

Short Stories

ANC

February

25¢



*Her
cargo was
a secret one!*

by
**John D.
MacDonald**

The Curse of the "Star"

Earn Big Money

WRITING ORDERS

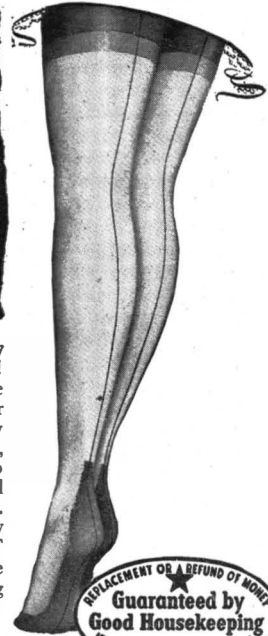
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HOUSECOATS - ROBES**

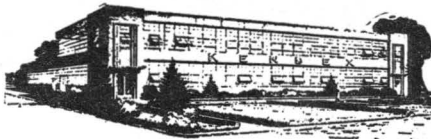
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AND IT'S JUMPING MIGHTY CLOSE

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HE'S LANDED IN THE BOAT! LET'S GET OVER THERE QUICK!

HE'S FOULED THE LINE AROUND YOUR MOTOR. WE'D BETTER TOW YOU IN

THAT'S OUR PIER

RESTING QUIETLY SHE'S A KNOCKOUT

HOW'S MY FISH?

PICTURES? TAKE KIP HERE, BUT LEAVE ME OUT. I LOOK LIKE "BLACKBEARD THE PIRATE"

WHY NOT CLEAN UP IN THE CLUBHOUSE WHILE I GET MY CAMERA

SAY, THIS BLADE'S AWOMEY! I'VE NEVER ENJOYED A QUICKER, SMOOTHER SHAVE

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THAT'S A BARGAIN!

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Short Stories

THE

BEST

OF

AMERICA'S

ACTION

ADVENTURE

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EDITOR
D. McILWRAITH



February, 1951

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COVER—Charles Wood

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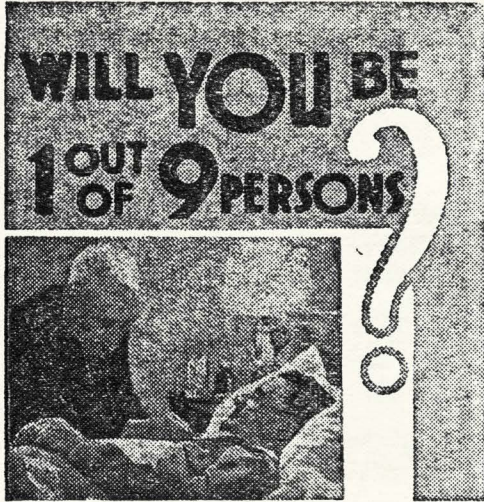
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According to American Medical Association "Journal" one in every nine persons became a hospital patient last year.

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THE SHOOTER'S CORNER

Conducted by
PETE KUHLOFF

.35 Caliber Marlin Rifle

LATELY I have been shooting the Marlin lever action Model 336 Sporting Carbine in .35 Remington caliber.

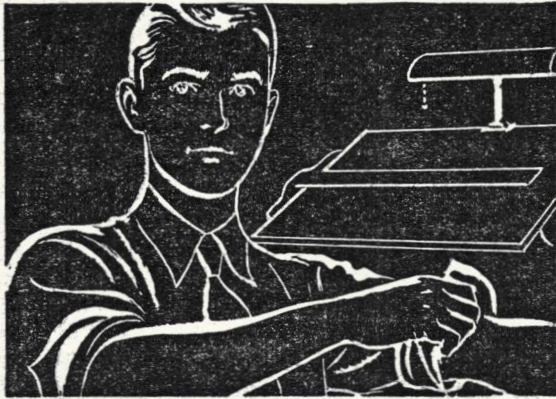
Regular readers of the "Corner" know that the .35 Remington cartridge is one of our best for the deer and black bear class of game at short and medium ranges, especially in heavy brush. If you remember our African report, of a couple of years ago, on the performance of this cartridge, you know that in the hands of an experienced hunter and good shot it can take any game found on the American continent and practically any soft-skinned game found in Africa. The old .35 Remington cartridge hasn't been getting the praise that it deserves.

So, for the lever action enthusiast, the fast-handling Marlin Model 336 is available not only in the customary .30-30 and .32 Special calibers but the .35 Remington as well. The six-shot rifle has a 24-inch barrel, while the seven-shot Carbine and the six-shot Sporting Carbine both have 20-inch barrels.

If you have not examined or shot one of these tubular magazine guns maybe I'd better try to describe them. The Model 336 replaced the Model 36 a few years ago, and while the mechanical action is essentially the same, certain changes, such as a new type round breech bolt (instead of the customary square one) which locks snugly into the round receiver hole, were made for smoother action and greater strength as well as ease of manufacture.

(Continued on page 6)

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(Continued from page 4)

Speaking of the mechanical action of the Marlin 336, it might be pertinent to mention that this fool-proof system goes back to the Model of 1889, which was the first of the solid top, side ejection, lever action rifles that made Marlin famous. This action was invented by L. L. Hepburn of Remington-Hepburn single-shot action fame.

The design is unique in several respects and the safety features are positive. First, it is impossible to fire the rifle if any of the several parts are inadvertently left out in assembling after cleaning—also, it can only be fired with the finger lever completely closed. This eliminates the possibility of the gun being fired with the breech bolt unlocked.

This latter safety measure is accomplished by a very ingenious arrangement of the firing pin, the locking bolt and the finger lever. The firing pin is completely cut in two towards the rear end and the short rear piece pivots down out of contact with the front section when the action is open. When the action is closed and locked, the two pieces of the firing pin are brought into a straight line by the raised locking bolt, which does not project below the receiver as seen in some other lever action rifles, and the gun can be fired. The slightest movement of the finger lever draws back the firing pin, the locking bolt is lowered, and the front end of the rear portion of the firing pin drops down and it is impossible to drive it forward until the breech bolt is closed and the locking bolt has risen to the fully locked position.

Now it might be a good idea to mention that when any gun needs repairs it should be sent back to the factory or turned over to a gunsmith that is known to be absolutely reliable and an expert craftsman. This applies to all guns, Marlin, Winchester, Savage or other makes. In the past I have heard of careless or ignorant gunsmiths making so-called repairs to the actions of rifles and shotguns that proved to be dangerous to the shooter. I don't mean to imply that all gunsmiths are in this category—but there is no point in taking a chance with an unknown quantity. The big firearms outfits are proud of their reputations and ordinarily take the

(Continued on page 8)



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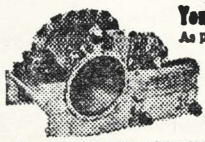
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(Continued from page 6)

precaution of thoroughly inspecting and proof firing arms that they have repaired. The old saw "It's easy to buy a new safe gun, but impossible to see with a store-bought eye" still holds.

To get back to the Marlin Model 336. As I said, I have been using the Sporting Carbine, and believe me it is the handiest little lever action woods gun that I have ever carried. The pistol grip is nicely designed and much more comfortable than that on my old Marlin Model 1893, which was my favorite for Eastern deer and black bear for many years.

The 20-inch barrel and half magazine make this little deer getter balance just right and in dense brush around a cranberry bog I didn't get it hung up once! The very light weight of around 6½ pounds was indeed a relief after the 10-pound scope-sighted rifle I lugged around early last fall.

Speaking of scope sights, the Marlin Model 336 big game rifles are the best of the lever actions for scope mounting, the solid top side ejection feature is the reason. Ordinarily, for the hunter with normal eyesight, there is not much reason for mounting a telescope sight on a brush rifle—but when we get along in years the old eyes lose some of their elasticity and iron sights, especially the open variety, blur quite a bit to make it difficult if not impossible to do fine shooting.

My eyes are none too good and I was greatly surprised when I made a target group as small as 1½ inches at 85 yards—though I must admit that most of my groups ran around four or five inches.

So, for the hunter who wants a lever action rifle or carbine that develops more initial energy than the .30-30 or .32 Special, I certainly can recommend the Marlin Model 336 in .35 Remington caliber!

New Gunsmithing Book

A DURNED good book, *Gunsmithing Simplified* by Harold E. MacFarland has just been published. I have been studying it for two or three weeks and for my money there's a lot of good dope in its 302 pages for the amateur gunsmith or the gun-

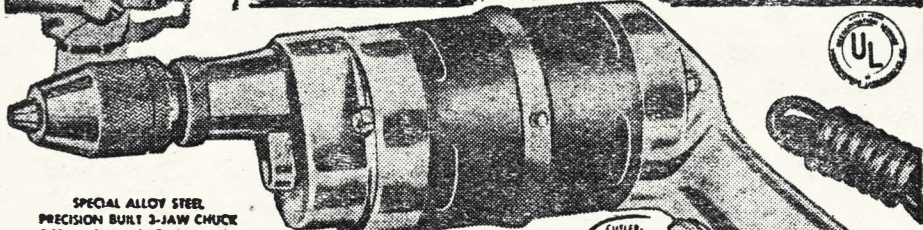
(Continued on page 10)

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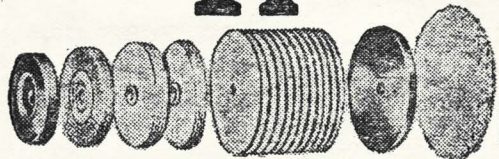
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P. E. R.

(Continued from page 8)

bug who likes to tinker—and I know for a fact that there are a lot of professionals that can learn something by giving it a good going over.

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Gunsmithing Simplified is published by the Combat Forces Press, distributed by Rinehart and sells for \$6.95. If you can use it you can't go wrong on this one!



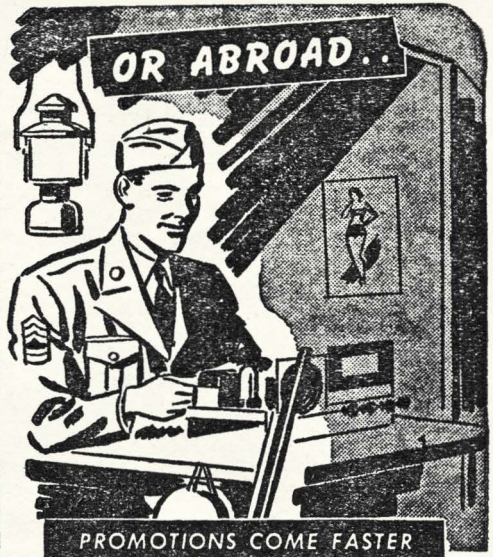
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(Concluded on page 12)



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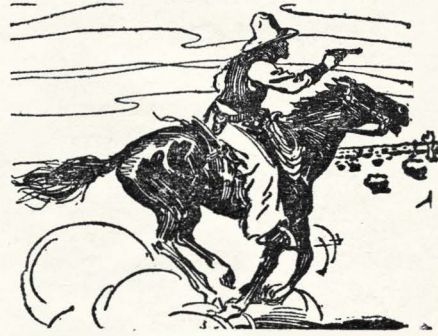
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(Concluded from page 10)
chart you can figure out the very best range for sighting in your favorite rifle. This is important, for a great many shooters now have their rifles sighted in so that they are not taking full advantage of the capabilities of the cartridge used.

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The Story Tellers' Circle



San Anton'

PAINT and Pinto Hawkins are with us again this issue, and with them came this interesting letter from Caddo Cameron:

Writing in Harper's Magazine, November, 1877, a world traveler, Harriet Prescott Spofford, said of San Antonio, "On a more enchanting spot, the eye of poet never rested. There is probably nothing like it in America."

(Continued on page 14)

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The Story Tellers' Circle

(Continued from page 12)

I wouldn't know about the poet's eye, but, from what I've been able to learn of the old town, the lady said a mouthful in that last sentence. As a white man's settlement the city was 159 years old when she got there in 1877, and as an Indian village it was old when Cabeza de Vaca stumbled onto it in 1536; but, to me, the interesting and pleasing thing about San Antonio is—*notwithstanding its long white hair and whiskers, history shows that it behaved like a gay and lusty young hell-bender, always ready for a fight or a frolic.*

Now, don't get me wrong. From the days of the Padres San Antonio has had its religion and culture, its aristocrats and their snooty society; and with the influx of German settlers in the early and middle 1800's, it acquired a large element of law-abiding and industrious citizens who built substantial homes and established sound business enterprises, many of which are in existence today as modern monuments to their founders. So San Antonio was never what could rightly be called a rawhide and buckskin town. It was, however, a tolerant city, since so many of its people were pleasure-loving Latins or other nationalities who had fled oppressed Europe in search of liberty.

While towns like Abilene, Ellsworth, Wichita, Dodge City and Tombstone were gaining their reputations as rip-roaring centers of gambling, gunfighting and bloodshed, Old San Antonio was ripping along with the best or worst of them, though without their publicity. They were infants compared to this Texas city. The total blood shed in all of them would not have been a drop in the bucket of blood spilled in San Antonio before they were born. For example, there is the Arrendondo massacre on August 20, 1813, when the Spaniards smothered and shot three hundred citizens. (One of San Antonio's streets commemorates that affair—Dolorosa, the Street of Sorrow.)

MANY of the badmen of the Old West were no strangers to San Antonio. Quantrell, the James Boys, Bill Longley, Sam Bass, John Wesley Hardin, Doc Holliday, Clay Allison, J. King Fisher, Ben Thompson and others—both famous and unknown, walked the streets of "The City That Care Forgot" and kidded the chili queens on Military Plaza. Ben Thompson tangled with noted marshals and raised plenty hell in the Kansas cowtowns, but lived to get himself killed in San Antonio. King Fisher shot his way to fame in Old Mexico and the Southwest, then died with Thompson in the Jack Harris Variety Theater on West Commerce Street.

San Antonio once claimed to be the world's greatest horse market, and as a cowtown it was second to none. Longhorned cattle ran wild in the chaparral and on the prairies near which it nestled, and were rounded up in its backyard. The northern cattle trails—Chisholm, Western and earlier routes—were like trees with trunks resting on Red River and roots spreading downward through Texas. Many of these roots touched or passed near San Antonio, so that it was an outfitting point for trail drivers. Cattle kings of that day were familiar figures in the plushier night spots and their hands—shaggy men in leggin's and high-heeled boots, made the old town hum while taking a final fling before heading north on the long and dangerous trek to market.

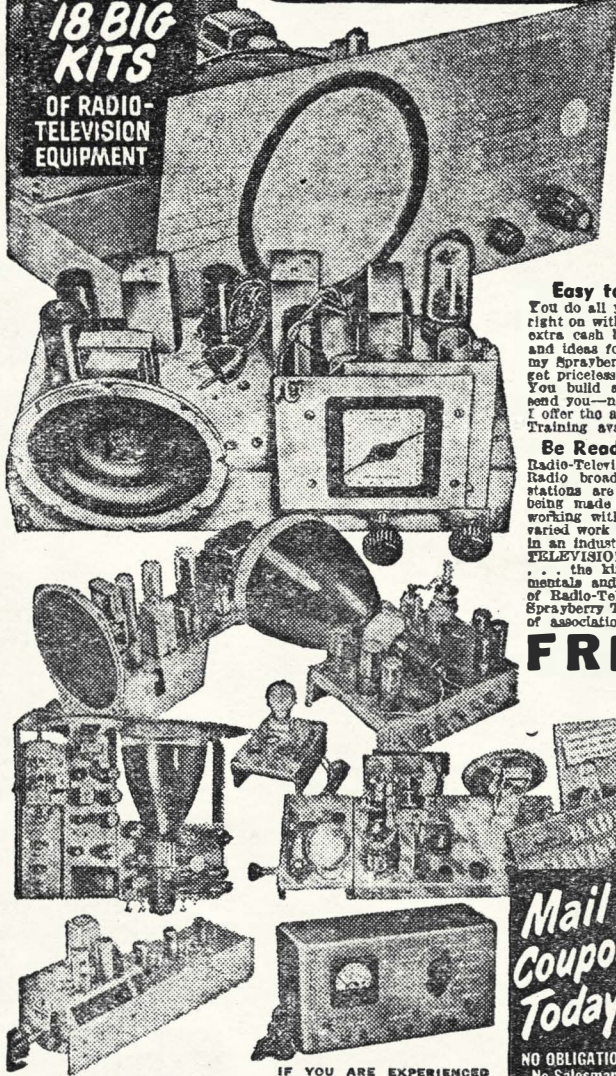
San Antonio went and chased the chili queens out of Military Plaza, built a city hall in the center of it and cleaned up around it, so the old square ain't what she used to be. However, if you're like me, (For your sake, Heaven Forbid!) you can go and sit on the steps and dream about what it was like in the old days; and, I'll confess, you can kind of wish that you were making the rounds with Paint and Pinto and Uncle Tobey, a-huntin' the coldest lager in Texas.

—CADDO CAMERON.



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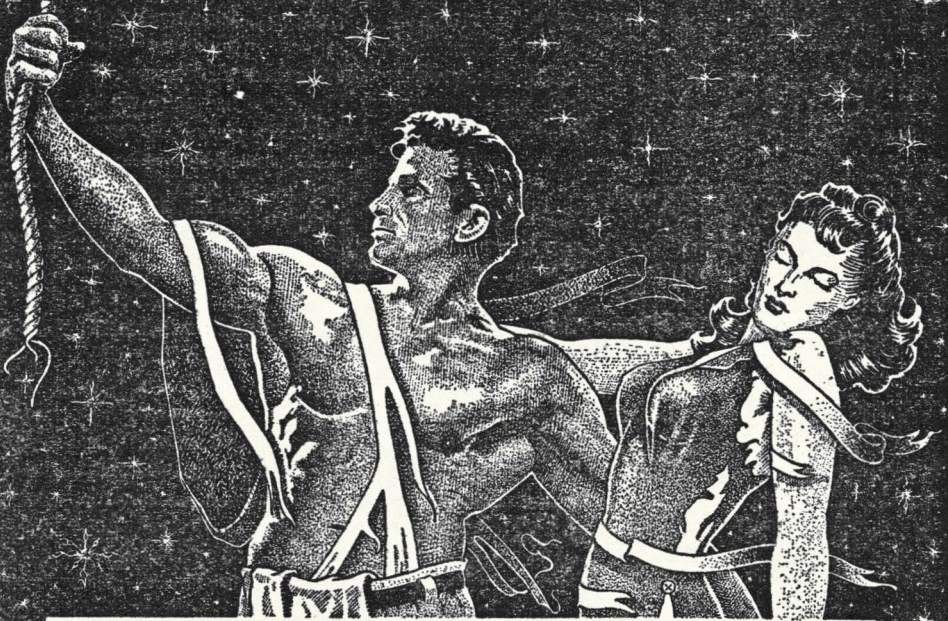
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Please Check Below About Your Experience
 Are You Experienced? No Experience

THE CURSE OF THE "STAR"



BY JOHN D. MAC DONALD

EBERLE

HE SAT in the high-ceilinged room at the Great Eastern Hotel in Calcutta, stripped down to his shorts, the typing table set squarely under the overhead fan.

As he worked at the last article the sweat dripped from his nose and his chin, falling onto the keyboard and onto the backs of his hands. Overhead the big fan blades whispered softly through the air and the ancient, defective electric motor buzzed with each revolution.

His body was leaned down by the months in China. His body and spirit both. The contract called for six articles. This was the last. The first one in the series had been glib, fresh, slightly sardonic.

But China infects a man with its own

special sort of weariness. The top level politicians are fair game for irony. But the people, the incredible people, the courteous, smiling, child-like people—withered old women of thirty trotting under two hundred pound loads, the swollen-bellied, stick-legged children of famine, the boy-soldiers of twelve in gray quilted uniforms—a man who can deal with them in words of irony has an ineradicable smallness of soul.

Malcolm Atkinson had been catapulted from obscurity into fame by reason of the articles he had written on the Western Zone of Germany under the occupation forces. He had brought to international reporting a wry humor that very effectively impaled the blunderers, the greed-blinded.

And so he had been sent to China, accredited to the dwindling Nationalist forces,

It Did Not Take the American Reporter Long to Sense the Mystery Aboard the Freighter Plodding Eastern Seas

to work his savage magic on little men who were on the spot.

There was no more irony in Mal Atkinson. Not after retreating through famine areas to Yunan, after being evacuated to Assam, India, in a shuddering, wavering DC-3 carrying forty-six passengers—an air-weary plane that had once been operated by the CNAC.

He sat in the room at the Great Eastern in the incredible September heat and tried to put it all down, oblivious of the swarming traffic sounds from the road below. He wrote, not of the battles, not of politics—but of the little people he had seen. A father stripping bark from the trees to boil in ditch water and feed his children. A mongrel dog cornered by a pack of hungry children, whining away its last seconds of life. The armed man with plump dead rats for sale at fantastic prices.

He tried to put it all down. He didn't preach, or point out lessons, or draw moral conclusions. He just wrote down the facts, the look, taste and smell of them. He kept himself going with black coffee, and he worked with something like fury. He wrote for thirty-eight hours and when at last it was finished, he read it over and knew that he had never done anything like it. It was so close to him that he could not tell if it were very good—or very bad. The New York editors would know.

Malcolm Atkinson prepared the airmail

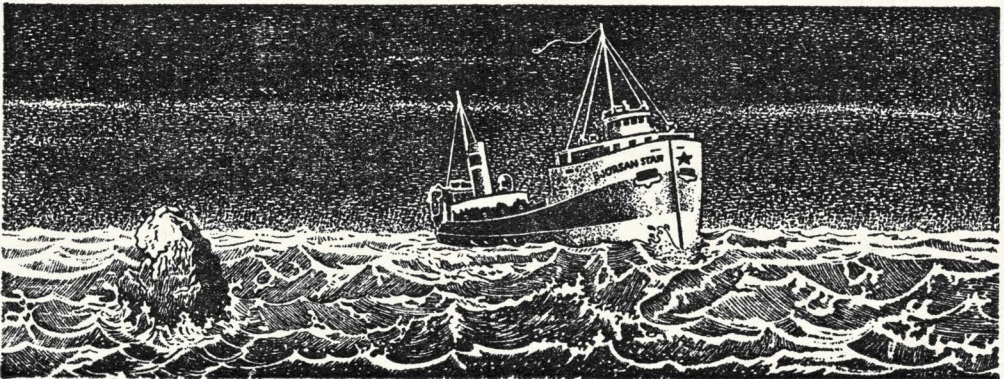
envelope, inserted the manuscript, sealed it and placed it on top of the typewriter. He stood up, dazed with weariness. A moment ago the manuscript had seemed to be the most important thing in the world. Now he hardly cared whether he mailed it or destroyed it. He had written from the heart, from a desire to make everyone understand what he had seen and what he had felt while seeing. Now it was done, and he felt that a certain portion of his life was done—as though something of his spirit had died along with the nameless ones who lay in the ditches in the famine area. He felt drained and purposeless.

He walked over to the bureau and picked up the copy of the cable he had received in answer to the one he sent announcing his safe arrival in India. The paper was limp and damp from the humidity.

**FIVE RECEIVED STOP EXCELLENT
STOP AIRMAIL FINAL AND RETURN
IMMEDIATELY STOP BIG ARGENTINE
DEAL COOKING STOP
A T RHODEMAN**

It was an enormous effort to return to the typewriter and make a copy of a reply.

**AIRMAILED SIXTH TODAY STOP
NEED REST STOP TAKING SLOWEST
BOAT AVAILABLE STOP HOPE IT
TAKES TWO MONTHS STOP
ATKINSON**



He went into the bathroom, filled the sink with the undrinkable Calcutta water and sloshed it on his face and head. It was a temporary relief. He stood up with the cool water running down his bare chest and looked at himself in the mirror over the sink. China had made a difference. The scar tissue on his right shoulder was still pinkish red. That had been luck. The defective projectile had exploded in the mortar tube and he had been a scant fifteen feet away.

He was down to 160, a good twenty pounds lighter than the day he had arrived in Hongkong. His face had the yellowish tinge that atabrine gives and the whites of his eyes were muddy. New lines around his mouth and at the corners of his eyes were too deeply etched. His thirtieth birthday had passed, unnoticed, in China.

Mal had long since decided that his face was adequate, and nothing more. He would never be asked to pose for a whiskey ad. No distinction there. Just a look of lean, fine-drawn stubbornness and sensitivity. A fighter, not necessarily a winner. He rubbed a big hand through his cropped black hair and saw how much more gray had begun to show up at the temples.

He pulled on a pair of linen trousers, shouldered into a sports shirt, stuffed his bare feet into sandals and took the manuscript and cable down to the desk.

With those details attended to, he walked numbly back to his room, pulled the bed over under the fan, stripped and fell across it. It was like tumbling down a long, black-velvet staircase. He fell endlessly into the depths of sleep.

WHEN he awakened he could not tell if it were dawn or dusk. By the volume of traffic sounds he guessed that it was dusk, but he did not know the day. Down at the desk they told him the day, and he realized that he had slept nearly twenty-eight hours. He was vastly hungry. He sat in the bar and had three gimlets, then took dinner out in the courtyard at a table where he could watch the dancers circling limply in the heat, as though condemned to some grotesque punishment.

Three tables away he noticed a party of five, two women and three men, obviously

Americans. They were all a bit drunk—not obnoxiously so, but just enough so that their voices were the faintest bit louder than necessary.

The women were both attractive, and he found pleasure in looking at them, because it had been a long time since he had looked at a woman with the sure knowledge that she was freshly bathed and scented, clad in fresh clothes, with no insects in her hair or on her person.

All five were deeply tanned. One woman seemed to be about twenty-five. Her hair, piled high on her head, had the color and the gloss of the horse chestnuts he had gathered when he was a child. He could remember throwing the sticks up into the tree, then scrambling with the others for the nuts that fell, avoiding the sharp green spines as he split open the outer husk to disclose the nut inside, as burnished and perfect as the wood of the furniture which stood, solemn and silent, in the front room of his aunt's home, the room into which he was forbidden to go.

The woman wore a pale aqua evening gown and he guessed that she had purchased it locally because the designer had borrowed from the Chinese to the extent of slashing the skirt at the right side from ankle to knee. Mal watched her as she danced with the oldest of the three men, a burly, bald-headed fellow whose rimless glasses sparkled in the subdued light. He wore a khaki bush jacket and trousers in strange contrast to the white mess jackets of the other two men and the evening gowns of the women.

The bald man perspired profusely as he danced, but the tall girl in the aqua dress seemed to remain fresh and cool. In mid set the orchestra broke into a rumba, and showed immediately that they could handle that type of music much more effectively than they could American jazz.

The couple came so close to Mal's table, the stocky man holding the slightly taller woman at arm's length, that Mal became aware of the musky perfume she wore. The dress was fitted closely around the slim waist and the hips. The man's brown hand rested on the concavity of the waist just above the full swell of the left hip.

Mal watched them and then suddenly as they turned, he noticed their expressions.

The girl wore a pronounced look of fear and distaste that came and went so quickly that he wondered if he imagined it. She held the upper part of her body rigid, but from the waist down her hips and thighs moved with the pronounced rumba rhythm.

The older man's expression did not change. He had to look up a bit to look into her face. He wore a crisp gray line of mustache. He seemed to be laughing at her, and there was no mistaking the fact that it was a laugh of contempt.

He turned her so that she looked across his shoulder and, for a moment, into Mal's eyes. She held his gaze for a second or two before she looked away. Soon the set ended and they went back to their table. His interest aroused, Mal looked more carefully at the others. The other woman was of an age, possibly a year younger than the taller girl. She had that disconcerting vividness that is so animal in content that the impact is like a blow. Black sleek hair, bold eyes, a slash of a red mouth, a face and body continually in motion, in flux. When she stood up to dance Mal saw that in spite of her look of plumpness, of a bit too much breadth of hip and depth of breast, her waist was extraordinarily slim. She was very light on her feet, very quick, and she laughed endlessly up into the face of one of the two younger men.

It is a lonely game in a public place to attempt to sort out the lives of strangers. The two younger men seemed to be of the same type. Tall, thick-shouldered, with the pale eyes, unreadable expressions and heavy mouths that tell unmistakably of a streak of brutality. Professional soldiers have that look.

The plump girl seemed to be spreading her attention equally between the two. When the bald-head spoke, the other four listened attentively. The five acted as though they were well accustomed to being with each other. They had found their pattern. The tall girl did not speak at all while at the table. The black-haired girl chattered on with no one paying any particular attention.

At eleven o'clock he felt his head grow heavy and his eyelids sag. He could no longer maintain his interest in the group at the other table. He went gratefully up to his room and slept until dawn.

THE breeze that came in at the wide window with its deep sills was almost fresh. He put on a pair of clean shorts and sat on the sill, his back to the frame, and watched the grayness over the city slowly lighten. Two stories below beggars slept on the sidewalk wrapped in the grayish cotton which, during the day, would form their turbans. Sleepy hotel employees came out and screwed a section of fire hose to the polished brass outlet in the side of the hotel. The hose stiffened as the stream of water pulsed through it. They turned the hose on the sleeping beggars, who jumped to their feet, screamed curses and fled, wringing out the strips of cotton.

The long sleep had somehow made the flight from China seem like a dream. He remembered the old man who died on the plane, the way they had pulled the body back, stripped it, pushed it out to spin down to the green jungle floor of Burma far below. That, too, seemed like something he had read rather than seen.

HE SMOKED and watched the city and wondered what he would do with his life. This was a time of taking inventory. He could not quite imagine going back to the glib, smart-aleck reporting that had been so satisfying before China.

After a leisurely breakfast he went to the river docks. It took him three hours in the heat and confusion, next to the stink of the river, to find what he wanted. It was Swedish registry, with an Irish first officer named Dolan. Dolan sported a long, wide, bristly beard the color of midnight flame.

"If it's no hurry you're in, lad, she may be your craft. How good a sailor are ye?"

Mal grinned. "Always sick the first day out. After that I'm okay."

"The *Bjornsan Star*, lad, could work up a vicious pitch and roll in drydock, I do believe. But she's a clean ship. You'll find the grub good, but not fancy."

"What did you say the ports of call will be?"

"After we get down this stinking river, we go to Colombo, then Perth, Melbourne, Wellington, Pago Pago, Honolulu and Port of Los Angeles. You'll get a few days ashore each place, I should say."

"I'm not after the sightseeing. I need a long rest."

"And if ye'll forgive me sayin' it, you look as though you could use it, lad. There's a good cabin empty. We're running with a short crew this trip. No third officer, so I'll have the second move into the third's bunk and you can take the second's cabin."

"I don't want to inconvenience anybody."

Dolan leaned forward and there was a grin behind his beard. "Truth is, the Bjornsan Line is so hongry for a bit of passage money, you could have the old man's cabin if he hadn't already given it up. So go get your papers in order and I'll have the passage agreement ready for you by the time you get back. Your hotel is probably cooler than this dutch oven, so say you come aboard at nine tonight. We go downriver on the tide change at ten-fifteen."

AT A FEW minutes before nine the Sikh taximan deposited Mal and his two heavy bags on the dock at the foot of the *Bjornsan Star's* gangplank. Dolan was leaning on the rail overhead smoking a pipe. He waved at Mal, turned and roared a command in what could have been Swedish. Two blond sailors trotted down, grinned at Mal, shouldered the bags and went aboard, beckoning to him to follow them.

"Welcome aboard, lad," Dolan said. "Follow the boys to your cabin and lock your stuff inside. Thieves have a nasty habit of sneaking aboard here. Then come on back topside and talk a while."

The *Bjornsan Star* was a nondescript freighter of unknown breed. She sighed gently against the dock like a troubled old lady who dreaded the weary miles ahead. Below decks she smelled of fresh paint and oil. The companionway was spotlessly clean, freshly painted, but as hot as an oven.

By the time Mal got back out into the open air with the cabin key in his pocket, his clothes were sticking to him.

He went up to Dolan. "That's a nice cabin."

"You'll find it comfortable, Mr. Atkinson. Ye have another name, I suppose. Call me Bob."

"My name's Mal, Bob." They shook hands.

"What's your trade, Mal?"

"Reporter. I've just come out of China."

"A bloody horrible mess that must be. When I get some time I want you to tell me about it."

A cargo floodlight affixed to the skeleton of what had been the wartime radar setup clicked on with blinding whiteness. Dolan sighed. "Now the old man's getting anxious. Here he comes. Doesn't speak a word of English."

The captain walked around a hatch cover and came over to Dolan. He gave Atkinson an incurious glance. He was a wispy, dry-looking man with a hollow chest, blond hair gone gray, faded blue eyes and a suit of rumped, food-spotted whites.

Dolan said something in which Mal heard the sound of his own name. The captain gave a curt, continental bow in Mal's direction. Dolan said, "This is Captain Paulus."

Paulus pulled out a large old gold watch, said something in an irritable tone to Dolan, waved the watch face in front of Dolan's eyes and stalked away. Dolan turned and spat down onto the dock, then in an oddly husky tone said, "An old fool who can't pilot a rowboat in a mill pond. But his record's spotless. Never lost a ship in forty-three years. Some have the luck and some don't."

Mal gave Dolan a quick look. In the glare of the floodlight the odd green eyes of the first officer were like the shadowy side of one of the big bergs from the Arctic ice pack. Standing next to him, Atkinson was once again startled at the size of the man. His breadth made him look stocky in spite of his better than six feet of height. The big hands, their backs covered with freckles and coarse red hair, were like one-gallon gourds.

"He's worried about something?" Mal asked.

"The other passengers. They'll make it all right. All their stuff's aboard. I think that's their car now. Yes. There they are."

MAL stood beside Bob Dolan at the rail and looked down at the five people who clambered out of the touring-car taxi. They were foreshortened by the height, but he had no difficulty recognizing the three

men and two women from the Great Eastern.

As the bald-headed man started to look up, Mal, with an instinctive reaction which surprised him, straightened up so that his face was not visible from below.

He heard the familiar babble of the plump black-haired girl, the quiet answer by one of the two husky young men. Dolan went to the head of the gangplank to welcome them aboard, and Mal walked out of the light down toward the fantail. Once in the deep shadows he leaned against the rail and watched the preparations for departure.

The pilot came aboard. Soon the lines were cast off. The soft guttural vibrations of the engines and drive shaft quickened as black water widened between the hull and the dock. The *Bjornsan Star* moved slowly out into the channel and headed down toward the sea. Sailors coiled and stacked the mooring lines and the floodlight clicked off so that the pilot could see the channel markers more clearly. The wind freshened on the side of Mal's face as the teeming stench of Calcutta began to diminish astern of them.

Dolan was nowhere to be seen. As his eyes grew more accustomed to the faint glow of the stars, Mal picked his way toward the bow. Muddy water, frothed by the knifing of the bow, swept back along the hull. Forward, four large bulldozers, like big sleeping animals, were lashed to the deck, fore and aft of the forward hatch.

Once he reached the bow, he turned and looked up and back. He saw the compass light on the bridge shining faintly against the dark face of the native pilot, saw Paulus, frail beside Dolan. The bull-throated voice of the ship startled Mal with a long blast. Flames flickered from the low decks of the native craft moored to the river banks and he heard a snatch of plaintive Hindu song.

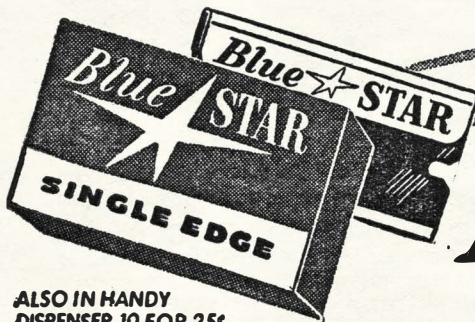
Now the voyage had started and he thought that in many ways a voyage, for a passenger, is like a serious illness. It is a freedom from all responsibility, and after a time, if the voyage lasts long enough, it is easy to forget all that went before it, easy to forget that it will ever end.

He leaned his back against the rail and hooked his elbows over it. The breeze had

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begun to dry his damp clothes. Then he saw a vague lightness moving toward him, moving carefully along the narrow spaces of the open deck. He could not make it out for a time and watched carefully until she was silhouetted against a patch of the lights on shore. He then saw that it was a tall woman, and he guessed that it was the one from the hotel.

When she was but five feet away he said, "Good evening."

She gave a small startled cry and put her hand to her throat. She was close enough so that he could see that it was the girl from the hotel.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't mean to startle you."

She laughed nervously. "I just didn't know anyone was up here. I wanted to cool off after that ghastly heat in the city. Are you one of the officers?"

"No. I'm a passenger, too. Malcolm Atkinson."

She moved closer and leaned over the rail beside him. He turned so that they stood there, elbow to elbow.

"My name is Temble. Mrs. Roger Temble, Mr. Atkinson."

"How do you do," he said gravely. She put her hand for a moment in his. Her fingers were long and cool.

"Are you going to Australia?" she said.

"No. All the way to California."

"Why, so are we! We had to take a little ship like this one because of all our equipment, you know."

"Equipment?"

"I guess there's no reason why you would know. My husband's work is only well-known among his fellow scientists. He's a geologist and paleontologist. We've been on a small expedition to the Northwest frontier. It's never been adequately covered before, you know. It's lasted seventeen months now." She had begun to talk rapidly with an odd nervousness that made him uncomfortable. "Dr. Temble didn't want me to come with him because of the unsettled conditions here in the East. He was just going to bring Dave Welling and Tom Branch with him this time, but I guess I made a nuisance of myself. The way wives will. So the doctor said I could come and bring along a girl

friend. I asked Gina Farrow, and . . . would you have a light, please?"

Mal turned his back to the wind and cupped his hand around the flame of his lighter. She leaned forward, the cigarette trembling though she held it with both her lips and her fingers. As she did so she looked up into his face.

Her eyes widened with what he could only call terror and recognition. She turned and fled along the dark deck. He heard her bump painfully into a stanchion and go on without a sound. He was too surprised to call after her. He saw the glow of her cigarette on the deck at his feet. He picked it up and flipped it overboard.

Much later he went down to his cabin, adjusted the ventilator so that the breeze was directed into his bunk and went to sleep, still wondering about the odd behavior of Mrs. Temble. But sleep took him out of here and now—back into there and then—back into fear that awoke him, time and time again, with the taste of it on his lips.

II

IT WAS eight when he went topside. The *Bjornsan Star* was still heading down the river toward the sea, but the banks had faded away until they were but misty lines on the horizon. He found Dolan amidships. The Irishman's eyes were red-rimmed, but he had a heartiness about him.

"Mal, lad, did we wake you thumping the craft on the bottom?"

"How do you mean?"

"'Tis the only way you can get down this censored son of a river. At low tide we rested her on the bottom for nearly an hour."

"I didn't even notice. How many passengers are there?"

"Yourself, a party of five—explorers or something—and a dusky gentleman from Kashmir. Seven passengers all told. Have you breakfasted. No? Come along, I'll guide you to the food department."

After devious below-decks turnings, Dolan stepped aside and ushered Mal on with a bow. He stepped over the weather sill into a room roughly twenty by ten. A table that would set eight was bolted in the center of the room. Four tables which would

seat two were bolted in the corners. There was a smell of strong coffee in the air. At the the far end of the room a door swung back and forth with the gentle pitch of the ship in the mild river swells.

Captain Paulus and a stranger, a young man about twenty-one, his face strong and oddly vacant, sat at the far left corner. Paulus nodded distantly at Mal and leaned over his plate again. At the large central table for eight sat one of the two young men of the expedition and the dark-haired plump girl—Gina Farrow.

Mal smiled at the captain, turned right and took the first table directly to the right of the door from the passageway. As he sat down he could feel the eyes of the two at the big table on him. A few moments later a husky young blond lad, not more than seventeen years old, came out of the galley and came directly to him.

"Vee haff," he said, "broon juice from tins, bread toasted, aiks how you vish those, blanty coffee, sar."

"Juice, scrambled eggs and coffee. Your English is very good," Mal said.

The boy flushed. "Thanking you, sar. Quick, I get them."

Mal had just received the abundant plate of eggs and the boy had taken away the empty juice glass when the bald-headed man entered. He gave Mal an absent glance and went directly to the big table. Seconds later the second of the two husky young men came in. He did not glance in Mal's direction. Their party was complete, except for Mrs. Temble. The four of them talked together in low tones. There seemed to be a hectic gaiety about them.

Mal was on his second cup of excellent coffee when the "dusky gentleman" came in. He looked somewhat as Gandhi might have looked if he were clad in the most extreme of Hollywood sports togs. His shirt was cerise, his slacks powder blue. He gave his order and while waiting for it to be brought in, he inserted an American cigarette into a filter holder and lit it with a wide-ribbed gold Dunhill. He smiled at nothing and at nobody with all the good will in the world.

Mal glanced up quickly as the dark-haired girl approached his table, smiling. She carried her own cup of coffee with her. Since

she had been sitting when he entered the room he had been unable to see her costume. Below the frilly pink blouse she wore a pair of crisp, white, abbreviated shorts, straw shoes with high heels. Her legs were tanned to a honey-brown shade, ripe in contour.

She put her cup and saucer opposite him and said, "You are just going to think that I'm the most terribly, terribly brazen soul in the world at large, but I was just over there saying to Tommy that if we have to share all the space on this tiny little old boat for just weeks and weeks, the best old thing to do is just bust right out and give our first names. Don't you think so?" She sank gracefully into the chair opposite Mal. "My silly name is Gina. Gina Farrow. What's yours?"

The approach was a bit overwhelming, and so was her vividness at first hand. "Mal," he said weakly. "Mal Atkinson."

"Now you know that name just rings the teensiest little ole bell in my mind, Mal. I just know you're about the famousest person I ever did meet. Me, I'm a little old widow nobody ever since Charlie got himself leukemia, that's cancer of the blood, you know, and he just up and died on me and we were probably the happiest little couple you ever saw—and I will say we certainly were the happiest couple on the campus back there at Northeastern. But I've got to say we were nobodies because Charlie never did really get himself a chance to do all those wonderful things he used to tell me about at night after the lights were out. Not that I ever gave the old devil much chance for talking." She giggled with a surprising loudness and ran the pointed tip of a pink tongue across her lower lip.

"I write for magazines," he said while Gina was taking another breath.

"I just *knew* you were some sort of man like that, Mal. I would never have been here at all except Sara came to me and said ole Roger just wouldn't have one woman all by herself going along on an expedition like this—and you know how lonesome a widow gets, all those black clothes and nothing to do, and so I just up and said yes, because I knew I'd run into all kinds of important people like you, but we haven't met any—not any—because there we were back up in those old hills without even a movie

within a couple thousand miles, near as I can find out. So this is what I really came for, Mr. Atkinson, Mal, I mean, and I just want you to talk and talk and talk, and if you can play a little bridge it will sure be a bonus for free, like with the soap wrappers."

SHE ran out of breath, picked up her cup, and sipped coffee, looking at him over the rim with dark eyes that crackled and danced with secret fire.

Mal took a deep breath. "First, I am not a famous person. Second, I play bridge. Third, thanks for taking the initiative."

"Why, we might be days and days and days before anybody made a move to get acquainted with anybody else, and think of all that time wasted. Now we're just the best old friends, aren't we?"

"Of course."

She finished the cup and pushed it aside, standing up as she did so. "I promised Dr. Temble that I'd walk around the deck with him a few times. Believe me, that will do me good. All my friends, they say, 'Gina, you could be a real pretty girl if you just could take off some of those pounds you're a-carryin' around.' Now you find us up on the deck and I'll make sure you meet Roger because he's a real honey, and I like you, Mal, and you two boys will get along real sweet for this trip."

She followed in the wake of the three men who had just left the room. The engine shudder decreased in tempo. The mess boy saw Mal's puzzled look. He stepped forward. "Vee dropping bilot. You vish vatch. Ah, no. More coffee? Goot coffee?"

Mal grinned and nodded. Again his cup was filled. He lit a cigarette and inhaled deeply. The captain and the young man Mal had guessed to be the second officer had left the officers' mess.

The man in the cerise shirt smiled over at Mal and said, "I heard the young lady introducing herself. I shall do the same." He spoke with the smothered crispness of Oxford. "I am Mister Gopala, Mr. Atkinson." He came over to the table, shook hands with one firm downward jerk.

"Won't you sit down?" Mal asked.

"Thank you, no. I wish to watch this

affair of dropping the pilot. You see, this is my first voyage in over twenty years. It seems quite new to me. Later I wish to talk with you. The esteemed Mr. Dolan informs me that you have recently been in China. I have a deep interest in that country." He smiled, almost shyly. "And I, too, play bridge." He bowed and left hurried, walking with short quick steps.

Mal could hear, at a distance, the shouted commands and instructions as the river launch came alongside to take off the pilot. The cessation of motion had stilled the air coming from the ventilators and the room began to grow uncomfortably warm. The coffee was still too hot to finish.

The door from the galley swung open and a short man of about thirty came in. The minus quality of chin, the protruding teeth, the bright eyes gave him the inevitable look of a chipmunk.

He stared at Mal. "Hullo! Another one! No wonder I had to give up my cabin. Who are you?" It was a harmless question, but insolently expressed.

"Another passenger," Mal said flatly.

The short man clapped his hands and rubbed them together. "Good!" He sat, unasked, at Mal's table. "I'm damn tired of polite people. I'm Torgeson. Chief Engineer. Minnesota '39. This is my one and only trip on this venerable old lady. I'm a specialist. We converted her from steam to diesel and I'm along to see how she takes the operation. What'd you expect? A dour Scot?"

Mal smiled. "I give up. My name is Malcolm Atkinson. I'm a reporter. I need a rest so I picked a slow ship."

Torgeson signaled for coffee. "The word is that we have a couple of dollies aboard, Atkinson. Can you confirm that?"

"A very acceptable pair, Chief. One well-married and the other one hovered over by two boys with a mean look."

The slight man sighed. "Always my luck. Do we ever get an unattached female aboard? No. My undeniable charm and beauty never gets a chance to function. I suppose you expect to enjoy the trip?"

"Why not?"

"Hark ye, Atkinson. Here's a brief run-through. An incompetent captain. A jealous

first officer of international fame. He's the guy who lost the *Catbay* on the rocks outside Boston harbor on a sunny afternoon. A second officer with an IQ of about fifty-eight, I'd say. Sparks is an alcoholic, well into the delusion stage. And they all hate me because I say what I think. Happy trip, Atkinson!"

There was a dancing light of wry humor in the small bright eyes.

"How big is the crew?" Mal asked.

"Seven in my gang, counting me and the second. Ten topside hands plus the three officers. That makes twenty. Cookie and two mess boys. Twenty-three. The seven passengers brings it to thirty. Oh yes, and Sparks. Thirty-one aboard."

The sound of the engines picked up again. Ka-thud . . . chung; ka-thud . . . chung; ka-thud . . . chung. Torgeson cocked his head on one side, listened, nodded. Breeze began to sigh through the ventilators cooling the perspiration on their faces. In a few moments the *Bjornsan Star* began to lift and sigh and creak with the first ground swells of the coastal sea. Mal glanced over through the ports and saw the horizon line lift into view, hang there for a moment, then slide down out of sight.

Torgeson finished his coffee, clattered the cup into the saucer, shoved the chair back and stood up, wiping his mouth on the back of his hand.

"If you want to tell lies," he said, "look me up. They moved me up to the fore-castle. I'm bunking in with Sparks and the second. Two guys have my cabin and a bald-headed guy has Sparks' cabin. The babes are in Paulus' cabin and the Hindu is bunking in with Dolan. Aren't we a happy little family? Grinning, he went out through the galley.

MAL stood up and started to go out through the other door. As he reached it, it swung open and Mrs. Temble came in. Her eyes went wide for a fraction of a second and then she gave him a shy smile. "Please, Mr. Atkinson, were you leaving? Would you mind sitting with me for just a moment?"

"Not at all." He followed her back to the cleared table where Mr. Gopala had

sat. She walked ahead of him, her shoulders straight with that rigidity he had noticed on the garden dance floor of the Great Eastern. Like the Farrow girl, Mrs. Temble wore tailored shorts. Hers were a vivid yellow. Her slim legs were tanned and beautifully formed. She wore a jade green halter tied at the small of her straight back. She had let the burnished red-brown hair down and it reached to her shoulderblades. It was tied with a scrap of yellow yarn. On her slim brown feet were flat-heeled Indian sandals.

Once they sat opposite each other and after she had given her order to the smiling mess boy, it seemed to take her a very long time to lift her eyes to his. Mal saw that he had underestimated the loveliness of her face, the short straight nose, the delicate bones of the eye sockets and temple, the clean line of jaw and rounded chin. She could live to be ninety and carry beauty to her grave. It was possible to see in her face just how she had looked at twelve, just how she would look at forty. Her eyes were on that borderline where they are neither gray nor green nor blue—but something of all three.

She said tonelessly, "I want to ask you to forgive me for last night. I wish to explain that we have been under considerable strain during the past year and my nerves are not what they should be. Lately I have been doing inexplicable things and my husband feels that it is high time we returned to the States. You must have thought me a perfect fool to act as I did."

Mal looked at her for a long moment. "Your name is Sara, isn't it?"

She nodded and again the fear was in her eyes.

"Sara, tell me how long it took you to memorize that little speech."

"What are you talking about?"

"It's as phoney as a nine-cent dime and you know it. I frightened you last night and you were frightened for a good reason, I would guess. I don't know what that reason is. You could call me a recent expert on fear. I've seen a hell of a lot of it lately. I would guess you're in some sort of trouble. I'm not going to try to ride to the rescue with banners waving. I've outgrown the

knighthood impulse. I just want to tell you that you have nothing to fear from me. I'm a tired guy on my way home. That's all. Somehow your fear is hooked up with recognizing me from the hotel. That was coincidence of the simplest sort."

He could not read her expression because she was looking directly down at the empty plate in front of her. But he saw her firm breasts encased in the jade halter lift with the quickness of her breathing. And her hands, on either side of the plate, were clenched so that the knuckles, against the tan, whitened to ivory.

She looked up again. "You are . . . exactly what you said you are?"

"A reporter—headed home after the world's worst assignment. Yes."

"I . . . I can believe you, Mr. Atkinson, but the others . . ."

"My name is Mal," he corrected gently. "The others won't believe that I am what I am, eh?" He smiled. "Just what sort of an expedition was it, Sara?"

She shut her eyes for a moment, then started to stand up. He reached across the narrow table, put his hand firmly on her warm brown shoulder and forced her back down into the chair.

"Stay and have your breakfast. I'm going up on deck." He stood up. She kept her face turned away from him. He looked down at the shining hair and said, "I won't meddle, but even a guy who has given up a knighthood will have to come running if the lady makes a direct appeal."

He left her without looking back.

HE went up onto the boat deck that was on the same level as the bridge. The captain's cabin was between the boat deck and the bridge itself. Off to the right the mainland of India was a hazy line on the horizon. Dr. Temble and Gina Farrow stood close together at the rail between the bow of one lifeboat and the stern of the second.

Gina turned and smiled at him and called, "Come here, Malcolm." He went over. "Malcolm Atkinson, Dr. Roger Temble." Temble's grip was surprisingly strong. The eyes, behind the glittering rimless glasses, were liquid brown.

"So nice to meet a fellow passenger," he

said softly. "Mr. Atkinson, I am afraid you will have to forgive us for any irregularities of behavior you may see. Our little group has had several taut hours over the past seventeen months and you could call us a bit unstrung. My wife, particularly. She told me last night of her very ridiculous behavior when she met you on deck. This expedition has been very hard on her. She came with me under protest, you understand. My protest."

Dr. Temble smiled in a friendly way, but Mal had the impression that he was being watched very carefully by both of them.

"Your wife has already explained that to me, Doctor."

"Ah, good! She is a very sensitive and excitable girl. I am really afraid that if we had delayed getting her back to a familiar environment, her mind might have given way, wouldn't you say so, Gina?"

"Sara's a sweet kid, Roger," Gina said, "but she's got too much imagination. You know how those things are."

"So, Mr. Atkinson," the doctor said suavely, "if you should happen to notice any . . . uh . . . aberrative symptoms during our voyage together, I would appreciate your bringing them to my immediate attention."

"I'll certainly do that, Doctor."

"I understand you've been in China on an assignment, Mr. Atkinson?"

"That's right."

"How did you get out?" Both of them seemed to be watching him with a very intense interest. A perverse devil took charge of Mal.

"You'll forgive me, I hope, if I duck the question. It's all happened so recently. You know how it is. Too early to talk about it."

He had thought Dr. Temble's liquid brown eyes to be warm. Now he noticed that behind the lenses they had all the expression of congealed jelly. Gina, for once, was not in ceaseless motion. Her face, without its vivacity, was more rapacious than striking.

Temble said quickly, and with great joviality, "Well, I sincerely hope that after you have rested you'll be able to tell us about that great country during these months of severe trial."

Gina clutched the doctor's arm. "Roger, the man plays bridge!"

"Excellent!" Dr. Temble said. "The two girls and I could have alleviated many hours of boredom if we had had a fourth, but neither of my two associates, Mr. Welling and Mr. Branch, proved themselves capable of learning the game. Once we get our sea legs, I suggest that we make up a game. Where would you suggest, Gina?"

"The cabin Sara and I have would be perfect. Light and airy, Roger."

"Tomorrow would be about right for me," Mal said.

He smiled and left them. He spent the next hour or so learning his way around the ship. The radio shack was at the after end of the boat deck, beside the ladderway leading down to the main deck. The only above-decks cargo was the group of four big used bulldozers near the bow, British Army surplus consigned to New Zealand. As he walked around he noted that the cargo winches, life boats, all rigging, were in superb condition. He also learned that, of the crew, only Dolan, Torgeson, Sparks and the one mess boy spoke English. The other crew members, except for the sullen-looking second officer, seemed smiling and amiable.

He went back up onto the boat deck and looked in at Sparks. The man did not look up. He was about fifty, with a gray ravaged face, eyes deeply set. He had a long wave receiver set to a Calcutta station, set softly to a program of Indian music. He was reading a tattered copy of Plutarch's Lives.

At last he seemed to grow conscious of Mal's shadow in the doorway. He looked up with nervous jerkiness.

"Passengers not allowed in the radio room," he said in a rasping voice.

"My error," Mal said, backing out.

The hooded eyes stared at him. "Error is the great common denominator of mankind, sir. Life itself, once you have studied it, reveals itself to be a structural error generated in the heat of the primal world, in the hot depths of a lifeless sea. History is but the recounting of errors compounded as a result of that first one, the first creation of a uni-cellular animal which divided itself to make two."

"And so," said Mal, "you sit in there with that belief and take pleasure in reading what a compounded error has written about other biological errors, eh?"

Sparks stared at him. "Come back in here, sir. Sit down. It was too much to expect that there would be anyone to talk to this trip." He reached out and cut off the whine and wail of the music. "My name, sir, is Stephen MacLane. I taught philosophy at the University of Glasgow until one sunny morning I found that I did not believe any word which I said. Since then I have made it my habit to break down the beliefs of others to basic and hence meaningless fundamentals. I wish to know what you believe in, sir. And I wish to know your name. Do not be frightened, sir, at the wee blue monkeys that infest my board here. I've found that they are harmless despite their evil appearance."

MAL glanced at the board with a chill feeling at the back of his neck. The man had stated it all so soberly that the idea of tiny blue monkeys seemed feasible.

"My name is Malcolm Atkinson. And I do not know what I believe in."

"A common state. Less positive than those who follow Sartre, the high priest of believing firmly in nothingness."

"I may believe that I exist. A year ago I was certain of it. Now I feel as though I were a cleverly created illusion, MacLane."

One gray eyebrow went up. The man smiled. "A pleasant sourness to find in one so young. Take that fool, Dolan. He believes in himself. He thinks that if the factor of luck could be taken out of his life, he could rule his environment. Paulus believes in nothing but a clean ship and good digestion. Torgeson believes the world is a comic opera devised for his special amusement. He, too, is a determinist. The second officer exists only on the animal level. He is possibly the happiest man aboard."

Mal did not leave until the mess boy came to the doorway and announced that it was time to eat.

For the mid-day meal he was directed to the main table. The Captain sat at one end, Dolan at the other. Sara Temble was seated

at the Captain's right, Gina Farrow at his left. Dr. Temble sat beside Gina, facing Tom Branch. Mal sat at Dolan's left beside Branch, facing Welling. Mr. Gopala, considered a second-class citizen, sat smiling and alone at a table for two. The other men entitled to eat there came and went during the meal, wolfing the food and departing hurriedly.

Paulus ate with shocking carelessness, liberally spattering the front of his whites and the table around his plate. As he hastily chewed each mouthful, he stared frankly and with obvious pleasure at the bare brown shoulders and arms of the girls on either side of him.

The food was plain and good. Branch and Welling did not indulge in table talk. Of the two, Tom Branch was the larger, but only by a little. His white shirt bulged across the barrel chest, the buttons pulling the fabric tight. Mal thought that he did not look as alert as Welling, the slightly leaner man. Both of them moved with the coordination of natural athletes and neither of them dropped their poker expressions for a moment. At close range Mal found that they were both older than he had first thought.

Mal was curious about the two of them. As research geologists, they were beautifully miscast. Even if there were a mining engineering tie-in, it still did not make a great deal of sense. The details were wrong. Details of scarred knuckles, of the constant controlled alertness. In fact, Temble's relationship to them smacked a bit of the relation of trainer to animals.

Mal grinned inwardly as he saw both Gina and Sara pointedly avoiding any glance toward the captain's lusty eating habits. Dolan gave Mal a solemn wink.

III

WEARING canvas shoes as protection against the searing heat of the deck plates, Mal walked in swimming trunks to the blue canvas cover of the main cargo hatch, raised a foot above the level of the deck. As usual at this time of day, both Sara and Gina were already there, spread lax on their blankets, their honey-tan bodies gleaming with oil, limp under the fist of the brute

sun. In their two-piece suits Gina's body was a token of abundance, Sara's a more delicate promise.

Gina lifted her head and said sleepily, "Ah! The man who opens with a psychic two bid."

"Worked, didn't it?" he asked as he spread his own blanket between them.

"It worked that time. Next time you try it, Roger and I will clobber you and Sara."

"It kept you two out of slam, didn't it? And next time you are thinking I'm trying it, we'll have a fistful, won't we, Sara?"

"Of course," Sara said distantly. Ever since that first breakfast aboard a week ago, Sara had had an impenetrable reserve. She smiled willingly enough, but the smiles never reached her eyes. She played competent unemotional bridge. Roger Temble was a plunger. Gina had natural card sense. The way they had divided it off made it a close interesting game.

Mal adjusted his sun glasses and lay face down, his chin on one clenched fist. From the stern came the intermittent snapping of the target rifle, now so familiar that it had become a part of the background. Welling and Branch had devised a game involving the plunking of stoppered beer cans and bottles in the turbulent wake of the *Bjornsan Star*.

They were one day out of Colombo, heading southeast toward Perth. There was a faint breath of coolness in the air. Soon they would get so far south that sunbathing would be out.

He had been planning this special moment for two days. He said idly, "Girls, have you noticed how much more cordial the good doctor has been these past two days?"

Gina rolled over onto her side and stared at him. "How do you mean?"

He felt Sara looking at him from the other side. "Now I am his buddy-buddy. Before that I was some sort of a menace. Reporters get so they can feel those things."

"You're working that old imagination overtime," Gina said tightly.

"Am I, now? It seems that three days ago during our bridge game some inquisitive character, probably either Welling or Branch, neatly forced the door to my cabin

and went through my stuff. In the bottom of my flight bag he found my credentials and a copy of one magazine carrying my picture along with the last article of the German series. So he tipped off the doctor that I was okay and the doctor has been beaming at me ever since."

"Boy!" said Gina. "You've been taking it in the leg."

"Gina, my lass, sometimes you bore me. And this is one of the times. You five people have your guard up so high that you're all about to fall over backward. What is it, kids? Smuggling? Tell Uncle Mal."

With an odd sound in her throat, Sara jumped up, picked up her blanket and walked quickly away. Mal laughed. "You see, Gina, you've got one weak sister in the group. The rest of you can play poker, but that's not Sara's game. She's your give-away."

"Shut up!" Gina said.

"Why should I? It makes a long trip very interesting. The tough little doc and the frightened wife and the vivid widow and the two muscle boys. I guess one of the endemic diseases of the reporter class is an itching bump of curiosity and——"

She put her hand on his wrist and her fingers tightened down. Her dark eyes, looking into his, were hard and direct. "You talk a lot, Mal. That's a disease, too. Now use your head. If this was a small matter, we could all carry it off so you'd never guess. But it's big. It's so big, Mal, and I want you to believe me because it may be pretty important to you—and you are a nice guy. It's so big that it's worth risking a shipboard . . . accident to protect it. Is that clear enough?"

"Am I to take it that you've just threatened me?"

"I thought it was pretty clear."

"Come off it, Gina. That's melodrammer. Is a threat supposed to scare me?"

He had turned onto his back. She was propped up on both elbows, her dark hair falling forward by her cheeks so that a long strand of it brushed his arm. She looked beyond him up the expanse of deck. Then, very deliberately, she lowered her head and covered his lips with hers. Her bared teeth were bruising. As he involuntarily grasped

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her upper arm, feeling the sun oil under his fingers, she pulled away.

"That," she said, "is for being a guy who can't be frightened."

He saw that the sunglare had shrunk the pupils of her eyes to pinpoints. She was breathing shallowly. "Now I get the approach," he said. "It comes in three levels. The first one is to scare me. I don't scare. The second two levels are intermingled. An appeal to be rational about this, plus the promise of a bonus named Gina if I act like a good boy."

She pushed herself back onto her haunches. Her face was suddenly ugly. She called him a name which he had never before heard a woman use. For a moment he thought she was going to leave. But she lay down again, on her back and shielded her eyes with her forearm.

"Naughty, naughty," he said. "Such language."

Her voice was far away. "Have you ever tried to live on what our fine colleges pay an assistant professor? You wouldn't understand that, would you? You wouldn't understand watching the years go by. You wouldn't know what it can do to a woman."

She sat up again and leaned toward him. "Mal, I mean this. If anybody . . . anybody . . . tries to take away from me what I'm going to have, I'll kill them. I'll get something sharp and I'll kill them with it. And if they take it away from me, I'll spend the rest of my life finding them and killing them for doing it to me, even if I have to do it on a busy street."

Then she did get up, picked up the bottle of lotion, the towel and her blanket and left in the direction Sara had taken. He watched her leave. Her flanks moved solidly under the thin trunks. The black hair, spilled down to her shoulders, glinted blue in the sun.

THE *Bjornsan Star* churned and waddled placidly down through the blue seas. Routines became more fixed. Mal knew from Temble's unchanged attitude that neither of the girls had spoken to him about the conversation in the sun. Their motives in keeping silent were not clear to him. Routine brought with it an emotional and intellectual

lethargy—precisely what he had sought for in taking passage on the ship. It was a time for healing. Later would come re-evaluation. He had been filled with a hundred springs wound tight. Each day more of them relaxed.

During the daily bridge sessions it became easier for him to forget that there was a mystery about the five which he had not unraveled. Then he would look over and see Gina's dark eyes and he would remember again.

He sunbathed until it grew too cold. He played chess with MacLane, talked football with Torgeson, talked ships and the sea with Bob Dolan. Each night he fell immediately into dreamless sleep. Slowly he regained the weight he had lost, and he kept it from settling around his middle by a series of exercises in his cabin that took a half hour each morning and a half hour each night.

There were odd little incidents. One night he could not sleep. He went up onto the boat deck with such unconscious lack of noise that Temble and his wife did not hear him. Mal went to the far side of the boat deck. He could hear Temble's hoarse angry tones, but he could not make out the words. Finally Temble passed him ten feet away, went down the ladderway to the main deck.

When Mal walked over to the other side he saw that Sara still stood there, looking out across the placid sea, clad in a pale robe. The hem whipped in the wind as did her hair, glowing faintly in the starlight.

She turned as she heard his steps. "Nice night," he said. "I couldn't sleep."

He stood beside her. "Neither could I," she said. The silence between them was not awkward.

"It seems too bad," he said, "that trips must have an end."

Her response startled him. She turned into his arms with a sob in her throat. She was trembling. He held her closely, her head against his shoulder. She cried with almost perfect silence. When the interval between the racking sobs grew longer, he put his knuckles under her chin and gently forced her to look up at him. He kissed her on the lips, meaning it for a gesture of kindness, doing it without conscious

thought. He heard her breath catch in her throat as her arms went strongly around his neck and she pressed herself closer to him, responding to the kiss with a silent ferocity that turned it into something not at all like the gesture he had planned.

Then he kissed her cheeks and tasted the salt of tears on his lips.

He tried to make a joke of it. "A fine thing," he whispered. "This would look just fine to the honorable doctor."

"If he thought anything about it, he would probably find it amusing," she said.

"I don't think I understand."

"Don't try to. There's been nothing between Roger and me for . . . for a very long time, Mal." She pushed away from him, almost roughly. "But that's no reason for this. You caught me when I was feeling sorry for myself. Please, Mal. Let's both forget it."

"That might be a difficult thing to do, Sara."

"Don't try to be gallant, Mal. I'm not in the mood. Just forget it happened. That ought to be simple enough, hadn't it?"

"If you say so, Sara. Good night."

"Good night and . . . thank you very much, Mal."

THAT was one incident. It did not quite end there. The next afternoon Gina came to him where he stood alone on deck and said, with waspish humor, "Let's both try to forget, darling."

"Couldn't you sleep?"

"Not with you comforting our solemn girl about six feet from the porthole over my bed, I couldn't. It was a sweet scene, dear. You played it well. But don't try to follow it up."

He grinned at her. "Jealous?"

"That might be a good word for it, now that you mention it, Mal."

And there the incident ended.

When they docked in the narrow channel at Perth, he went to a book store in Freemantle and bought a heavy bundle of books. After one day and one night in harbor they pulled out, headed east for Melbourne. The winds became bitterly cold. There were frequent cold slanting rains that left the decks gray and glistening. Sara stayed out

on deck during the rains whenever she could, with a borrowed coat on. He noticed that when she went back to her cabin after a rain, the red-brown hair pasted tight to the clean lines of her skull, there was more peace in her expression than at any other time.

They had been partners long enough so that their partnership play became far better than that of the Roger-Gina combine. Both Roger and Gina grew sulky about it, and there was not as much fun in the game as formerly. Mal suggested that they change the set match so that he and Gina would be partners. As he suggested it, he looked at Sara and found no flicker of disappointment in her eyes. Roger and Gina put up only a token argument. Once again the match was on an even keel.

As they docked at Melbourne, Gina came up to him and said, "I want an evening out, and you are the lucky boy. Thrilled?"

"Through and through."

They went out together and he tried to give her enough liquor so that it would loosen her tongue. Her face slackened and her eyes grew dulled, but she gave him no information at all about what he wished to know. She clung to him all the way back to the *Bjornsan Star*, but once they reached the deck she passed out. He managed to get her up onto the boat deck to the door of the captain's cabin and there he turned her over to an unstartled Sara who thanked him and asked him to please put her on that bed over there and good night. "I'm enjoying the book you loaned me."

WHEN Mal awakened the next morning they were heading south around Tasmania into a heavy blow. Gina was at breakfast, bright-eyed and apparently unabashed.

At Wellington the cargo winches were broken out again and the bulldozers were hoisted, one by one, and swung over onto the pier. A large tonnage of food was taken on for Pago Pago.

The sky was a dim unbroken gray when the doll-houses on the slopes of the hills encircling Wellington harbor faded back into the distance.

Gina stood beside Mal and said, "My tan

is about gone. How long before we can start the sunbaths again?"

"Four days or so, I should judge."

"Let's round up the bridge experts and whup them again, man."

It was near the end of the bridge game that the pitch and roll of the ship grew more pronounced. Doctor Temble began to look a bit gray around the mouth. It was Dr. Temble who broke up the game.

When Mal went out onto the boat deck he was startled by the hard force of the wind blowing out of the south. He had heard the whine of it in the rigging, but the actual personal violence of it was completely unexpected—as was the sudden feeling of awe. Huge swells, flattened by the wind, came driving steadily out of the south. Their large foamless crests were very far apart.

Mal had difficulty with his footing. At last he reached the ladderway at the after part of the boat deck. He looked down onto the main deck and saw Dolan supervising the stringing of life lines. The ship's carpenter was working with timbers and spikes, strengthening the hatches.

Mal felt his way cautiously down the ladderway and went close to Dolan. "Storm coming?" he yelled over the sound of the wind.

Dolan put the red beard close to Mal's ear. "The old fool wouldn't lay over in Wellington the way I wanted him to. Don't worry though. The old lady makes work of it, but she'll ride it out. It'll take us off course, though. Good thing you've got your sea legs, Mal. We'll start taking water over the decks in another couple of hours. Then you'd better stay below. And eat hearty. It may be the last hot meal for a while."

By the time of the evening meal it was almost as dark as night outside. Mister Gopala, for the first time, seemed to have lost his happy spirits. Even the mercurial Torgeson seemed subdued. He ate rapidly, seeming to flinch each time the pitch of the ship lifted the screw half out of water so that the entire vessel shuddered as the screw flailed the air astern.

Captain Paulus did not appear for the meal. The mess boy's durable smile was a trifle strained. "Where's Gina and Roger?"

Mal asked, leaning forward to speak across the silent Tom Branch.

"Both ill," Sara answered.

"So's Welling," Branch said. It was the second time Mal had ever heard the man speak.

Dolan came in and sat down. The mess boy brought a plate heaped with food to him. The pitch was slowly growing more pronounced. The *Bjornsan Star* seemed to coast down at a steep forward angle for an interminable time, before slowly lifting her bows, creaking and complaining as she did so.

Dolan grinned behind his beard. "Decks awash now, people. She's riding hard, Stay off the weather decks."

"But I have to go on deck," Sara said, "to get up to our cabin."

"Not tonight," Dolan said firmly. "You stay below."

"But Gina's up there alone," Sara said.

"She'll be fine. I'll look in on her on my way to the bridge," Dolan answered.

AFTER Sara finished her meal she left the room. She was back again in ten minutes. She sat down across from Mal in the chair Welling usually occupied. She smiled wanly at Mal. "Roger's really ill. Mr. Gopala's being very sweet. He insisted that he could take care of him and practically forced me out of the room. . . . Oh, that was a big one!" The *Bjornsan Star* slowly came up and they heard the sound of tons of water roaring along the deck overhead. Water sloshed over the weather sill into the room and then began to wash back and forth with each movement of the laboring ship.

Only Sara, Tom Branch and Mal were left in the room. Mal glanced at Branch and was surprised to see that the husky man was pale, that he licked his lips continually.

"Not my racket," Branch said solemnly. "Not my racket."

He left the room. He was back within a few minutes, peeling the plastic from the top of a bottle of Irish whiskey. He sat down heavily and lifted the water glass out of its slot in the false top that had been fitted to the table.

"Want some?" he asked of Sara and Mal.

She shook her head. Mal held out a glass. "Two fingers," he said.

The bottle neck chattered on the rim of the glass and Branch sloshed about three inches of liquor into it. He poured himself more than half the tumbler full. Keeping a firm grip on the bottle he tossed it down in about five thick swallows; then coughed and shook his head.

Mal took his time with his potion. It had a pleasant smokey flavor. Branch took his bottle and glass and moved cautiously over to a corner table. He sat with his wide back to them.

"How long will it last?" Sara asked.

Mal shrugged. "These things sometimes last for a full week. I don't know. We're running with it."

There was a long convulsive shudder of the ship and the screw was lifted out of the water.

"I ought to get up to Gina."

"She'll live through it, that one," he said.

They sat for a long time. He remembered the kiss on the boat deck and tried to capture

her eyes. She would not look at him. She wore a thick tweed skirt, a white fuzzy turtle-neck sweater. She had fashioned the ripe hair into two braids which gave her a school-girl look. He wanted her to look at him. There was something about a storm and its flavor of catastrophe that broke down reserve and inhibitions, sent a heady excitement pounding along the pulses.

A long time passed in silence. The motion of the ship grew choppy, more abrupt, harder to anticipate. One violent heave slid her half out of the chair. She smiled at him apologetically.

The bottle smashed on the floor. They both turned and looked at Branch. It was obvious that the bottle had been emptied before it fell. Branch turned and focused his eyes on them, grinning, and his underlip sagged away from strong yellow teeth.

"Come talk to me, baby," he said.

"What do you mean?" Sara asked coldly.

He gave here an exaggerated leer. "Don't tell me it's over your head, baby. Right along you've known how it's been with me. But the old man is laid up now. C'mere,



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kid. Sit over here where I can sweet-talk you."

Sara started to get up. Mal tried to restrain her. She shook off his hand. "It's all right, really. He's just drunk. There won't be any trouble."

She had to hold onto the table for a moment until the ship steadied. Then she went toward Branch in a half run, urged on by a new tilt of the ship. He laughed loudly, caught her by one wrist and swung her into his lap. The chairs had been bolted to the floor. Sara gave a shrill cry of fright as Branch wrapped his big arms around her, saying huskily, "You know how it's been with me right from the beginning, baby. With a little luck we can keep the whole works for just you and me."

As Mal jumped toward them, the first roll of the *Bjornsan Star* flung him in the other direction. He fell against one of the fixed chairs, but on the next surge he went uphill toward Branch, moving like a man breasting waist-deep water. Throughout the ship unfastened doors banged and equipment thudded.

Branch looked up as Mal was upon him. He pushed Sara off his lap and she fell, rolled hard against the wall. Branch came up out of the chair and clubbed at Mal with a fist like an oak knot, but the movement of the ship destroyed his aim and they fell against each other. Mal brought his knee up hard and tried to rush Branch against the bulkhead, but the bigger man twisted easily and it was Mal who hit the steel, his head snapping back hard against a row of rivet heads, the shock and pain dazing him.

Branch set his feet and, grunting with each swing, he drove his big fists into Mal's middle. Then the roll of the ship carried him backward out of range. He went back, off balance, until the backs of his thighs struck a chair back. He toppled over with a surprised look frozen on his face. He was on his feet immediately, blood flowing from a cut across his left cheek. Sara, off to Mal's left, had pulled herself to her feet.

"He'll kill you!" she screamed.

The tip of the floor brought Branch on in a blundering rush. Mal barely had time to get his foot up. He kicked Branch

in the pit of the stomach but the big hands clamped on his ankle as Branch's mouth sagged open. Branch twisted hard and Mal fell heavily. A hard fist thudded against his head just over the ear and the room spun.

Then suddenly Branch was gone. Mal rolled onto his hands and knees and, peering up, he saw Dolan standing there, feet planted, red beard matted, braced against the sway of the ship, holding Branch by the nape of the neck with, effortless strength.

AS BRANCH tried to kick him Dolan laughed, a laugh which merged with the roar of the storm. Dolan was like a creature out of the sea. He held Branch with his left hand and drove his right fist against the man's jaw with such a cat's quickness that there seemed almost to be no interval between blows. Branch fell. He lay on his back and his head lolled back and forth on his limp neck with each movement of the ship.

Dolan reached over and fingered the jaw. "Didn't break it," he said with satisfaction. He straightened up. His eyes suddenly held a weary look. "We've lost a man. Swept overboard. We saw him go and we couldn't do a damn thing. And we've lost a passenger."

"Who?" said Sara in a tone barely audible.

"Welling. Broken neck. The way I see it, he must have started out of his cabin and lost his balance and got thrown against the rail that protects the ladderway down to the engine room. He toppled over. Torgeson found him down there. I tied the body back in the bunk."

"Can I get to my cabin?" Sara asked.

"No. I can't let you take the risk and I can't spare the men to take you on a rope. You stay below."

He turned and went out, cat-footed, steady as a rock against the wild pitch of the floor. Mal looked at the unconscious Tom Branch and then over at Sara.

"Sooner or later," he said, "He's going to come out of it and make trouble. I think we'd better go to my cabin. I won't bother you."

She nodded. Once they reached the companionway leading from the mess room

the going was easier as the swing of the ship merely knocked them from side to side of the narrow corridor.

Water was ankle-deep in the corridor, sloshing back and forth, wetting them midway to the knees. At the turning where his cabin was off to the left, Sara stopped, clung to a wall brace and stared off to the right where the door to the deck was open, the pin in the wall slot holding it open.

The noise was louder here. "Can we look?" Sara called.

He shrugged. "No harm in looking."

They went cautiously down to the open doorway. The weather sill was a foot high. With each swell the *Bjornsan Star* was burying her nose as she came up out of the trough and the water, waist high, was roaring down the weather decks. There was a fascination in the sight of the wild sea. The wind was still strong, stronger than before, but each mountainous wave was crested with white froth that streamed away in the wind. The sea and the sky were the color of gray metal.

As a massive angry roar of water went by the door, seething and bubbling, Sara stepped quickly out over the weather sill and ran for the amidships ladderway leading up to the boat deck.

Mal was frozen for a moment, and then he gave a great cry and plunged after her. He saw that she could not possibly make it. Nor could he reach her. He got as close as he could and then clamped his right hand on a round metal rail support. As the wave brought her tumbling back to him he reached out and managed to catch her by the arm. He took a deep breath and shut his

eyes. The hard weight of the water closed over him, roaring in his ears. He felt the popping and crackling of his shoulder muscles, felt the slow slip of his fingers down her wrist to her hand. Then, as he thought he would lose her, the pressure eased. When the water dropped away, he let go of the rail support, grabbed her other wrist and ran backward away from the next wave already breaking over the bow. She was unconscious. He tumbled her in over the weather sill and, barely in time, with the water pulling at his legs, he fell in on top of her.

He dragged her back toward the branching of the corridor, rolled her onto her face, kneeled straddling one slim leg and pushed down with his hands against her small waist for a slow count of three, then took the pressure off, counted to three again before reapplying it. After he had done it twenty times she coughed and retched up a gout of sea water. She moaned just loud enough for him to hear her.

He picked her up and stumbled heavily toward his cabin.

IV

AS THE open door banged violently, he carried her in and put her on the bunk. Then he returned to the door, took the key from the outside and locked it on the inside. His locked door banged with an irritating clatter. He latched it.

Both of them were drenched. She lay, rigid and white-faced. Long shudders shook her body. She opened her eyes and looked up at him and tried to say something, but

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her teeth were chattering so badly that he could not make out the words. The blueness of her lips and fingernails frightened him and he tried to remember what he had read about shock.

He unlaced her sodden shoes and took them off, stripped the soaked wool ankle socks from her feet. Then he tried to strip the white sweater, heavy with water, up over her head. She fought him.

"Sara! Listen to me. You've got to get dry and warm. Please."

She did not fight any longer, and he threw the sodden sweater over under the wash stand. She lay with her eyes shut. "Can you hear me?" he asked loudly.

She nodded. "Okay, Sara. Here's two towels. I'm going to turn my back and count slowly to a hundred. Then I'm going to turn around. You'd better have everything off, be dry and be under those covers. Understand?" She nodded again as a great shiver possessed her.

He went over and stared out the closed porthole at the wildly tossing sea. Once the porthole rolled underwater, startling him.

"All right?" he called, without turning.

"Y-y-yes," she answered. He turned. Her clothes were in a damp heap beside the bunk. The covers were pulled up to her chin and she was trying weakly to dry her hair. He made her hang her head over the edge of the bunk, where he knelt beside her and rubbed the gloss back into the glowing strands. They came alive as they dried, springy under the towel.

He took the flask from his flight bag and made her drink several swallows of straight brandy. She coughed and her eyes streamed, but she had stopped shaking.

"Thanks, Mal. Thank you very much."

"That was a damn fool stunt, Sara. You could have died."

"Would that have been important?"

"To me? Yes." She flushed and looked away. "Turn over and face the wall, Sara. See if you can sleep. I've got to get out of these clothes."

He stood and toweled himself dry, looking over at the autumn flame of her hair spread on the pillow. He put on dry clothes, wrung out their wet things in the wash stand—her heavy sweater and skirt, the

diaphanous undergarments. He lurched over and stood beside the bunk, braced against the deep swing of the ship. She seemed to be breathing heavily, regularly, in spite of the movement that rolled her back and forth. He was drugged with weariness. He made a bed of the damp clothes by spreading a blanket over them. He stretched out on the floor against the wall after turning out the light. The *Bjornsan Star* labored her weary way through the endless night.

HEAVY banging on the door awakened him. He was stiff and sore from the pummeling of the wall and floor. He stood up. The movement of the ship was oddly different.

"Who is it?" he called. Sara was sitting up in the bunk, her eyes wide with fright, the covers clasped to her breast.

"Dolan. Is the Temble woman with you?"

He glanced over at Sara. She made no sign. "Yes," he called back.

"Both of you get down to the ward room as fast as you can make it. Hear?"

"Right." Dolan was gone.

"What is it?" Sara asked. Her voice trembled.

"He's worried. Something about the ship." He looked at the port. It was rolling under with every third wave. "She's lower in the water, Sara. Logier." He went to the flight bag, pulled out a white shirt, flannel slacks and a heavy cardigan sweater. He threw them over onto the bunk. "Get dressed fast. Your stuff isn't dry yet. Roll up the sleeves and cuffs."

He turned his back to her. Dressed in his clothes she looked amazingly frail. He unlocked the door and they went down to the ward room. Everyone stared at them with varying expressions as they came in, fighting the pitch of the ship. Gina looked into Mal's eyes with amused insolence. Sparks stood braced in a corner, a book in his hands. He glanced up absently and then began reading again.

Roger Temble's complexion was green, but his eyes were alert, his smile sour. "I'm happy to see you're alive and . . . unharmed, my dear," he said. "We were worried about you."

"Listen," said Mal, "your wife couldn't get back up to . . ."

"Please shut up, sir," Dr. Temble said. "I think there are things of importance to be discussed." Sara stared woodenly down at the floor.

Tom Branch, his mouth puffed, his eyes disclosing the extent of a brutal hangover, sat numbly in one of the chairs. Anger flickered in his eyes and disappeared almost immediately as he glanced at Mal. Torgeson, looking like the small gray ghost of a once cheery squirrel, sat near Branch. The cook, both mess boys and six other seamen were crowded into the room.

Dolan stood, his feet spread, his eyes bleak. Behind him Mal saw the figure of Mister Gopala clad in a huge fuzzy blue sweater, with a pink scarf over his head and tied under his chin.

"This meeting," said Dolan in a voice that filled the room, "is to bring you up on the state of affairs. At three this morning she hit a bad one and some starboard plates amidships buckled. The water's coming in faster than the pumps can handle it. One of the boats was swept away yesterday. At dawn Captain Paulus stole the other one and left with the second officer and six seamen. I don't think the boat lived in that water." He turned and repeated what he had said in Swedish this time. The men took the information stoically.

"Now for an accounting. After yesterday's two accidents there were twenty-nine of us left. Eight took the remaining boat. So there's twenty-one of us. You six passengers, the two men up at the wheel, nine seamen in this room, Sparks, Torgeson, myself and Torgeson's second in the engine room. The radio shack is gone."

MacLane folded his book, keeping a finger between the pages. "And now, Dolan, I can tell you what I've been trying to say. Last night I ducked out to eat, and when I got back to my board I found that some clever devil had been at work in there. Tubes cracked and connections torn loose. In the best of weather it would have taken me three days to get back on the air."

Dolan gave him a look of heavy contempt. "The blue monkeys did it, I suppose." At that second the *Star* rolled so badly

that MacLane was forced to take a step away from his corner. He fell back against the wall heavily.

"I am not saying, Dolan, that they couldn't have done it. I just doubt they had the technical ability. At least all the little creatures are gone now."

Dolan shrugged as if it were no longer a matter of importance. He turned to Torgeson. "How do things stand below?"

The chipmunk mouth quivered, but the voice still had its truculent rasp. "Water ten inches over the floor plates when I left. An hour, maybe, before it douses the engines. They'll suck in water vapor and in diesels that's a more explosive mixture than the oil and they'll run away with . . ."

"Skip the technical information, Torgeson. Damn a man with my luck. Now get this. We haven't been able to take a shot for twenty hours. We're headed northeast. There's one hell of a lot of open sea around here. I want to stay with the ship until the last minute. Then we'll spread oil and take to the rafts. Everybody has to be ready to go at thirty seconds' notice. Guessing our speed and drift, we've got one chance in a thousand of hitting a little French pimple of an island. The oil will give us a chance to get everybody lashed to the rafts and . . ."

"I've got to get into the hold," Dr. Temble said in a loud hoarse tone.

Dolan stared at him. "What the hell for?"

"My . . . my specimens! The expedition specimens!"

"Even if you could get into the hold, which you can't," Dolan said, "I wouldn't load any rocks and bones onto our rafts." He stared at Temble and seemed to be waiting.

Temble's eyes had a glassy shine behind the dewed lenses. "You don't understand, Dolan. It's more than . . ."

"Shut up!" Gina screamed, her face contorted.

Temble stared at her and his mouth hardened. He advanced a step toward Dolan, and he clung to the table to steady himself. "You intend to abandon ship?"

"Yes," Dolan said, and Mal sensed a grin behind the beard.

"Then I have to tell you this. Our ex-

pedition was set up as a smoke screen. A wealthy Hindu, enormously wealthy, was in danger of having his fortune taken over by the Pakistan government. During the fighting he converted everything into jewels and gold and hid them. We went in and located sediment containing skulls of entelodonts of the Miocene period. We cut blocks of the sediment and the standard procedure is to cover the exposed bones with shellac and wrap the blocks with burlap soaked in flour paste for shipment. There can be no question of import on such items. We cracked one such block, bored a hole in the middle for the treasure and re cemented it with mud before wrapping it. I have to tell you all this so you won't abandon ship unless it is suicide to stay with it."

"Go on," Dolan said.

"I would guess the total value at about . . . six million dollars. Dolan, if you can save this ship I'll cut you in for a sixth share."

"A quarter share," Dolan said. "And besides, who are you to cut me in? Where's the owner?"

Mal looked over just in time to see the look in Sara's eyes as she lifted her glance to his. It answered Dolan's question with cruel clarity.

"He did not survive the trip," Temble said.

Branch startled them all with a loud laugh in which there was no trace of humor or amusement. It sounded more like the Bray of an animal.

AS DOLAN gave orders to the crew, one of the mess boys broke open the locker containing the life jackets. They were of dingy gray canvas designed like a vest, with blocks of cork sewed in around the waist.

Once they had been donned a new flavor was in the air—of expectation and immediacy. Mr. Gopala made sharp clicking noises with his tongue, indicating extreme disappointment with the cut and fit of the garment.

"Stay in this room, all of you," Dolan ordered, striding out. Torgeson had gone below to watch over his precious steel monsters. The crewmen huddled in a group.

Sparks was reading again. Mal sat on the floor beside Sara, their backs against the wall, their legs braced. Between them, where the others could not see, she held his hand tightly. Her slim fingers were strong and icy. Temble and Branch had their heads together. Once Branch stared over at the two of them. It was a flat stare, without emotion. A carpenter might stare in that way at a board he was about to cut. A trap shooter might stand and wait, his eyes on the trap, with precisely that expression.

Once the *Star* heeled over so far that every mouth went taut, all eyes went wide. From Mal's position, staring along the floor was like looking up a steep hill. She remained in that position for an impossible, interminable length of time before slowly creaking and sighing back to roll, not quite so far, in the opposite direction.

"I thought it was going all the way over," Sara said, her lips close to his ear.

"It won't, don't worry."

"I'm sick, Mal. Sick inside. I've been sick for a long time. It started when I found out what he is. What Roger is. They killed that man when he left the fire and went down to the stream to wash."

He pressed her hand. "Don't talk about it."

"I don't care any more, Mal. If I live I'm going to tell what he did."

"Don't say that!" he said sharply. "If he should hear you . . ."

"Gina's his kind of woman. She has the same streak in her that he has. They found it out on this trip, Mal. The way she watches me . . . I know what she wants him to do."

"Please, darling."

She looked into his eyes and then her slow smile came. It was a faintly crooked smile, uptilted more on the right than on the left. Her eyes at that moment were as gray as the sea—as gray as the sky—and as warm as lips against his heart.

"Like that?" he asked.

Her fingers tightened on his hand. "Just like that, Mal. And I didn't know it before. What a time to find out!"

"Stay close to me. No matter what happens. Stay close to me."

"I will. Oh, I will!"

EVERY moment the *Bjornsan Star* increased the spasmodic extent of her labors. The salon windows rolled under with each wave. So much water came in that Sara and Mal had to stand.

Dolan came to the doorway and bawled, "Lines are strung. Everybody up onto the boat deck. Watch yourself?"

The sailors, when he repeated the order in their language, made a frantic rush for the doorway, clogging it for a moment with their struggling bodies. Mal let the others go first. He and Sara and MacLane were the last to leave. Mal supported Sara with a strong arm around her waist.

At the exit to the weather deck he yelled into her ear, "Run out and grab that rope when I push you. Hold on with both hands all the time. Move by sliding your hands along it."

Then she was ahead of him, clinging to the rope. They made ten feet before the water roared down at them. It swept her off her feet a fraction of a second before it knocked him down, burying them both in its turbulence. She slid back against him and he got his arm around her, locked his hand on the rope in front of her body. As soon as the deck was clear they scrambled up and made another eight to ten feet before the water smashed at them again.

The third time a body slammed against them with brutal force, almost tearing them from the life line. It tangled in Mal's legs as the water drained away. He looked down and saw Gina there. Her eyes were open and she seemed to smile up at him. But then he saw that the water swirling away from her, was pink, saw the great wound where her throat had been slashed. The next

wave spun her away into the screaming grayness astern. Sara had not seen. Her movements had grown feeble and he knew that she was but semi-conscious from the buffeting she had taken. The absurdly large slacks he had given her were pasted to her long legs. But there was no longer the danger of chill. The long night had carried them far enough north so that the sting was gone from the air and even from the water.

At last they reached the point where it was but a dozen feet around the corner to the amidships ladderway leading up to the boat deck. He forced her along, spending the last of his energy to get her to the foot of the ladderway. The next boiling wave caught them there, but he had both hands clamped to the steel railing, his arms around her.

She climbed slowly. When she paused to rest he looked back to see how MacLane was faring. MacLane had reached the foot of the ladder. He looked up with a face so strained that it resembled a skull. As Mal watched he saw the wave smash the weakened man against the steel treads of the steps. MacLane dropped and the wave carried him ten feet before it receded. There was no chance of reaching him. He lay with the book beside him and Mal wondered vacantly how he had managed to bring his reading along so far. Then the next gray wave swirled MacLane away, around the corner and out of sight.

Sara fell once she reached the boat deck. He picked her up, supported her, as they made their way by the empty davits and along the side of the captain's cabin to the bridge where the others were gathered.

Temble ran to Mal, grasped him and shook him, yelling into his face, "Where's

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Gina? Where's Gina? She was right behind me!"

"Swept overboard," Mal said crisply. "I couldn't save her."

Temble's shoulders slumped. He staggered wearily and almost fell. Up on the boat deck the rolling motion of the ship was even more pronounced, but they were at least out of the reach of the waves. The superstructure looked as though a giant's hand had swept casually along the ship, from stern to bow and back again.

Mal found Sara a relatively dry corner. Dolan and a husky seaman fought the wheel. Dolan's mouth sagged open with strain, so that it formed a wet red orifice in the middle of the matted beard.

"Cross your fingers for luck," Dolan roared. He gestured dead ahead with a motion of his head. The glass ahead of the wheel had been smashed out. Mal squinted against the driving spray. Dead ahead, revealed only when the *Bjornsan Star* rose sluggishly to the top of a great wave, Mal could see the spray thundering high from the reefs, see a low gray island beyond.

It came closer with startling speed, always nearer each time it became visible. And suddenly, in the midst of the storm, there was an odd silence. Mal realized that the vibration, unheard but felt through the soles of his feet, had ceased.

The following sea began to slowly turn the *Star* broadside to the giant combers that leaped forward to smash against the reefs.

Dolan jumped back from the wheel roaring a great oath into the wind. "He couldn't give me five minutes more!"

Once broadside to the waves, the *Star* made one gigantic roll that tumbled the unway into a heap in one corner of the bridge. A seaman was thrown against the jagged shards of glass remaining in the frame. Badly slashed he began a ceaseless screaming.

Mal crawled and fought his way to Sara. Once he reached her he craned upward until he could see from the side windows the reef so close that the spray was flung into the air to fall on the *Star*. The next wave would bring them down onto the reef and all he could hope was that through some miracle they could get into the relatively

quiet water beyond the harsh coral. He dropped and shielded Sara with his body. The *Bjornsan Star* lifted up and up, seeming to hang poised for a long moment. She came down with a rending, crashing, long-drawn-out jar, breaking her back and her heart.

She sagged over, steady for a moment at a precarious angle. And the next wave smashed her broadside. With a long scream of steel on coral she slid over the reef and down into the quiet water beyond. She floated for a moment and then the bow struck and the wind slid her slowly around. She came to gentle rest.

V

IT WAS a breathless dawn, hot and torpid and muggy. The sun was a rising ball of brass and steam rose from the brush and the palms and the damp main road of the small thatched village.

Of fifty huts a good score had been smashed by the wind. This was Dakeet, child of catastrophe, step-daughter of the great winds, and island five miles long, three quarters of a mile wide, ringed about with coral reefs. The gray sea, not forgetting anger so quickly, still thundered at the reef and the outrigger canoes would not be launched for several days.

Mal stood on the sloping sand of the beach and looked out at the dead hulk of the *Bjornsan Star*. She was canted at a forty degree angle, resting on the shallow bottom, her starboard rail under water for all of its length except for a few feet near the bow. Some of the native boys had swum out to her. They sat on their heels on the canted port rail looking for all the world like three dusty brown birds. Between the thunder of each wave on the reef Mal could hear their chattering as they discussed this strange and wonderful deviation from the norm of Dakeet.

Sara came down to the beach from the shelter of the line-brush. The slacks, though badly wrinkled, were almost dry. She had rolled up the sleeves of his white shirt and she wore it open at the collar. Her hair was badly tangled and lifeless from the crusted salt, but her smile was for him alone.

"Dry, eh?" he asked.

"Enough to wear. Now tell me what you found out last night, Mal, after I collapsed on that cot in the resident's house."

"We were twenty-one, weren't we? Now it's fourteen. That man you saw slashed died of loss of blood. Torgeson was trapped below decks when she settled. He said he was going back for something just after the engines failed. MacLane and Gina are gone, of course. And two other men were swept away. One of them was the English-speaking mess boy."

Her eyes clouded. "He was nice . . . and Gina . . . she was my friend, I guess."

"We're being given breakfast at the house of the resident. He's had no time for us. Too busy taking care of his people here. There's about two hundred of them. They had some deaths in the storm. There's a bad food situation because of the storm. He told Dolan that he'd talk with us after breakfast."

"Did you see him last night?"

"Just for a moment. Small, nervous type. French of course. His name is de Beauharnais. Been here for a long time, right through the last war. The people are Micronesian—probably stranded here during one of their long jaunts a few hundred years ago. We'd better head toward his place. It's a ten minute walk, wouldn't you say?"

EVEN the sturdy residency had suffered damage from the storm. The roof of one of the wings had been torn off despite the anchor cables fastened to buried logs. But the wide screened porch was intact. It was placed at the head of the village street and but fifty feet from the waterfront. The next building was a store, undamaged, its windows still boarded up. The neatly lettered sign over the closed door said, "A. Hayaka—Merchandise" in three languages.

The others were all gathered at the end of the big porch which, in L shape, encircled the village side and the sea side of the building.

Mal and Sara nodded at the others. Temble said to her, "Come here, my dear."

She glanced up at Mal then shook her head firmly. Branch took two slow steps toward her, looking back at Temble like a dog eager for command. Temble said softly,

"Not now, Tom." Dolan chuckled dryly.

There were not enough chairs for all of them. Sara and Mal wandered away from the rest. In a little while de Beauharnais came up the steps onto the porch, his face sagging with a bone-deep weariness. He carried a small black bag which he handed to one of the house boys.

In spite of his obvious tiredness, there was an electric vitality about the small man. He faced the group in silence. "Have you injured?" he asked. "Forgive me for not asking before. I am the doctor here, too, as you see."

"One bad wrist," Dolan said. He turned and spoke to the man in question, who held out a swollen, discolored hand, wincing as the resident fingered the wrist.

"Sprained only. Tell him to remain with me. I will tape it." Dolan spoke to the man who then stepped back into the group. "Are all of you here? Yes? It makes fourteen, eh? Did you radio your position?"

Dolan explained about the radio. De Beauharnais gave a Gallic shrug. "You will be with us for some time, I see."

"How do you mean that?" Temble demanded harshly.

De Beauharnais raised one eyebrow and stared at Temble as though astonished by the tone of rudeness. He answered quietly. "It is three weeks before one of the island ships will stop here. We have no mode of communication with 'outside'. We must plan what must be done. What cargo have you? Anything salvagable?"

"A good deal of tinned food, sir," said Dolan. "Australian butter. Tinned New Zealand beef. I took a look at the ship. At low tide it shouldn't be much of a chore."

"Excellent!" the Frenchmen said, smiling. "That will help solve our most pressing problem. As soon as you have rested I shall require you to take a party of your men and begin salvage operations. The foodstuffs will be brought here for storage. Now as to living arrangements—" He found Sara in the group, bowed to her. "I would be most pleased if you would accept my hospitality, Mademoiselle."

"She is my wife," Temble said truculently.

"Ah, so? Then perhaps you too, sir."

"It might inconvenience you, M'sieur," Sara said, "as we shall require two rooms."

De Beauharnais took a crumpled piece of paper from his pocket and held it at arm's length to read it. "The note you gave me, Mr. Dolan. Let me see. I have four rooms that can be put in order. I should suggest the following people in that case. Mrs. Temble, Dr. Temble, Mr. Gopala and Mr. Atkinson. You, Mr. Dolan, along with the remaining passenger, Mr. Branch, can remain with the crew can you not?"

"I would prefer that Mr. Branch be given a room," Temble said.

"That has already been discussed with Mr. Dolan," De Beauharnais said, "and it was decided that Mr. Branch is in better condition to withstand a . . . primitive environment. My work crews are helping rebuild the huts now. The day after tomorrow they can begin the construction of huts for your crew. Until that time the crew and you too . . . gentlemen can sleep out of doors."

"Where?" Branch asked sullenly.

"That brings up a most serious question. You will forgive me for speaking this way in your presence, Madame Temble. Mr. Dolan, you must keep crew members away from the village women. I would not have thought that men who had so recently been close to death would have had the spirit for amorous adventure. There was one incident last night. I have spoken to the girl. She is quite certain that she inflicted at least one deep scratch on the face of the stranger."

The crew stood stolidly, not having been able to follow the conversation in English. Mal looked and saw one heavy man with three parallel scratches down the left side of his face to the corner of his mouth. The man slowly grew conscious of all the eyes on him.

"Mr. Dolan, please explain to them what happened. Mrs. Temble, please go inside the house immediately."

As Dolan explained, the other men moved nervously away from the scratched one. He lifted his fingertips to the scratches on his face. Dolan's voice was rough and angry.

"Please explain to him that here on Dakeet we do not have time for all the judicial niceties."

Dolan gave de Beauharnais an odd look, and did as requested. Mal felt the tension in the air, felt it grow to a quivering edge.

De Beauharnais said, almost shyly, "You see, these are my people and they love me and they also expect certain things of me." With these words he took a small automatic from his side pocket and fired once, seemingly without aim. The man with the scratched face took one unsteady sidestep and stood, legs spread for a moment, before going down. Two drops of blood appeared at the rim of the small hole over his right eye.

The man shuddered against the wide board floor and lay still. De Beauharnais said, "The evidence was sufficient. I pronounce the man dead. If I had not done this thing they would have taken him tonight and death might not have been as pleasant. Mr. Dolan, you will take your crew and Mr. Branch to the east end of the island. Take the body along and bury it there and put up any marker you think advisable. My boys will bring food to you. Report to me on the progress of your salvage operations."

Temble, Mal and Gopala stood beside de Beauharnais on the porch and watched the group of nine walk down through the village. Four of them carried the body. All the way through the village they were watched by the populace. There was no sound, no jeers, no laughter.

De Beauharnais sighed. "My table is set for five. Will you give me the pleasure of joining me. I have opened the last tin of good coffee."

WHILE Sara napped, two women sitting on the floor outside her door, Mal walked east down the beach. The tide was high, almost covering the *Bjornsan Star*. When he reached a small patch of high ground set back from the beach he saw that Dolan had set the men to work cutting bamboo, tying the lengths with vines. The men were stripped to the waist. Branch, with sullen face, was working and sweating with them.

Dolan smiled at Mal, walked and met him sixty feet from where the men were at work. They sat on their heels on the beach.

Dolan drew meaningless lines in the sand with a bit of shell.

He said, "You see how I did that? I wanted Branch and Temble split up. The girl doesn't matter. She's against it and against Temble anyhow, isn't she?"

The big red beard was crisp in the sunlight. "Maybe I'm not quick enough," Mal said, "but I don't see what you're driving at."

Dolan cuffed him roughly on the shoulder. "Use the sense God gave little animals. Count off who knows about the six million dollars out there. The Tembles, you, Branch, Gopala and me. MacLane and the mess boy knew and Torgeson. They're out of it now. The Farrow woman is out of it. Now, just for the hell of it, try to imagine what would happen if you and me and Gopala were dead. Mrs. Temble is gutless enough so that the doctor could make her keep her mouth shut. The island ship comes. By then Temble has gotten his specimens, the right one anyway, out of the hold. **Away he goes.** Thank you for your kindness, M'sieur. I'll send you a Christmas card. But we're alive. You and Gopala and Sara Temble are witnesses to his agreeing to a one quarter split. The fool knows he's got to buy you and Gopala off, too. He must realize that." He cuffed Mal again, so hard that Mal sprawled over onto the sand. "Can't you see it? This is a big chess game from here on in. I made a move. I split Branch and Temble. And I'm the boy who takes charge of salvage."

Mal stood up. "What do you expect to get out of it?"

Dolan towered over him. He scowled.

"My full quarter share. I'm going to sleep with both eyes open and my back against a wall, Mal. And, by God, you're going to do the same. You're my witness."

"What makes you think I won't tell the whole dirty story when I get to customs at Los Angeles or wherever we dock?"

Dolan laughed so hard that he staggered. "Mal, you're a funny lad. Ye are, Mal. I don't care what you say to customs. I'm taking my split right here, my full quarter, and I'm staying in the Pacific. I know where I can buy an island. I'll stock it. I'll build a teak house on it and I'll have the best liquor and the fairest women for a thousand miles around. This is my way out, the one I've been waiting for. They broke me and they spit on me, on Bob Dolan. I've been waiting. Now it's going to be my turn to spit. They better all stand back. If you've got the brains God gave geese you'll come in with me, pry all you can out of Temble by threatening to tell de Beauharnais. That little Frenchy, if he knew about it, would find some law where he could grab the whole pile. The Temble woman likes you. Bring her along if you go for that sort. We'll all take what we can get and let Temble, Branch and Gopala figure out what to do with what's left."

Mal looked out to sea. He took a long time answering. "Maybe, Bob, you've figured it all out a way that looks good to you. Hell, that much money would start anybody's heart thumping. But there's one factor you've overlooked."

"And what would that be?" Dolan asked scornfully.

"Gina Farrow. She wasn't washed over-

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board. At least not alive. Her throat was cut. So you have to know who did that, because whoever did it wants the whole works for himself. And did Welling fall, or was he pushed? Could be the same person. And if anybody has already gone that far, a few more aren't going to bother him."

After Mal was a hundred yards down the beach he looked back. Bob Dolan was still standing in the same position, scratching the back of his head with one big hand.

SARA lay in a patch of shade wearing the cheap print dress which had come out of the smiling A. Hayaka's stock. Mal sat a few feet from her, his back against a palm trunk, his hands locked around his knees. Through an opening in the brush he could look out across the bay to where, at low tide, the outrigger canoes were clustered around the hulk of the *Star* like insects around a bit of food.

Bob Dolan stood atop the wreck, his beard a pinpoint glint of fire at that distance. The sailors had rigged a makeshift block and tackle hoist, using a weighted canvas hatch cover for a sling. The native boys would dive down into the water in the hold and transfer cases to the sling. The sailors would haul away until the sling was above the deck level and then the cases, one by one, would be transferred to a canoe. Each loaded canoe was paddled to the village beach where the native women waited to carry the cases up to the residency.

"Mal?" she said softly.

"Darling."

"Do you feel like I do? No yesterday. No tomorrow."

"That's what an island like this is supposed to do to you. But it doesn't do it for long. Just for the first week or so. Then the heat and the monotony and the flies and the sun glare begin to get you down. A year and you're island-happy, talking to yourself."

"How about you, Mal? What is it about you? It puzzles me. You're all mixed up in this and yet you're not *part* of it. You're sort of a . . . watcher."

"I'm having an emotional convalescence, maybe. I don't know how to explain it to you. I saw so much death and so much

suffering concentrated into a few months that all this . . . it seems artificial, somehow. Like Roger and Dolan and Branch are playing some sort of a game for backward children."

"And me too?"

"No, Sara. Not you. You're the only real part of, and you don't even belong in the script. How is Roger acting?"

"He's forgotten I'm alive. He's put me off in a little compartment in his mind labeled 'For Future Action'. He's frantic because Dolan is keeping him out of the salvage operations. You've seen how strained his eyes look. He's borrowed binoculars from de Beauharnais and he watches them out there every moment they're working. I think he's going a little mad, Malcolm."

"His boy, Branch, is out there."

"He doesn't trust Tom Branch. He didn't trust Welling either. He got them, you know, by putting a blind ad in the papers. 'Young man. Profit and adventure.' That sort of thing. He interviewed hundreds."

"And let the good ones go, eh?"

"Yes. And losing Gina seemed to do something to him. She was strong, you know. He was beginning to depend on her. Now he's alone. He knows that I've got nothing but contempt for this whole plan of his. I never really understood Roger before. That terrible ambition of his."

"How did you happen to marry him?"

"I was a coed at Northeastern. A miserable little sophomore. Seven years ago. My people were killed in an airline crash and . . . Roger was there. Sweet, gentle understanding. Sometimes you have to have someone to lean on, you know. I think he agreed to bring Gina and me along on this trip as sort of insurance against anything Branch and Welling might try. I guess he thought chivalry wasn't dead. It is, you know. Quite thoroughly dead."

Mal thought of Gina, of how he had last seen her. "It seems to be," he said softly.

"Let's walk, Mal," she said, getting to her feet. He marveled at her way of making every move with coordinated grace.

As they headed west along the beach she said, "There are thirteen of us, Mal. And so quiet. Like that usual part of a symphony

where you wait and wait for the music to crash out."

"Just before the coda."

"What's going to happen, Mal? Somebody else is going to die. They are, aren't they. Don't let it be you, Malcolm. Please don't let it be you."

"I'll consider the request."

"Don't joke about it. Take me seriously."

"I do. Always."

"I keep hoping and hoping that nothing more will happen. I want to go home and I want to leave Roger and divorce him and marry you." She blushed and looked away. "I forgot. You haven't even asked me."

"I don't want to ask you. Not here and now. Not in this comic opera atmosphere of treasure and dusky maidens. I want a scene with piano in the background, holding your hand across a table, with you wearing flowers I've bought for you. And before I ask you I want to learn how to come alive again. I want to know what I'm going to do with my life."

"Our life."

"All right, you forward wench. Our life."

THE small cranky gasoline generator quit that night and the table was set for five under the hard white glare of a Coleman lantern hung from an overhead beam. It made hard shadows on the floor. De Beauharnais, looking more rested than at any time since their arrival five days before, sat at the head of the table. Gopala and Malcolm sat at his left facing Sara and Roger across the wide table. The night was still and muggy and one of the house boys pulled on the string which moved the swinging fan back and forth under the lantern making a metronome shadow which swept from one end of the table to the other and back again, slowly.

The meal was a rich, highly-spiced curry, which Mr. Gopala, for one, ate with great enthusiasm. As he wrapped the bits of spiced rice in the green leaves and popped them into his mouth, he raved to de Beauharnais about the beauties of the island.

"Unspoiled, untouched," he said. "A gem. A jewel of the Pacific."

"If you had seen Dakeet forty years

ago, my friend" said the Frenchman, "you would not say that. A few ships had touched here in the days of sail. They left their usual gifts to the island. Diseases that rot these peoples. For generations they were sullen. Now we are bringing them back to life. It is a long process. You ask why, and how France can afford philanthropy. It is not exactly that. At one time there were good pearls here. The beds have been seeded again. Another five years, maybe ten, we shall begin to get those fine pearls once more. And these people grow strong again. They will dive for us and gladly."

Sara, as always in Roger's presence, ate quietly, rarely lifting her eyes from her plate. Roger Temble had lost weight. His hand shook as he ate.

Mr. Gopala leaned back from his empty plate with a small, satisfied belch. "Now tell me, M'sieur, is it possible to leave this island in an outrigger canoe? Can any port be reached?"

"There is an island without inhabitants, smaller than this one, almost forty miles to the north. That is the only place that can be reached. It is without water. Sometimes my people go there for the fishing when they know the weather will be calm for many days. In the proper season. Why do you ask?" De Beauharnais smiled. "Are you tiring of my hospitality?"

Gopala held up both hands in protest. "But no! It is just a small matter of curiosity. I do not wish to . . ." He frowned, then beamed at Mal. "Ah, I remember your American word. I do not wish to snitch. But I saw something which puzzled me. I have done much walking around your island, of course. Mr. Dolan and Mr. Branch, they have from somewhere acquired one of the outrigger canoes. At dawn I saw them repairing it. They have paddles. They seemed to be talking earnestly about some plan, but I did not wish to approach near enough to find out. It seemed to me that they could only be thinking of escape. I should not wish them to attempt something foolish and die because land is too far away."

Mal glanced at Temble. The man had a fork raised halfway to his lips. The fork was motionless in the air for long seconds,

and then he lowered it back to the plate. He looked pale under his tan.

De Beauharnais said, "I have talked to Mr. Dolan many times, Mr. Gopala. He is a capable ship's officer. He has looked at my charts. I am positive that he would not attempt anything so silly. You must be mistaken. They must have the canoe for some other purpose. Maybe they wish to try their luck at fishing."

Temble laughed. It was a hard spasm in his throat. "Yes," he gasped, "I think they want to try their luck at fishing. At fishing for . . ." He looked warily at de Beauharnais and stopped talking abruptly.

Gopala said quickly, "Oh, I forgot that . . . other matter, Dr. Temble. I can see how they might hope to . . ."

"Shut up, Gopala!" Temble said.

Gopala smiled. "Ah, of course. How stupid I am!"

"What is this all about, please?" the Frenchman asked coldly.

"Nothing," said Temble. "Nothing at all." He pushed back his chair and without further comment he left the room. De Beauharnais shrugged.

"Forgive his rudeness," Gopala said. "He has been under considerable strain, you understand."

"Of course, of course," de Beauharnais murmured. He clapped his hands for the house boy to bring the coffee.

Mal had taken the first sip of his coffee when he heard, as did the others, a distant cry from within the house, the thud of a fall. De Beauharnais sprang up, dabbing his lips with the napkin. He ran toward the inner doorway and stopped abruptly, slowly raised his hands and backed away. "What is the idea of this?" he demanded in a shrill, indignant voice.

Roger Temble, an automatic pistol in his hand, aiming directly at de Beauharnais, advanced into the room. His brown eyes had a staring look behind the clear lenses.

"Don't try to stop me. I went into your rooms to find one of your guns, M'sieur. One of your boys tried to stop me. He will be all right, I'm sure. Don't follow me and don't try to send anyone after me. I'll be back soon." He moved around the Frenchman to the doorway that led onto the

porch. They heard the screen door slap shut, heard his feet thud against the packed dirt as he ran off into the darkness.

Mr. Gopala inserted a cigarette into his filter holder. He lit it with the gold lighter he had managed to cling to throughout the shipwreck. He said, "M'sieur, I took the liberty of borrowing a tiny bit of petrol for my lighter."

De Beauharnais put his hands on his slim hips. "What is there that I do not understand? What sort of madmen have been wrecked on my reef? My apologies to you, Madame Temble."

"I think," said Sara in a small thin voice, "that my husband has gone to kill Mr. Dolan and Mr. Branch."

Wide-eyed house servants had appeared in both doorways. De Beauharnais gave his orders in the multi-voweled tongue of the islands. He said to those at the table, "Kindly stay where you are." He left the room. He was back in five minutes wearing a face net, carrying a small calibre rifle and two revolvers.

His smile was tight. "So long as we deal with madmen, we must act accordingly." He handed one revolver to Mal. "You will come with me." He handed the other to Gopala who took it gingerly. "And you will stay with Madame." He gave a curt bow in her direction. "Forgive me. I intend to bring him back with me. If he does not come willingly, I shall harm him."

Five boys were waiting at the foot of the porch steps. They all carried fish spears and wore the long flat trading knives. They were excited. They fell in behind de Beauharnais and Mal as the two men headed for the beach to walk up to the new encampment at the eastern end of the island.

VI

MAL had accepted the revolver and the responsibility with a blandness that had no conscious thought behind it. He was now being carried along in the course of events with a numbed acceptance. There was an unreality about it, and he tried to concentrate on the impressions his senses received in order to recreate reality.

The rising moon flooded the beach with

silver and made the waves molten. Far out in the bay a deeper shadow hinted at the spot where the *Bjornsan Star* had sunk after sliding off the reef. His shoes made small scuffing sounds in the dry sand. Behind them the boys padded along, talking to each other in hushed liquid tones. The sea against the outer reef was more vibration than sound. Phosphorescence glimmered through the smaller waves that licked up along the packed sand.

De Beauharnais used a long tireless stride and Mal felt the pull of muscles in his thighs.

Far ahead and to the left Mal saw the white hard spot of light from the Coleman lantern de Beauharnais had loaned to the encampment of the nine men. As he saw it, they heard, above the soft sounds of the sea, a distant shout and then the flat snapping sound of shots fired in the open air, three of them in rapid succession.

De Beauharnais yelled orders to the five boys and broke into a lithe run. Mal had difficulty keeping up with him. His hand was sweating on the cool grip of the revolver. As he ran de Beauharnais turned and said in almost a conversational tone, "I will go along the beach. You head toward the encampment and fire into the air and try to drive him down to me. If he tries to stand against you, find cover and try to shoot his legs."

The nightmare feeling of unreality did not diminish. As they neared the light Mal, obeying like an automaton, swerved left and ran directly toward the light. He did not realize he was shouting until he heard his own voice in his ears.

He topped the small rise and saw two figures, directly under the lantern hung by a taut wire from tree to tree, rolling and struggling. Another figure lay ominously still a few yards away. The other men were standing nearby and one of them kicked heavily at the two struggling figures on the ground. They all moved back as Mal shot twice into the air, the heavy revolver jumping his hand.

Mal shouted to de Beauharnais to come. Dolan rolled onto the top of the other figure, casting a mighty shadow in the hard blue-white light. Roger Temble was under-

neath and Dolan's two big hands were locked around the smaller man's throat. Dolan's arms were so long that Temble could not reach Dolan's face. Already Temble's motions had grown loose and languid.



The automatic glinted in the hand of one of the men nearby. Mal aimed the revolver and the man hurriedly tossed the automatic into the dust at Mal's feet. He snatched it up and yelled, "Bob! Bob, let go of him!"

Dolan gave no sign that he had heard. His eyes were squeezed shut and the corded muscles stood out on his bare arms. Temble no longer struggled.

Mal hesitantly struck Dolan over the head with the barrel of the heavy revolver. Dolan shook his big head. Mal, as de Beauharnais came up behind him, hit Dolan again, much harder. The big man sagged. It took a third blow before he dropped and even then the big fingers had to be pried off Temble's throat.

Both men were unconscious. Mal gave the automatic to de Beauharnais who slipped it into his pocket and went over to the other man who lay face down in the dust. One hand scrabbled spasmodically at the dust, as de Beauharnais gently rolled him over. It was Tom Branch, his pale eyes wide and

frightened, and dust caked on his lips. There were two bleeding holes in the center of the thick chest and a third one high, near the base of the throat. Each time Branch breathed the air whistled and bubbled in the hole at the base of his throat.

"Amazing vitality," de Beauharnais said calmly.

Blood clogged the throat hole and gouted from the side of Branch's mouth. His body went into sustained tremble, from head to foot, and then he lay still, the eyes no longer frightened, staring instead at a fixed point an incalculable distance away.

"What happened?" de Beauharnais asked of the nearest man, who made a gesture to show that he didn't understand. By then Temble was forcing himself up into a sitting position. Every breath made an audible rasp in his bruised throat. He gagged, and began to paw at the ground on either side of him. "Glasses," he said in a husky whisper. "Glasses."

Mal found them, off to one side. Both lenses were shattered, the bows bent. He kicked them over to Temble, who felt them with his fingers. "Can't see without them," he whispered.

Dolan came alive with no intermediate period of helplessness. One moment he lay still, the next he was on his feet, rocking a bit, fingering the top of his head ruefully, his green eyes full of comprehension. He looked hard at Temble who sat like a chubby helpless child, the broken glasses in his thick hand.

"One for the books, lad," Dolan said. "He came up roaring, yelling for Tom and me. Thank God, Tom was closer and got out first. By the time he tried to swing toward me I was halfway down his throat. I tumbled him over and I don't remember much after that." He glanced over at Branch. "Dead, eh?"

Temble still could not speak above a whisper. "And you should be dead too, Dolan. Both of you should be side by side. No power on earth is going to cheat me out of what's mine."

"I happen to be a power on earth at the moment," de Beauharnais said briskly. "Kindly get on your feet, Doctor, and walk back to my bungalow."

Temble got up. He walked with the extreme care of the grievously near-sighted deprived of glasses.

"You will come also," de Beauharnais said to Dolan. "Appoint one of these men in charge. Tell them no one is to leave this encampment."

THE boys were not in evidence during the long walk back down the beach to the bungalow. Mr. Gopala sat alone at the table, the revolver beside his plate.

He smiled. "I sent the lady to her room. I thought she might be safer there, as I've never discharged a firearm in my life."

De Beauharnais said, "Kindly remain seated, Mr. Gopala. Doctor, please sit where you were before. Mr. Dolan, pull that chair over to the end of the table and sit there. And you, Mr. Atkinson. Kindly take your place."

The Frenchman sat down at the head of the table and delicately dusted his hands. "Now then, we must talk sense. A great deal of sense. I am, by hobby a mathematician. This equation contains an unknown factor and until I know what it is, I cannot solve it. The unknown is a random factor leading to unpredictable variations in the behavior of this small group."

"It's time to talk business," Dolan said. "I agree."

The Frenchman looked down the table toward Dolan. "Proceed, please."

"It's pretty clear, isn't it, that the doctor here is a murderer, M'sieur. I mean there's no way for him to get out of paying a penalty."

"Just a moment," Roger Temble said, peering at Dolan. "Don't go too fast. De Beauharnais is a man who will understand my rights to . . ."

"Be still!" the Frenchman said. "I am listening to Mr. Dolan. And kindly do not tell me what I will and what I won't understand. I shall make a complete report of this affair, including the statements of all witnesses, and I shall turn the report, the statements and Dr. Temble over to the authorities so that he may be taken from here and given a proper trial."

Dolan pursed his lips. "Now I wonder if we couldn't persuade you to take care of

the justice angle yourself, the way you did that first morning we were here."

"That was a case affecting my people. This doctor killed one of you. I cannot regard the two affairs in the same light, obviously."

Dolan rested his big freckled fists on the edge of the table and leaned forward.

"I want to make a deal, M'sieur. You know the doctor is a murderer. If you can kill him, or have one of your boys kill him while trying to escape, I can make a dream of Paris come true for you. I can put a million dollars right in your hands, no questions asked. How does that sound?"

"Wait, wait!" Roger Temble said shrilly.

"Be still!" de Beauharnais said. No boy swung the overhead fan. The black shadow of the hanging blade was sharp and clear on the white cloth, as clear as the blade of a guillotine. The seconds passed, one by one.

"And what," said de Beauharnais, "if I should prove to be exceptionally greedy?"

Dolan did not answer. Mr. Gopala's eyes were like black buttons. Mal stirred restlessly. De Beauharnais had neglected to relieve him of the heavy revolver. It was in the waistband of his trousers, digging into him uncomfortably.

"Once Temble is dead," Dolan said soothingly, "we can discuss terms more carefully."

"Once Temble is dead, you would have a lever to use against me, Mr. Dolan. Is that not true? I would have exceeded my responsibilities. The price might go down rather than up."

Gopala, like a spectator at an intriguing game, shifted his eyes back and forth from one speaker to the next.

"If you wanted to be very greedy," said Dolan, "it wouldn't be much of a trick for you to . . . eliminate Temble, me, Gopala, Atkinson and the woman. I suspect that you might not be willing to stomach such a wholesale procedure."

MAL heard Sara's light step approaching. As the others looked toward the door he eased the revolver out of his belt and laid it between his thighs, moving his chair a bit closer to the table so as to conceal it from Gopala on his right.

Sara was pale. She halted in the doorway and he could see the gladness in her eyes as she saw him. "I . . . heard your voices," she said hesitantly.

"Sit down, my dear," Dr. Temble said in a husky whisper. "Sit down and listen to these gentlemen bargain over me. Dolan has offered de Beauharnais a million dollars as a fee for killing me."

"He shot and killed Branch," Dolan said, his tone indicating that it was ample explanation for everything.

Sara slid into her chair. "I . . . I don't understand."

De Beauharnais smiled at her. "Madame, these men are most amusing. I gather that there is a treasure of some sort on that ship. The ship rests in my bay, at my island of Dakeet. They are stupid to think they have any bargaining power at all. If it is there, I shall find it and I will handle it as an honest official should. There is no question of killing your husband, no matter what Mr. Dolan may have thought."

"As an honest official, you will see that it is given to me," Temble said.

"It is yours?" the Frenchman asked politely.

Mal caught movement out of the corner of his eye. He turned to see that Dolan had moved his big feet under him for balance. The hands were tight on the arms of the heavy chair. Dolan leaned forward, a slow inch at a time. The intent was clear. If he could spring the length of the table those massive hands could snap the Frenchman's neck like a twig. And it would be, in a sense, an answer to all Dolan's problems.

Mal felt the awakening inside him, the sudden urge to stop being a spectator. Across from him was the woman who would give point to any direct action he took.

He slipped his finger through the guard and said, "Dolan!"

The big man stopped his slow movement. In the silence Mal thumbed back the trigger of the double action revolver. The click was surprisingly loud.

"Sit where you are, Dolan. Don't move. You too, de Beauharnais. And don't call your boys. All of you sit still. And don't look so pleased, Mr. Gopala. I want some answers from you. Where were you when

Welling fell or was thrown down the ladderway?"

De Beauharnais looked puzzled. Gopala reached out and butted his cigarette in a saucer. "I believe I was attending Dr. Temble in his illness."

"And where were you when Gina Farrow's throat was cut, Mr. Gopala?"

The slim brown hands placed another cigarette in the filter holder. "If I remember correctly I must have already reached the bridge. I was ahead of her. I am glad to know precisely how it was done."

"Throat cut!" Dr. Temble whispered. His eyes were wide. Sara shut her eyes and leaned her head back against the back of the high chair. Her full underlip trembled.

"Dolan!" Mal said, "Did you and Branch have an outrigger canoe hidden away?"

Dolan looked dully at Mal. "Hidden? Hell, no! Drawn right up on the beach near the encampment. We used it to get out to the *Star*."

Mal smiled at Mr. Gopala. "Now maybe you'll explain a bit to us. I think it had better be a pretty good explanation. I think that it had better be good enough to clear yourself of Gina Farrow's death."

Mr. Gopala sucked smoke into his lungs and suddenly ceased to look, in his too-gay clothes, like any sort of a comic figure. The button eyes looked like flint rock.

"My name, of course, is not Gopala." He looked directly at Dr. Temble. "My brother spoke to me of his plan to get our monies out of Pakistan. He spoke of this honorable Dr. Temble, who, out of the goodness of his heart, and for a small fee, would aid him. I cautioned my brother. He would not listen. He should have listened. If he had, he would not have been struck over the head and tumbled into the stream at night.

"He was a stubborn man, and a gullible man, but I was fond of him. I knew of his death two days after it happened. I examined the body. It was no great feat to book passage on the same boat as you, Dr. Temble. Money speaks loudly in any tongue. After I studied you and your wife and your two . . . helpers, and that other woman, the greedy one, I was prepared to act."

He smiled at the cigarette in his hand. "Though I am not, in many ways, a devout

Hindu, I do ascribe to our rules against the taking of life. So, much as I might have enjoyed it, I could not work directly. Mr. Branch proved to be an easy problem. I had merely to ask him if he had been playing the American game of poker. He said that he had not. I then told him that I must have made a mistake, because I was certain that I had heard his friend, Mr. Welling, promising to Dr. Temble that Mr. Branch would cash in his chips before they reached Los Angeles. Mr. Branch was quite unexpectedly clever about the mode of death, I thought.

"It is easy to play the part of the slightly stupid person who overhears interesting fragments of conversation. Dr. Temble, you will remember my speaking to you of seeing the Farrow woman and Mr. Branch in amorous closeness in the night on the boat deck and hearing her say something to Mr. Branch about 'poisoning the old fool'. Then I waited to see which one you would remove. It was an interesting wait. I rather thought you overdid the part where you demanded to know what had become of her. She was behind you on the life line. An excellent opportunity in all the confusion. I assume you were motivated by jealousy as well as fear."

"You devil!" Temble whispered.

"And it was not difficult in your nervous condition to make you attack Mr. Branch and Mr. Dolan. I rather hoped that Branch would die and Dolan would escape. So you see I got my wish. Now Mr. Atkinson has brought all this to a head sooner than I had hoped. I rather thought he was beginning to consider me as a factor. Now, of the original five only Dr. Temble and you, Mrs. Temble, remain. I could not have him kill you or you him as I have learned to consider you as an innocent party to this adventure of his, motivated by a rather questionable loyalty. And, Mr. Dolan, you are merely a greedy fool. Your god is luck. But all your life it hasn't been bad luck which has brought on catastrophe, merely bad judgment. It has been a most interesting game."

"You talk as though it were over, Gopala," Dolan said slowly.

Gopala shrugged. "Isn't it?"

"There is the treasure," Dolan said.

"I shouldn't worry about that, Mr. Dolan. My brother wished the treasure transported to Calcutta and put in the vault of Lloyd's Bank there. I saw to it that his wishes were fulfilled. Our family wealth never left Calcutta. It was removed while the *Bjornsan Star* was still at the river dock. An intermediary explained the situation to Captain Paulus and gave him a small gift in return for his cooperation. If, Mr. Dolan, for the sake of a treasure which was never on the ship I could have encouraged you to kill Dr. Temble, I would have . . . how do you say it . . . racked up a perfect score . . ."

Dr. Temble sprang to his feet, knocking his chair over backward. He screamed at Gopala, "You lie! You lie!"

Gopala looked up at him with unconcealed amusement. "Poor little man," he murmured. "Poor little professor."

Temble wheeled before anyone could guess his intent and ran from the room. De Beauharnais stood up. "Why don't you let him go?" Gopala said. "He can do no harm, except to himself."

Dolan put his face in his hands. After a long moment he looked up. "I've done nothing I should lose my ticket for, have I?" he said defiantly.

"You might even be commended for beaching the ship here," Gopala said.

Dolan walked heavily to the doorway and out into the night.

Gopala said, with striking tenderness, "Mrs. Temble, this has all been most difficult for you. I am sorry that I had to be the one to allow you to find out that your husband was capable of killing a woman."

Sara managed a smile. "I really don't think it matters. I really don't think it has mattered for a long time. I think I will go to bed now. Good night, gentlemen."

THE squat, sturdy trading vessel churned through the placid sea. Malcolm stood on the afterdeck beside Sara, looking back toward Dakeet, low on the horizon.

"You'll be able to forget, Sara," he said.

She glanced at him. "There would be more to forget, Mal, if you hadn't turned me away when you did, so that I couldn't see it

happen. What do you suppose he was after?"

Mal shrugged. "I don't know. Some crazy idea of diving down into the hold himself to prove that Gopala was lying, that Gopala was trying some trick. But he was clumsy with that outrigger canoe and his eyesight was so bad that when he tumbled out, he probably didn't even notice the band of shovelnose sharks that had come in through the gap in the reef. It didn't last long. The way to think of him, darling, is to remember how, in the beginning, he was good to you. But there was madness in him ever since he got his hands on that treasure."

There was a polite cough behind them. They both turned. Mr. Gopala, wearing a wine red shirt from A. Hayaka's stock, and a pair of white duck trousers too large for him, beamed at them. "This one," he said to Sara, "is a good man, but with a tiredness in his soul. You will bring him back to life, you know. He will grow from your strength, but it will take a long time."

Mal frowned. "You're a pleasant little guy in some ways, but you've got a knack of keeping your nose in other people's affairs."

Mr. Gopala's smile was not dented. "Quite true." He pulled a small chamois bag up out of his shirt. It was tied around his neck by a leather thong. He reached into it with two thin brown fingers and pulled out a green stone the size of a hazelnut.

He held it out to Sara and put it in her hand. His smile grew broader. "You see, there is always some treasure. Not much, maybe. But a little. It may be only my conscience speaking. Or it may be that I yearn to be young again. It is for you. For both of you. There is a curse on it, however. If you should ever separate, it will turn to glass. And the longer you stay together, the deeper will grow the green fire in its depths."

He bowed ceremoniously and turned away.

"How deep can we make that fire, dearest?" she said.

"Deeper than deep," he answered as she stood tall and proud and unafraid beside him.

*Paint and Pinto Hawkins—Sometimes
They Themselves Didn't Know
Which Was Which*



THEM UNCONSCIOUS TWINS

By CADDO CAMERON

WITHIN the ancient walls of what had once been a Spanish prison at the northwest corner of Military Plaza in old San Antonio, two young Texas bronc riders were waking up on the morning after. The place was now called The

Bat Cave. Of massive stone construction and two stories high it served as city hall, police station, jail and as a warning to revelers on and around the famous plaza where all forms of amusement were offered to all manner of men at bargain prices. Paint and Pinto Hawkins had indulged in bargains,

ignored warnings and landed themselves in jail.

Seated on naked board bunks on opposite sides of the dungeon-like cell, these identical twins glared at each other. When Paint looked across at Pinto he saw an exact duplicate of his own brawny length, straw-colored hair and long bony face densely inhabited by freckles. And they were so much alike, he even had the same taste in his mouth.

Said Paint, "I've got us mixed this mornin'. Which is which—you or me?"

"Daggoned if I know," growled Pinto, "but I'd hate like hell to think I was you."

"You could do worse and still be better off. Whereabouts are we?"

"In jail."

"Sure, but *what* jail?"

Pinto held his head in his hands. "Don't know. Don't care. Jail is jail and we're in it. Be still!"

From a small barred window near the ceiling a shaft of light slanted across the cell and struck the wall above Pinto's bunk. Prisoners had scratched their names there in the yellow stone. Some were obscure unfortunates, others were famous men long dead—dated autographs inscribed in the early 1700s, Frenchmen and Spaniards who made history on Texas soil when it was New Spain. On this distinguished scroll there was printed in heroic letters, HAWK-INS.

Paint frowned thoughtfully at the word. "Say! We been here before. This dungeon packs our brand."

Pinto didn't look up. "That don't tell a man nothin'. We been in mighty nigh every first-rate jail in Texas and we run our brand on all of 'em."

PAINT sniffed the dank air. Through the odor of mildew filtered a familiar bouquet. "Hot damn! Now I know where we are. I smell a brewery!"

Pinto instantly lifted his head. "San 'Tonio!"

"And you ain't talkin', boy!" enthused

Paint. "Thought I'd lost my mind complete, but it's comin' back to me—part of it, anyhow."

"Yeah, man," declared Pinto. "This old

San 'Tonio lager beer sure re-stores a fella. My mind is a-driftin' home in driblets, too. I recollect how we and Uncle Tobey Dunn drove a band of XL horses to the stockyards here and it was a good drive, then—Huh! I can't recollect no farther."

Paint took it from there, "Uncle Tobey dickered some with Billy Shafter and sold off our stuff, and he trimmed that slick horse buyer a plenty. Uncle Tobey feels so good he swears we'll go and celebrate, and then—*My mind has balked on me!*"

Pinto picked it up, "We taken one of them hackney coaches and rid into town like dead game sports, a-headin' for the place that Uncle Tobey said had the coldest lager in Texas, only he couldn't recollect where to find it. We stopped at every place we come to so's to see if it had the coldest lager, which it didn't, and there was a hell of a lot of places, and—Damn! Here's where I go unconscious again."

Paint nodded. "You've always been more or less that way. It was like this—us and our fancy rig orientated around up and down Alamo and Houston and Crockett and in and out of places until we somehow got headed west on Commerce. We worked all the way to Military Plaza and half way around it without findin' the coldest lager in Texas, then pore Uncle Tobey he couldn't work no more—bein' a old stove-up man, so we taken and put him to bed in a ho-tel with his clothes on and his boots off, and then we—Now I'm unconscious!"

Paint looked at Pinto, and vice versa.

"Say!" exploded Pinto. "I know what happened after that, which simply means that we done lost half our minds, but we didn't lose the same half so we can piece 'em together and have one good mind between us, which is all we'll ever need. Lets us go!"

With a somber eye Paint glanced at the barred window, iron door and stone walls. "Where in hell can *we* go?"

"To sleep," muttered Pinto.

And they did.

"Them damned twins is my boys and I want 'em!"

Paint and Pinto awoke to the sound of those words, roared in a big voice they

loved to hear—Uncle Tobey Dunn, owner of the great XL, their home ranch. They sat up and tried to look sharp.

Uncle Tobey was coming nearer. "I don't give a hoot what the scalawags done, Louie, they ain't a mean hair on 'em. How come you to lock 'em up?"

A guttural voice answered with a slight German accent, "For raising hell—general hell, that is—and to protect them."

"Protect them twins? Huh! You mean to protect other folks."

"No, Tobey—to protect your boys."

The old cattleman snorted. "If ary one of my boys ever gets to where he needs the San Tonio po-lice for protection, I'll fire the cuss!"

Keys rattled and the door swung open. In strode Tobey Dunn, white hair and whiskers bristling and a touch of red showing in his normally clear eyes. Behind him came a bulky man with a sandy mustache on a round, pink face that beamed as if he had just downed a stein of cold lager. The twins knew Chief of Police, Louie Schultz, a good egg. They got quickly to their feet and stood with long arms hanging straight down.

UNCLE TOBEY glared up at them. "What in hell are you doin' here?"

Paint began, "Tryin' to catch up on our sleep, Boss, 'cause—'cause—"

"—that was a mighty long hot drive," Pinto finished, "and it's always powerful cool and nice sleepin' inside these thick walls."

Louie Schultz stroked his mustache with a big hand that hid his mouth.

Tobey Dunn coughed. "It's cool sleepin' in my ho-tel, too," he said. "After I finally got you speckled hyeenies bedded down in a room, why didn't you stay there like I told you?"

Paint looked at Pinto, and vice versa. Their faces were as long and solemn as an aged mule's.

In a moment, Paint answered, "We taken mighty sick, Uncle Tobey, and had to get up quick and go out and get us somethin'."

"That's a fact, Boss," added Pinto. "We figured it was the goat milk you bought us

over on Houston Street—swore it was a sure cure for freckles."

"You recollect what it done to you, Uncle Tobey," continued Paint. "You swore that goat milk was settin' a-straddle of your stomach instead of layin' down peaceable inside of it."

"Yes, Boss," concluded Pinto, "and we're wonderin' whether that Mexican goat hadn't been pastured on loco weed, or somethin'. What d'you think, sah?"

The old man was red-faced where his skin showed through or around his beard. "I think you're the damndest liars in all Texas!"

He turned to Schultz, "What did you figure to protect these sinners from, Louie? Theyselves?"

"From city crooks," answered the Chief. "Your boys don't savvy the trickery of the slick operators from the big cities and there are lots of them in San Antonio. They come from Back East and the river towns."

Uncle Tobey snorted at the twins, "Huh! So you had to get yo'selves protected."

BIG Louie beamed like a man with a bungstarter and a cold keg on a hot day. "Don't be too hard on the boys, Tobey. They *might* have been sick. When I first heard them, they were howling like poisoned wolves."

The old man scowled at the twins. They were as innocent looking as if they'd never been known to howl.

Said Paint, "Poisoned is right."

Said Pinto, "Mexican goat milk on a empty stomach."

"Whatever it was," continued Schultz, "I went down and trailed you for fear you'd need a doctor."

The twins anxiously hitched their weight from one foot to the other. Additional sleep had practically restored their memories, but some blank spots remained. Each was thinking approximately the same thing, *Trailed us! Lo'd he'p us!*

"You visited all the chili stands on the plaza," declared Louie, "and ate something at every one of them. By now you ought to be afire inside."

"We was afire then," said Paint, "and went to fightin' fire with fire."

"Yes, sah, Chief," added Pinto. "Goat milk poisonin' sets a man afire."

"You must've been afire," said Schultz, "for you proposed to every chili queen who waited on you. Real romantic, you were."

That rocked the boys back onto their heels, but their long freckled faces remained innocent and unperturbed.

Said Paint, "That's what this daggoned goat milk poisonin' does to a man."

"*Mexican* goat milk, that is," added Pinto.

"Constancia is the prettiest of the chili queens and she's a beauty," continued Louie. "You both asked her to marry you. She said she didn't know whether she wanted two husbands at once, but would think it over. You squared off to fight to see who'd get her if she wouldn't have the pair of you. I was moving in to stop it, when two girls showed up and gave you the high sign. You forgot about fighting. You introduced yourselves like gentlemen, bought the girls chicken with chili and fixings and took another order apiece to keep them company. Before they finished eating, you proposed to them."

UNCLE TOBEY chuckled clean down to his heels. The twins' freckles were brown spots on a red background now.

"Damned goat milk!" growled Paint.

"It makes a fella romantic when he'd ought to be smart," declared Pinto.

"What did them women say?" asked Old Tobey.

"I forgot to mention," said the Chief, "that the boys told the girls they were sons of a cattle king and they and their dad had just driven a little dab of horses to the stockyards here—five hundred head, I believe it was."

"That hundred geldings of our'n shore foaled plenty colts on the way here," drawled the old man. "But, what did them women say?"

Paint and Pinto wished the flagstone floor would drop like a gallows trap, and the farther they fell the better.

The Chief handed Uncle Tobey a cigar and lighted one himself. "They said—" He paused, having trouble with his smoke.

The twins stopped breathing.

"They said . . . 'yes'."

"NO!" cried the boys.

"What's more," Louie went on, "each girl grabbed a twin and started to lead him away. That's when I arrested you."

"What for?" demanded Dunn. "It ain't a crime for a pair of damned fools to get married in San 'Tonio, is it?"

Big Louie laughed. "No, but I thought maybe the boys should take a little time to think it over. You know, Tobey—San Antonio has about twelve thousand people and a lot of them are bad citizens, some worse than bad."

"So are my XL twins worse than bad and then some," snapped Uncle Tobey. "You had no call to slap 'em in jail to protect 'em from your two-bit city crooks. It's a disgrace to our outfit. Turn 'em a loose and you'll quick see what I mean."

LOUIE grinned at the fiery old cattleman. "I'll let them go if they'll make me some promises."

Uncle Tobey did the talking for the twins, which suited them perfectly. "What promises?"

"They won't go looking for trouble."

"No such promise! Us XL men make it a point to run onto trouble befo' it runs onto us."

"No fighting."

"No promise! My men are bred to fight. If I had one that wouldn't, I'd run him off with dogs."

"They must dodge a couple of crooks who were keeping an eye on them last night, said Schultz. "I mean Spark Cary and Shang High. They're two of our most dangerous thugs. You can't miss them. They dress like sports, plug hats, canes that are loaded and will kill a man, and Spark wears a Five-Hundred-Dollar rock in his cravat. Shang is a mixed blood who looks a little like a Chinaman. Those men are poison. Dodge them."

Uncle Tobey vigorously shook his white head. "My XL boys don't never dodge nothin' but mad bulls and red-eyed cows. No promise!"

"And no women."

"No deal! If my men want to throw

themselves away on women, that's their business."

Schultz looked at Paint and Pinto, thoughtfully stroking his mustache. "I'd like to hear a few words from the boys themselves."

The twins wondered what to say.

Before they had a chance to say it, Uncle Tobey snapped, "Be still! I do the talkin' for these spotted leopards, Louie, and mighty nigh all their thinkin' except when they're a-workin' bad horses. Now, it's time you opened the gate and let 'em ramble."

The Chief shrugged, "All right, Tobey, but I know I shouldn't do it until you're ready to go home. Remember, they're your responsibility. If they get into trouble, I'll lock up the three of you."

Uncle Tobey put his hands on his hips and teetered back onto his heels. "You and the balance of your twelve thousand citizens—*maybe!*"

THE three XL men left the bastille arm-in-arm, Uncle Tobey in the middle, and they set their bootheels down hard on the mesquite block paving. He steered his freckled twins purposefully toward a definite destination.

"Boys, I done found it."

"What you found, Boss?" inquired Paint.

"The coldest lager in Texas!"

"Hot damn!" exclaimed Pinto. "Just what we need to purify us after molderin' in that dungeon."

At the door of the adobe saloon the twins swapped quick glances over the old cattleman's head. They were here yesterday and Uncle Tobey then swore this beer was so hot it singed his whiskers. But today, seated with foaming steins at a table, the XL men tested their lager and unanimously pronounced it the coldest in Texas, if not in the whole U. S.

With one stein gone and another on its way, Uncle Tobey declared, "Boys, the old XL and every man, horse and critter on it has been dis-graced, particularly me. Never thought I'd see the day when men of mine come to town and got locked up by the police so's to protect 'em from city crooks.

It's plumb shameful! Louie Schultz is the out-talkin'est fool this side of hell. He'd give a pritty to get square with me for what I done to him at a poker meetin' a while back, so he'll spread the news to the fo' winds. We'll never live it down. I'm a mind to sell off everything and hit for South America, so he'p me!"

The boys' eyes met and hung on for a moment. This was serious. They shared Uncle Tobey's fierce pride in the outfit and, besides, they loved the cantankerous old cuss and wouldn't hurt him for worlds. Something had to be done and they nominated themselves to do it.

Paint asked, "Boss, d'you reckon you can stand to wait until mornin' before you start sellin' off XL stuff?"

Whereupon, Pinto observed, "In this hot weather, a heap of things can happen to San 'Tonio between now and tomorrow mornin'."

Uncle Tobey looked at the twins through the gap between his bushy white eyebrows and the rim of his stein. "Mmm-uh . . . Much as I hate to, I've got to stay in town tonight. Important business. His name is Wildhorse Wilson from Indian Creek. He and his trailmates think they're poker players."

The old man got up. "Time I was on my way. Set still, boys. How you fixed for money?"

"We ain't fixed," replied Pinto.

Uncle Tobey brought out a well-used buckskin bag and gave them each some gold pieces.

"There's two months' wages apiece, but you *could* earn every penny of it by mornin', Shore hope you do just that. Fact is—*you'd better!*"

THE usual balmy summer evening came to San Antonio and concentrated its best efforts upon *Plaza de las Armas*, Military Plaza. Lighted by a full moon, lamps and torches the great square was a combination carnival, market, promenade, bazaar and outdoor cafe, permeated by the pungent odor of burning mesquite wood in open cooking fires and the appetizing aroma of Mexican food.

The XL twins were on the prowl to-

night. Drifting from one saloon to another around the square they drank nothing stronger than a short beer and remained cold sober, though pretending to be somewhat more than a shade high in the hopes of baiting city crooks to make passes at them. The boys were in The Hole In The Wall, (once a Spanish Governor's palace,) when they got their first nibble.

Looking through the open door at the plaza, Paint observed, "Yander's them crooks Louie was talkin' about—Spark Cary and Shang High. They're a-huntin' somethin'. Betcha we're it. After all the lies we told last night, they figure our dad has got money."

"Then it's time we made ourselves easy to find," drawled Pinto. "Lets us go."

They went into the street and stopped. There they lifted their long faces to the sky and howled at the moon. Though the twins were habitually soft spoken, each had a big voice and since they howled in concert, hitting every note on the nose, the result was a squawl that rose and fell and tremoloed and carried far, a weird scream fit to strike terror to man and beast in a region where the savage warwhoop was not entirely a thing of the past. Dozing cab horses who had seen and heard everything, awoke and cocked their ears. The voice of the plaza dropped to a whisper for a moment, then burst forth in laughter and yells of encouragement to the howlers.

IN A group on the porch of a nearby barrel house an old cowhand yipped out his personal squall, then warned, "Ketch a-holt and hang on, boys! Them spotted lobos are a-tunin' up. They was on the loose last night. San Tonio lived through it, but she'll never be the same town again."

The twins locked arms and stalked down the middle of the street with alcoholic dignity. Pinto stole a glance at the city hall. "That made us plenty easy to find. Louie Schultz and two of his po-licemen are standin' in the calaboose door."

"Let 'em stand," snapped Paint. "They need to see how XL riders gentile city broncs."

The boys turned into a low adobe saloon with an open door and two unwashed win-

dows through which filtered yellow light. There were three men at a table in the rear and one bartender on duty—a tall, lean person with a hawk face and sharp, shifty eyes. Pinto ordered small beers and placed a five dollar gold piece on the bar. The saloonman brought the drinks, took the coin and dropped it into the till on the backbar. When they had emptied their glasses, Pinto politely asked the bartender for his change.

"What change?" snapped the bartender.

"From my five dollars."

"Five dollars—hell! You gave me a dime."

Pinto looked owlshly at his brother. "Did I?"

"If that was a dime," answered Paint, "it sure had the yaller janders."

The saloon man put his hands on the bar as if he were about to come across it, and growled, "Don't you hayseeds go to getting smart with *me*! Beat it back to the brush and learn how to count your money before you come to town again. You're drunk! Get out of here!"



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The boss of the clip joint had scarcely finished his speech when the twins' bony hands clamped on his wrists. They gave a tremendous yank. He dived over the bar and landed on his face on the sawdust-covered floor. The men at the table scrambled to their feet. Two pulled slungshots, the third had a knife. Pinto jammed a boot onto the dazed barkeeper's neck to hold him down, then snatched up a nearby chair and flung it at the toughs. Meantime, Paint vaulted the bar. He threw a bungstarter. The sledge-like missile put one man out of action. For an instant the air seemed filled with flying whiskey in quart bottles. The two remaining thugs were knocked down before they could close with Pinto. They took cover behind an over-turned table.

Pinto looked down at his semi-conscious prisoner. "Come and he'p me throw him out where Louie Schultz can find him."

"Hold on a minute," said Paint, tinkering with the money drawer. It had a trick lock, so he simply jerked it open, put in a dime and took out a five dollar gold piece. "Now we're square with this dive."

The plunge over the bar to the floor had almost knocked out the saloonman. He was as limber as a dry rope. Each taking an arm and a leg, the twins picked him up and carried him through the front door. Several men were there and more coming, attracted by the noise, and down the street trotted Louie Schultz with a policeman. Across on the edge of the plaza stood a huge barrel or hogshead, marked RUBBISH. The boys headed for it.

"We'll just take and dump him in there," said Paint, "with the balance of the trash."

"Good idea," declared Pinto. "That's all these city crooks amount to."

They jackknifed the long bartender into the barrel and walked away as unconcerned as if this were an everyday chore.

WHILE ambling around the square the boys were accosted by many of last night's acquaintances, some of whom they remembered. Constancia, the chili queen, was one of these. They took seats at her stand.

To the vast amusement of a dozen other folks, she greeted the twins in sultry Spanish, "My so beautiful sweethearts! I thought you had abandoned me. But you proposed to me—yes? And I told you I would think it over—no? Senores, I have thought."

"Uh-h, and what d'you think?" asked Pinto, so flustered he forgot to be polite and speak her language.

Constancia was the picture of dismay. "Oh, my sweet boys! I thought and thought, then remembered that I already have *one* husband and a long waiting list. My heart is broken!"

Everybody laughed, including the freckled twins, though their faces were the color of their bandannas.

She reached quickly across the counter and drew their heads close together. "Those girls from last night," she whispered rapidly. "They are looking for you. Be on guard. They are bad—very bad. Dangerous—*most dangerous!*"

"Much obliged," said Paint. "We'll keep a eye peeled. But we like our women dangerous."

BY THE time the twins had polished off their chicken with chili and accessories, the girls found them. Tillie and Tessie didn't look dangerous, except for the fact that they were mighty pretty in a small, dark fashion, dressed in black liberally trimmed with red. They claimed to be sisters, which, they had said, made them all the more anxious to marry brothers. Having declined an invitation to eat, the girls clung to the twins' arms and maneuvered them in a southeasterly direction away from the police station.

"We've been so worried about you," gushed Tessie. "Old Schultz had no right to arrest you that way."

"Were they mean to my boy?" asked Tillie, gazing starry-eyed up at Paint.

"Nope," he replied. "They wouldn't dast get tough with *us*. Socked us with a little two-bit fine for disturbin'—that's all."

"A fine!" exclaimed Tessie. "Why the very idea."

"Never hurt us a particle," declared Pinto. "Just tobacco money for our dad.

Five hundred apiece, and costs. Didn't cost much."

"Five . . . hundred!" gasped Tillie.

"Uh-huh, apiece," repeated Pinto. "Made a thousand for the pair of us. Dad swore he always knowed he'd a been money ahead to drown one of us when we was born."

"Mmm," thoughtfully murmured Tessie. "Sis, let's take the boys to the house where we can have a nice long talk about getting married. Mama and Papa won't be home before midnight."

Tillie thought that was a fine idea and so did the twins. They headed for a coach driven by what appeared to be a moderately honest Irishman, but the girls angled them off toward another with a smiling bandit at its door.

Before stepping inside, Paint paused to look back across the lighted plaza. He saw Chief Schultz drifting along as if he were not going anywhere in particular. He also saw Spark Cary and Shang High looking his way. Paint kind of wished they hadn't left their six-shooters at the livery stable when they hit town. That was Uncle Tobey's idea.

IT WAS a low house on the bank of the San Antonio River, which winds its way through the heart of the city like a country snake lost in town. The house was surrounded by a garden wall and almost entirely hidden by tropical and subtropical vegetation, typical of the city. Even the moon couldn't find its way through the trees and vines. When the big gate closed behind them the twins felt sort of cramped for breathing space and upon entering the latticed porch, overgrown by roses and honeysuckle, they strained their eyes to pierce the darkness and wished they were somewhere else.

Beyond the massive front door—recessed in two-foot walls, they walked into a dimly lighted hall with rooms opening into it from either side.

The boys eyed those closed doors suspiciously. At the moment they'd a heap rather be back on the Old XL, aboard a pair of fighting broncs.

"Go straight down the hall to the balcony, boys," said Tessie. "Wait there while Sis

and I light up the house and get something to drink."

The twins went out to the latticed gallery. Almost beneath it ran the river, a lusty infant that grew to man size long before its waters reached the Gulf of Mexico. A jungle of vegetation screened this house from its neighbors a short distance away upon either side, and the far bank was unoccupied. Behind the home next down stream a floating bath-house was moored. Though the girls' house didn't have one, such luxuries were common at the better homes up and down the river.

"I've got a feelin'," muttered Paint, "that we'd be smart to get to hell out of here."

"Me, too," cautiously said Pinto. "But I'm dumb enough to hate to run from pretty women. We never have."

"Nope, and it has cost us a-plenty."

"Yeah, and the cost of bein' dumb is goin' up faster than our wages."

"If we was to run off, though," declared Paint, "we'd never be able to face Uncle Tobey again—or ourselves."

"And you ain't talkin'," agreed Pinto. "I'd want to unhitch that bath-house down yander and float to the gulf, then clean on to South America if the weather was good."

"Besides, there's the two months' wages Uncle Tobey slipped us."

"Yep, and we've got to earn them wages before mornin'."

"Likewise," said Paint, "we're out to show San Tonio that we don't need no protection from her city crooks."

"You're damned right we are!"

A woman's heels clicked on the tiled floor in the hall. It was Tillie. "We're ready now, boys. Come into the parlor and have a drink on our dad."

Joking about swiping her old man's liquor, the twins followed her down the hall.

She opened a door on the right, smiled and told them, "Go in and behave like you owned the place. I'll be there in a minute."

The boys walked into the brightly lighted room. The door closed behind them. No drinks in sight, no girl, nobody, yet they had the feeling that the room was full of people. Pinto reached back and tried the

door. *Locked!* There were doors in either end of the room. Paint strode to one, Pinto to the other. They, too, were locked. The boys turned quickly toward the heavy velvet window drapes.

From behind them, came a man's soft voice, "Better sit down and make yourselves at home."

The twins whirled, instinctively reaching for six-shooters that weren't where they belonged. Behind a large leather chair diagonally across the room stood a burly man with a black mustache and a big jaw. A huge diamond sparkled in his cravat and a stubby revolver seemed at home in his hand.

The boys had no more grasped this picture and recognized Spark Cary, before another man arose behind a chair in a far corner.

He was stocky with an oriental face, a wicked eye and a bulldog pistol—Shang High, and at close quarters he looked like a bad man to monkey with.

"Why don't we let 'em have it, Spark?" he growled. "I'll take the one on the right—smack through the belly."

"We'd ought to," admitted Spark. "They're trying to break up our home. But the hell of it is, Shang, they're worth more to us alive than dead." Motioning with his pistol, Cary commanded, "Sit down, you! There on the sofa. Sit!"

The twins sat. Said Pinto, "You got us wrong, Mistah, plumb wrong. We ain't a-makin' out to bust up no man's home."

"The hell you ain't! You're running around with our wives."

"Wives?" queried Paint. "*What* wives? We ain't got a particle of use for wives."

"Tessie is my wife, Tillie is Shang's and this is our home."

"We saw you practically kidnap the girls on the plaza," declared Shang. "Forced them into a hack."

"That's a damned lie!" growled Pinto. "They—"

"Tony!" snapped Cary. "What about it?"

From behind the window drapes left of the sofa, stepped the bandit hack driver. He had a wide smile on his dark face and a long knife in his hand. "Of a certainty, Senores," he declared in Spanish, "these women-stealers forced the ladies into my

carriage. I will swear it by all the many gods of my ancestors."

Paint looked at Pinto, and vice versa. Their furious thoughts were running along the same lines, *The old badger game. It's got whiskers, but we fell for it.*

After a moment of painful silence, Pinto told the crooks, "There ain't a word of truth in what you're sayin', but we can't prove you're liars. You've got us throwed and tied good."

"We know when we're licked," added Paint. "What's it goin' to cost us?"

Spark Cary's eyes narrowed shrewdly. "Your Old Man is rich and you're the apple of his eye."

Pinto shrugged, and drawled, "Well, he ain't pore, but don't gamble too strong on that apple-of-his-eye business."

"Don't," cautioned Paint. "We're more like sandburrs in the seat of his britches."

"I'll chance that," snapped Spark. Pocketing his pistol, he went to a writing desk and got pen, ink and paper which he placed on a mahogany table under the central candleabra. "Come here and write a letter to your Old Man."

The twins sat still. Paint objected, "No sense in writin' him a letter. He's right here in town."

Shang High came from behind the chair, balancing the revolver in his palm. He looked the boys over with some care as if selecting targets on their persons. They got up and went to the table.

With pen poised, Pinto glared at Spark, and asked, "What d'you want us to write?"

Cary hooked a leg over the corner of the table near him. "Tell your Old Man that you're in serious trouble and it'll take a thousand apiece to get you out. Tell him to give the bearer the cash—hard money. Tell him you'll be dead by morning if he doesn't kick in. And do the telling in your own words. He knows your handwriting, doesn't he?"

"Better'n we do," answered Pinto. "But a thousand apiece is too damned steep. He'll never do it."

"Five hundred apiece is Dad's limit," added Paint. "He swears we ain't worth more'n half that to him, but he *will* go that high when he has to."

SHANG moved in behind them and jabbed the muzzle of his pistol against their long necks, first one, then the other.

"Maybe Dad *would* hike the ante," opined Pinto. "He knows that trouble comes powerful high in San 'Tonio."

He fell to writing, reading it aloud, "Tobey Hawkins, Esquire, Poker Room, Cattlemen's Hotel. We are in one hell of a jackpot with a fist full of nothing to draw to. Tried bluffing. It won't work worth a damn. Need two thousand hard money mighty bad. Give to bearer, or by morning you will tally short one pair freckled twins."

Pinto glanced up at Cary. "How's that?"

"Let me see it." Spark took the paper. Shang joined him. Heads together they frowned over the letter, trying to decipher it. Pinto had purposely scrawled his writing and put in a few meaningless marks between words. Cary growled, "Is this the best you can write?"

"It's better. I want to make certain Dad can read it."

"What are all these hen scratches?" suspiciously demanded Shang. "They look like Indian writing to me. Bet your Old Man can read 'em. Are you trying to slip something over on us?"

"What scratches?" Pinto stood up. In doing so he brushed off the pen and it rolled under the table. Paint said he'd get the thing and crawled after it. The twins' apparent surrender and haggling over the money involved had thrown the crooks off guard.

Intent upon the letter, they allowed Pinto to come within striking distance and carelessly permitted Paint to disappear under the table. The hack driver hadn't moved from his place near the window.

Suddenly, Pinto threw a lightning punch at Shang High's jaw. With life at stake, he put the last ounce of his rawboned strength behind the blow. It went home with a crunch. The thug's head snapped back as if his neck were broken. The revolver slipped from his hand. Pinto snatched up the weapon while Shang was crumpling to the floor and laid the man's scalp open with a wicked blow.

Meanwhile, Cary had been standing with

First-

**FIRST AID for
ACID INDIGESTION
HEADACHES
DISTRESS of COLDS**

Fast-

**FAST RELIEF
When You
Need It!**

Always-

**ALWAYS RELY on
ALKA-
SELTZER**

Alka-Seltzer

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ALL DRUG STORES U. S. and CANADA

a leg hooked over the corner of the table and his weight on one foot. Paint grabbed that ankle and jerked. The tiled floor was smooth. Spark was a heavy man. He fell hard.

His head struck with terrific force. He made a feeble attempt to rise, groping in his pocket. Paint lunged from beneath the table. He seized the crook's revolver and struck him viciously across the temple. Cary fell back and lay still.

All this happened in a matter of seconds, but the Mexican cabbie was long gone through a window. He took off a mesquite wood bar on his way out.

Breathing hard, the XL twins looked down at their bleeding and insensible prisoners.

Said Pinto, "Mighty nigh corpses, ain't they?"

"No foolin'," agreed Paint, "and they look right purty to me. What'll we do with 'em?"

"Wel-l," ruminated Pinto, "we could take and spread 'em out on Old Louie's calaboose doorstep, only that'd be a heap of bother."

"Uh-huh," mused Paint. "Looky here! Why not let's tie these mighty-nigh corpses and carry 'em down and put 'em on the platform of that floatin' bath-house, then unhitch the thing and let the sons-a-guns float, and—"

"Hot damn!" interrupted Pinto. "You're almost smart enough to be my twin. Then we'll go and tell Old Louie where to find his city crooks, and it'll be oodles of fun to watch him chase 'em down river. Lets us go, boy!"

THE twins found keys to the house in Cary's pocket and a clothesline rope in the kitchen. Working fast they tied the thugs and carried them one at a time down the balcony steps to a path at the river's edge, thence to the neighbor's bath-house. Though the large home to which it belonged was dark, the boys moved like freckled ghosts, for silence was of the essence. To get caught prowling would mean jail, or maybe a double-barreled load of bird shot.

With Spark and Shang safely and silent-

ly at rest on the bath-house deck, the twins cast off its moorings. The thing was heavy, having beer kegs for pontoons. It didn't want to shove off from the wharf. With one foot on the dock, the other on the edge of the deck, they pushed hard. The bath-house moved out a little. An eddy caught it. Pinto got his foot back to the wharf. Paint didn't. He did a split to the limit of his long legs. He threw out a hand to Pinto in a silent plea for help. Pinto grinned and folded his arms. Paint landed in the river, spread-eagled, face downward. He made a big splash and came up snorting like a longhorn in big water, though it wasn't quite to his armpits.

The bath-house door opened timidly. Moonlight exposed a white-clad figure with flowing yellow hair. She screamed. Another girl materialized beside her. She screamed, too. Their piercing wails carried like a screech owl's.

Paint rescued his hat and took out after the bath-house.

From the dock, Pinto urged softly but frantically, "Calm down, ladies. We're on our way to round you in."

Paint looked back across the water, and snarled, "Come on, you!"

Pinto slid into the river, cussing quietly. The twins quickly caught the bath-house, then the fun began. Though small here so near its source, the San Antonio was a frisky stream. It wanted the bath-house and fought for the thing. The gravel bottom afforded poor footing and the boys' high-heeled boots were unsuited to submarine work.

Time and again their feet slipped and they went under. Pinto was every bit as wet as Paint by the time they got the derelict out of the current and pushed it back to its wharf. At the point of climbing onto the deck with the mooring lines, the twins suddenly submerged to their chins.

Chief Louie Schultz and Uncle Tobey Dunn were coming down the steps from the house above!

"Hey, there, you freckled catfishes!" boomed the old cattleman. "What you doin' in the river?"

"And whose bodies are those on the deck?" anxiously inquired Schultz.

Before venturing a reply, the twins hoisted themselves onto the wharf. This gave them a little time in which to corral their stampeding thoughts. As solemn as owls and wet as retrievers, they stood elbow-to-elbow and tried hard to look innocent.

"Those ain't bodies, Chief," replied Pinto. "They're just mighty-nigh corpses and—"

"—they're playin' 'possum," continued Paint. "They been doin' their durndest to shed their tie-ropes and cussin' soft and low."

"Who are they?"

"We can't swear to it," replied Pinto, "but a fella told us they're Spark Cary and Shang High, and he allowed they're powerful dangerous city crooks."

Uncle Tobey chuckled. "They don't look overly dangerous now."

"Who tied them," asked Schultz, "and how did they get where they are?"

"The way things happen in San Tonio," answered Paint, "it's mighty hard to tell the who-and-why of anything, but—"

He hesitated, so Pinto picked it up, "We were sore-footin' it down the river to see how far the thing goes, when we seen this bath-house floatin' away, so we—"

"So I," interrupted Paint, "jumped in

and caught her and rassed her back, then—"

The bath-house door squeaked open cautiously. Out stepped two blonde and youthful visions in yellow hair and blue robes. Said one, "That's the truth. These heroic boys rescued us."

Then the other, in a melodramatic voice, "Perhaps saved us from a fate worse than death!"

The twins looked foolish.

Uncle Tobey looked like a man about to die laughing.

Louie Schultz looked like a man slapped in the face by ghosts. "What are *you* doing in there?"

"Sleeping," said the first girl. "It's nice and cool down here, and so romantic in the moonlight."

"Pray don't beat us or lock us in the wine cellar," cried the teen-aged tragedian. "There are rats in the cellar, Father!"

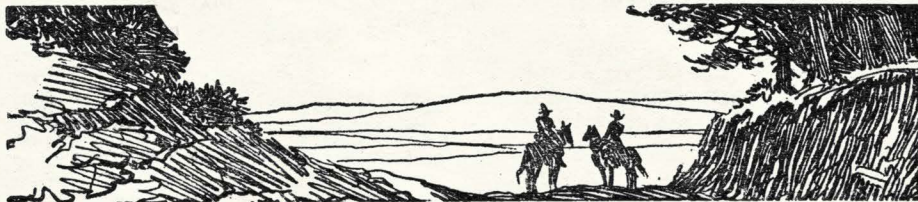
"FATHER!" exploded the twins.

"Yes, damn it!" growled Big Louie. "This is my home and these little fools are my daughters."

Paint looked at Pinto, and vice versa.

Asked Paint, "Am I unconscious again, or is it you?"

Answered Pinto, "It's both of us—mostly you."



*Trouble Reached a Long Arm
from Edmonton to the Silent
Reaches of the Kulink*

GONE WEST

By **BERTRAND W.
SINCLAIR**



TWO cocktails, an excellent dinner—after weeks of moose-meat and bacon—a drink of Scotch with a book salesman from the Atlantic coast, made Bill West pensive. He sat by a window in an Edmonton hotel watching the traffic flow by with a muted roar. Millions of people surging about their private affairs. Where did they all come from? Where did they all go when they vanished off the streets? Bill knew none of them. None knew him. He sat behind plate glass watching the swarm as he had watched ant-heaps under a hot sun in the North. That's what it was. An ant-heap. Two-legged ants. Scurrying. Bill had an impulse to scurry, too. Trouble to the right of him, to the left of him, behind and before him. Trouble that reached a long arm from Edmonton with its racket to the silent reaches of the Kulink, and God only knew where its clawing fingers might touch. And he had to be static—for the time being. Which was against all Bill's natural instincts.

He couldn't even talk. The right ear was far away. Apart from a session with a lawyer, who seemed more of a legal machine than a being with passions and sympathies, Bill had spent most of that day in Edmonton brooding till pressure accumulated on his chest like steam in a boiler. He sat there with a warm comfortable feeling in his stomach, acute discomfort in his mind. Uncertainty troubled his soul. Whenever Bill

West grew uncertain about anything he took steps to abolish uncertainty.

He walked over to a writing desk, chewed a pencil for a minute and wrote a telegram:

Bishop Wright,
Vendome Hotel,
Chicago, Ill.

THEY GIVE YOU LIFE OR SOMETHING
STOP HOW GOES THE BATTLE STOP HAVE
THE BRIGHT LIGHTS GOT YOU STOP GOT A
FIGHT ON MY HANDS

(Signed) W. West.

Bill took that to the desk clerk. The clerk called a messenger. And that was that. But not all of it. Bill went back to the writing desk with a gleam in his eye. He had found something to do. He wrote another telegram:

Daniel Mallory,
c/o Willamette County Bank,
Portland, Ore.

DO YOU STILL THINK YOU CAN SING STOP
IS THE RANCH HENS LAYING ANY GOLDEN
EGGS STOP ARE YOU MARRIED YET STOP IF
NOT CAN YOU HOP A MAIL PLANE AND
COME UP HERE AND HAVE SOME FUN STOP
ANSWER AT ONCE AS LONELY WIDOW
WAITS REPLY

(Signed) W. West.

After which Bill subsided with a chuckle. He went out, sat through a flicker drama alone, and went to bed early. He rose early, too, and he was still in his pajamas when a bell-hop brought him a wire from Chicago, which ran:

BATTLE WON ALL ALONG LINE STOP
LIGHTS ALL OUT STOP BE HOME IN TEN
DAYS STOP WHAT YOU MEAN GOT A FIGHT

ON YOUR HANDS STOP YOU NEVER DID
HAVE ANY SENSE

(Signed) Bishop Wright.

With neither cocktails, Scotch or breakfast under his belt to make him waggish Bill West set down on a telegraph form certain details he had omitted the night before:

Bishop Wright,
Vendome Hotel, Chicago

APPEAL COURT TURNED JOE SAMSON
LOOSE STOP SAMSON BRINGING SUIT
AGAINST US FIFTY THOUSAND DOLLARS
DAMAGE FALSE ARREST AND IMPRISON-
MENT STOP ALSO SUING FOR POSSESSION OF
KULINK CLAIMS ON GROUND WE RUN HIM
OFF STOP COURT HAS TIED UP OPERATIONS
WITH INJUNCTION STOP HAS GARNISHEED
OUR FUNDS IN ROYAL BANK AT WHITEFISH
STOP WIDOW JORDAN IN CHARGE OF MINE
STOP AGREE WITH YOU I GOT NO SENSE
STOP HOW ABOUT YOU DRIFTING OUT HERE
TO APPLY YOUR WELL KNOWN BRAINS TO
THIS MIX-UP

(Signed) W. West.

Bill despatched this and sat down to a hearty breakfast. A little after that he was handed another wire.

DON'T EVEN LAY CHINA EGGS STOP YOU
SOUND GOOFY STOP HAD NO OCCASION TO
SING SINCE SEEING LAST OF YOU STOP IS
THAT INSULT OR INVITATION STOP WHAT'S
ABOUT A WIDOW?

(Signed) Dan Mallory.

Bill resorted to composition once more. To Dan he wired the following:

FIVE FOOT TWO BLUE EYES BROWN HAIR
SAYS SHE LIKES THE NORTH STOP SAYS SHE
LIKES MEN WITH HAIR ON THEIR CHESTS
STOP I SMELL TROUBLE WANT YOU TO
STAND BY IF YOU CAN LEAVE THE SPUDS
STOP GUARANTEE YOUR EXPENSES AND
MAYBE BLACK EYE

(Signed) W. West.

Bill got two answers within the hour. One read:

DOCTOR TWO NURSES AND CONFINEMENT
TO BED INDICATED IN ADVANCED
CASES OF DELIRIUM STOP AM TAKING MAIL
PLANE NORTH AFTER LUNCH STOP GOD
HELP YOU IF THIS IS FALSE ALARM STOP
TRY ICE COLD TOWELS ON YOUR HEAD

(Signed) Dan Mallory.

And finally:

HOLD EVERYTHING STOP FLYING WEST
AT ONCE STOP BE IN EDMONTON TOMOR-
ROW NIGHT STOP IF YOU GOT A DELILAH AT
THE KULINK CLAIMS WHY NOT SIC HER ON
JOE SAMSON STOP YOU SHOULD READ THE
BIBLE AS WELL AS MAIL-ORDER CATA-
LOGUES

(Signed) Bishop Wright.

BILL WEST sat back and puffed at a cigar with a sigh of content. It looked to him like a big game. Three of a kind to call a bluff. A bluff that might, however, have teeth in it. Things had been running too blamed smoothly, Bill reflected. The calm before the storm. Anyway he had called up the shock troops and until the zero hour arrived there was nothing to do but wait.

Time hung heavy on Bill's hands the rest of that day. When he had dined he sat till he grew tired of sitting. He went out and rambled aimlessly about this city of fifty thousand souls, a metropolis in miniature because it was the gateway to the North. The Saskatchewan flowed majestically by its site. Running water, a highway for canoes, sternwheelers, rafts of logs, drew Bill. In the dusk he ambled out on this slip, that float. To Bill, used to great cities as well as the loneliness and dangers of the wilderness, the unsavory, unlighted portion of any town meant nothing. He had a way of going where he wanted to go.

And so he found himself strolling in the semi-dark of a row of squalid buildings, and since Bill was not in the habit of looking nervously over his shoulder footsteps coming up behind him didn't cause him even to turn his head nor quicken his steps. Bill didn't know those same feet had been following him for an hour or more. He passed under a street lamp. In the dark area

beyond that something whacked on his skull. And Bill dropped as if he had been shot.

Only he wasn't out. Bill West had an uncommonly hard head. Also he had a very thick mop of curly black hair like a mattress over that same skull. And he wore a gray felt hat of a London make which in the Bond street fashion of doing things differently had a quilted satin lining in the crown. All of which combined to nullify a blow that should have knocked him cold. It only knocked him down. Bill had been knocked down before with little effect except to make him very dangerous when he bounced up.

He didn't bounce up immediately. He rolled over on his side. His wits were working. He saw a pair of legs and grabbed them with hands like steel hooks, heaved and a body went over sidewise. A blow glanced off Bill's shoulder as he scrambled up. He saw then that he had three assailants. And he went for them.

IN ACTION Bill West was a combination of buzz-saw, cougar, and professional boxer. He could move like a featherweight. He weighed nearly two hundred. He could hit from any angle and when he landed it was like being kicked by a horse. Since his high school days Bill had learned pretty nearly all there was to be learned about rough and tumble scrapping, and for more than a year past Bishop Wright, whose ring record comprised one hundred and seven battles without getting knocked off his feet, had been coaching Bill with six-ounce gloves—teaching him how to conserve energy and place punches.

So that three to one was not so bad as it seemed, especially when one was down. Bill lashed out, jumped close to avoid a kick, hooked a right—and another one was down. The third man closed with him. Somebody grabbed his knees. The four became a squirming, striking, kicking heap. Bill got hold of an arm, wrenched, and brought a yell of pain. He butted a face, socked something with a knee. All those clawing, striking hands did was to inconvenience him. He got loose and bounced up, punching with short vicious blows at who-

ever was nearest. Giving, in short, an excellent imitation of a whirling dervish, who took and gave blows without abating his dance.

A window opened. Someone yelled. A whistle blew. Bill was conscious of these things, dimly. He had one enemy down on his knees groaning from a stomach punch. He was pummeling a second and the third man was coming at him from behind when a cop turned the corner on the run, and far off the siren of a police car wailed in the street.

At that one assailant fled. So would the one engaged with Bill when he saw the policeman, but Bill West cracked him on the chin as he gave ground and he fell backward over his partner, who was still on his knees with his hands pressed to his abdomen, making sounds of pain.

Bill faced the policeman, blood streaming from his mouth and nose.

"What's the row?" the cop wanted to know.

"Search me," Bill answered lightly. "I was walking up from the river and these bozos jumped me. One of 'em bopped me with something that felt like a blackjack. So I tore into 'em. There was three. One bird hotfooted it as soon as you showed up."

A police van the size and color of a small hearse came shrieking to a stop. Three policemen boiled out. They turned flashlights on Bill West, on the other two prisoners. They asked names, addresses. Bill told them who he was, his business and his hotel.

"Three of 'em, eh?" one cop remarked. "An' you beat up two of 'em an' the third run. You're some guy. Know these birds?"

Bill looked at them closely. He got a mild shock. And he understood one of the reasons for that attack in the dark. Also he could guess the identity of the third man who had vanished. That was luck. The big fish always got away.

"Yeah, I know these bozos now I get a look at 'em," he said. He took one of them by the arm and shook him angrily. "Was that Joe Samson that did a duck when the cop came, huh?"

But the fellow wouldn't answer.

"Well, what you want to do about 'em?"

one policeman asked Bill. "Lay a complaint? Better come along to the station, anyhow."

SO BILL rode to the police station on the front seat while the others occupied the interior. He told his tale briefly to the desk sergeant. He told them who he suspected the third assailant to be. And he was advised that he could lay a complaint of assault against them, although they were guilty of disturbing the peace anyway.

"I don't care anything about these two guys," Bill said. "But if the third man *was* Joe Samson, next to beating the block off him, I'd feel better if he was in jail while I stay in Edmonton. He belongs in jail, that bozo."

"We'll locate this guy and find out if he was in this scrap—if he's in town," the police told Bill.

So Mr. William West of the Kulink River, Mackenzie Territory, went to his hotel in a taxi, being considerably messed up, and now stiff and sore from that encounter. He went to bed early. He rose early.

When the police court opened Bill was on hand.

"Couldn't locate this Samson party," an officer told Bill. "These two bozos are mum. Better stick around and tell the magistrate how it happened. These bums look like bad eggs to me."

The magistrate put the bad eggs in storage for thirty days, without the option of a fine. He observed dryly that things were coming to a pretty pass when out-of-town visitors couldn't stroll around in the evening without being assaulted by thugs. Bill felt that way about it too, but he would have felt better if Joe Samson had been included in that thirty days in the cooler. Not that Bill was worried about his personal safety. But he didn't underestimate Joe Samson.

Bill stuck close to his hotel the rest of that day.

In the early evening he taxied out to a landing field and watched a plane swoop out of the sky, flatten out and tear up the ground with its tail-skid. It was a cabin job. When the door opened the first passenger to step out was a large, square-

shouldered dark man, very like Bill West—in short, Bishop Wright, himself. He took one look at his partner's marred face and exclaimed:

"Scrappin' again! William, William, you're the bee's knees! I hope you found a guy you couldn't whip."

"They don't grow 'em in these parts," Bill grinned. "Come on. We got plenty to talk about besides my failin's."

BILL talked voluminously all the way to the hotel. And as they entered they saw hovering over the register another large, square-shouldered man, red-headed, in a blue suit. And Bill West stole up behind this individual and smote him between the shoulder-blades with a whoop of joy that startled loungers in the lobby.

Up in Bill West's room Dan Mallory grinned and said:

"Funny, I can almost smell spruce an' muskegs an' moose steaks sizzlin' in the pan, Bill, just lookin' at you, you big stiff! I'm glad I came, even if it's just another josh of yours."

"Josh!" Bill West fingered his bruised face. "No, josh, believe you me. I told you I smelled trouble. I can taste it, now."

"Listen, Bill," Bishop Wright put in, "this red-headed guy looks intelligent, but he ain't a mind-reader. Tell him what you've been pourin' into my ear—about Joe Samson."

"Yeah. Come on. Unload," Dan Mallory boomed in a voice as big as his body. "An' don't imagine, you hairy ape, that you were temptin' me sendin' descriptions, collect, of a widow."

"There is a widow," Bill said soberly. "Steve Jordan's widow. She's holdin' down our camp on the Kulink. Anyway, Bish, Dan knows Joe Samson's caliber. We had dealin's with Joe the first winter of the Bear Lake rush. So—well, you recollect, Dan, me writing to you what happened to Steve Jordan, when I asked you to look up his widow in Portland?"

Dan Mallory nodded.

"The latest racket is this: while a trial court found Samson guilty of murdering Jordan, he had a smart lawyer who took an appeal. Samson was convicted on circum-

stantial evidence, most of which myself and Bish dug up—as well as gatherin' in this guy on our own an' turnin' him over to the police. The appeal court, after broodin' over it a long time, has quashed Samson's conviction flat. Bein' free and full of natural venom an' achin' to get back at me mostly, Samson and a clever legal shark have cooked up a nice little mess.

"He is bringin' suit for fifty thousand dollars damages for false arrest an' imprisonment. He is suin' for possession of the placer claim registered in Martha Jordan's name, an' the two Bish an' me own, on the ground that we unlawfully drove him off after he had discovered gold there, delivered him to the courts on a false charge, and a lot more hoocy. See? It has color, because me'n Bish did beat up him an' two other fellows after they'd jumped Jordan's claim, besides shootin' Steve.

"Also, in protection of what he claims is his rights, the court has been induced to issue a temporary injunction against us operatin' those claims until this damage action is tried. An' finally, the said court has allowed a garnishee order against every dollar we got in the Royal Bank at Whitefish, on Samson's claim that the money we have deposited there is the proceeds of gold taken from his discovery claim. Take it all around, he's temporarily got us sewed in a sack."

"Short an' sweet like the simple annals of the poor," Dan Mallory drawled. "That Samson party never had brains enough to cook up a stew like that."

"He's got a lawyer with a nose like a retriever when it comes to smellin' easy money," Bill said. "The plain fact is, Bish, that he's got us broke right on the jump. I borrowed a couple of thousand from the branch manager at Whitefish, on my personal say-so."

"We ain't broke," Bishop Wright said. "I took ten grand out of the joint account when I went east. I got most all of it yet. He can't work no garnishee on funds in the U. S. All this legal shootin' is off the mark. He can't make it stick."

"I engaged old John McIvor, K. C., to fight the case," Bill growled. "That's what *he* says. But he says further that a smart

lawyer can stir up a hell of a lot of fuss an' cost you plenty jack when it comes to lawsuits over property rights. Mac says Samson's lawyer probably figures he has *only* an outside chance to win, but that he'll pull every trick he knows to harass us until he gets our goat. Then he'll offer to abandon proceedin's for a cash settlement out of court. But——"

"But what?" Dan Mallory leaned forward. Like Bishop Wright he had slept in the same blankets with Bill West, eaten out of the same pot on hard trails. They had lived and worked and fought together for two hectic seasons. Dan, like Bish Wright, knew the shadow that crossed Bill's face meant something.

"Samson's out for blood," Bill said simply—and told them how he got the cuts and bruises on his face.

"He murdered once and got away with it," Bill said.

"Twice," Dan corrected. "Other men besides me credit him with bushwhackin' them two old prospectors that come up missin' on the east arm of Great Bear. Remember?"

Bill nodded.

"Guys like us," Bishop Wright said calmly, "take some murderin'. You got a program, Bill?"

"Yeah. That's why I hollered for Dan as well as you," Bill replied. "You fellows know I'm not scary. But I expect most anything. Martha Jordan, a cook an' six men, are sittin' twiddlin' their thumbs on the Kulink. They're no lambs, that're workin' for us. That woman is stubborn as a mule. She blew in there outa a clear sky. She owns the Jordan claim, although we've worked it on shares. She says nobody is goin' to drive her off her property. And she says she likes the North. No bigger'n a minute, that jane, but determined as hell. And the Kulink is no place for her. I want Dan to fly up there, tomorrow, an' keep an eye on her and the camp generally. You an' me, Bush, have to stay here for a hearin' on that injunction an' garnishee order. Will you do that, Dan?"

MALLORY agreed with a laugh. "Then what?" Bishop Wright prompted.

"When we get through the preliminary legal skirmish," Bill said, "we hop up there an' sit tight on them claims—even if we can't work 'em. I think they'll try to dispossess us."

"Huh," Bish grunted. He shrugged his broad shoulders. "If it comes to a personal fuss."

"Huh again," Bill jeered. "Who's always bawlin' me out about gettin' ready to sock somebody?"

"We've been socked hard, accordin' to your own account," Bish Wright answered. "I'm all for peace, but I'm no worm. Go on."

"Maybe," Bill said hopefully, "Joe Samson'll get impatient of legal proceedin's an' start in to play his own hand. He still thinks there's no law north of fifty-three, an' darn little elsewhere."

"It's liable to be tough," Bill went on. "You know how Corporal Steele, the gallant little Mounted Police from Whitefish loves me. The corp came up to serve these law papers on me just about the time Martha Jordan blew in. He don't dare put it into words but he still ain't so sure me'n Bish *didn't* shoot Steve Jordan."

"Aw, hell!" Dan Mallory exploded.

"He was suspicious when we brought the body in," Bill continued. "He means well, Steele does. But law an' order is his twin gods. An' he don't like me. He thinks I'm one tough bozo."

"You are, too," Bishop Wright agreed. "But not the way he thinks. The corporal has notions about Bill," Bish explained to Dan Mallory.

"Hell, yes, I was the innocent cause of startin' him on that tack," Dan said. "He tried to arrest Bill once for murderin' *me*. Can you feature that? Made himself plumb ridiculous, bein' green in the country. Never got over that, eh, Bill?"

"He never will," Bill West shook his head. "He's conscientious an' so darn upright he leans backward, but he's got a down on me account I thumbed my nose at him so often. He coulda made out a lot strong case against Samson if it hadn't been that suspicion of me in the back of his head. So we won't get no help from him."

Dan Mallory rose, stretching his huge

frame. His red head glowed like a beacon under the incandescent globes.

"We never used to need nobody's help, Bill," said he. "Your partner shapes like a full-glowed man. Let her ride as she lies. I'll play any hand you deal for me."

THE hand Bill dealt his ex-partner took Dan Mallory roaring north under the dawn sky to that camp on the Kulink. Bill and Bishop Wright, on their lawyer's suggestion, started a private detective combing Edmonton for Joe Samson. If they could locate Samson with the marks of Bill's fists on him, said McIvor, K. C., dryly, a sentence for common assault would not help Samson's suit at law.

But Samson lay doggo. He could not be found.

On the Thursday following a learned judge made that temporary injunction permanent—until the damage suit was tried. But he threw the garnishee out on a technical point Bill's lawyer raised.

Whereupon Bill West and Bishop Wright took the air. They landed on the Kulink with a collapsible rubber boat. They watched the plane become a buzzing dot in the blue above. Bill West sat marveling. He was equally at home in a city or a wilderness, but he still could not get used to that swift transition from one to the other. Not so long ago that journey would have taken back-breaking weeks with canoe and paddle. Planes made the wild places an adjunct to highways and roaring streets—they made also the easy money rackets of the town an adjunct to the wild. It worked both ways, as Bill knew. Here in this silence—a green world threaded with quiet waterways, hushed under a hot sun—Bill picked up a paddle.

They had landed ten miles below camp, where the Kulink narrowed and threaded a rolling broken country. They pushed upstream. Around one bend after another. They turned the last point. Bill West's paddle, wet and gleaming, poised in mid-stroke.

"God's teeth!" he breathed.

Their camp consisted of—but there was no longer a camp! Only one small cabin of peeled spruce logs that Bill and Bishop

Wright had for private quarters. Flat squares of ash and charred sticks marked the site of bunkroom, kitchen, storehouse,

There should have been seven men and one woman there. No living thing moved except a bluejay that screamed harshly as he flew away. And when his strident note ceased there was utter silence, the hush that seems to lie heaviest over lonely deserted places.

They looked inside the cabin. Tumbled blankets on two bunks. Paper and magazines on a rude table. Bill's work clothes on a peg.

"My gun's gone," Bill West said. "Say, Bish, this looks fishy to me. Them buildings was fifty feet apart. Three of 'em. They wouldn't all go whoof at once. Not accidental. An' where in hell do you suppose everybody is?"

Bishop Wright scowled. There was no answer to that.

They stepped outside, staring at that desolation. Running water sparkled in the sluice. Picks and shovels stood stuck in heaps of winnowed gravel. Bill West muttered an oath.

THAT fork of the Kulink was a gut between rolling hills, sparsely clothed with timber. The opposite bank, across from and slanting steeply up from their placer workings was masked with droop-boughed spruce and berry-brush. From that leafy covert a rifle spoke with a sharp, staccato voice.

Bishop Wright flinched, grunted. Bill West caught him by the arm, fairly threw him through the doorway and fell in after him. Another bullet flicked splinters out of the door casing, buried with a *pluck* in the log wall. Bill turned on his knees and closed the door.

"I knew that fire was no accident," he said. "How bad you hit, Bish?"

"I dunno," Bish Wright grunted. "Stings. Don't feel like a knockout."

"We're kind of in a box," Bill growled. "Ain't got even a pistol. All we can do is lay low."

"That bozo don't know we ain't got guns," Bish said. "So he won't rush us—unless he's cuckoo."

"Yeah, that's so," Bill agreed. "And he can't get a bead on us in here. Let's look you over."

The bullet had punched a neat hole through the fleshy part of Bishop Wright's left armpit.

"You're lucky," Bill commented. "Three inches off your heart. You'll be too damned sore to move by an' by. God, I wish I had a gun!"

"Wish in one hand and spit in the other an' see which'll get full first," Bishop Wright quoted jocularly. "Where do we go from here?"

"We don't go," said Bill. "Not till it gets dark."

"Reckon it's Samson doin' his stuff?" Bish asked after a time.

"That guess is as good as any," Bill declared. "He could fly in same as we did. It's his kind of stuff. Yeah, it's either Samson or a murderin' lunatic. Huh! Here's where Corp Steele ought to be maintainin' the well-known law an' order. He'll be walkin' around Whitefish straight as a ramrod, or sittin' in his quarters polishin' the brass buttons on his red coat."

"If he ever has to go into the bush after a shootin' guy he'll get himself killed," Bish prophesied.

"Probably," Bill agreed. "When it comes to this kinda stuff he wouldn't know what it was all about."

BILL edged over to a window, stared at that green mask. He thought of an old frontier trick—and put his hat on a stick and edged it through the partly open door. It worked. A bullet spanged into the wood.

"He's right on the job," Bill muttered. "Must figure either to kill us or scare us off—an' probably don't care which."

Bill rustled around and tied up Bishop Wright's wound with a torn pillow slip. He sat down and had a smoke. After a long silence he broke out again angrily.

"I'm not goin' to take this lyin' down. That bozo is layin' in the brush on the south slope. I'm goin' out the back way an' do a sneak on him."

"You're crazy," Bish demurred. "Your naked hands against a gun? Come dark we'll beat it for Whitefish. Forget it."

Bill West couldn't forget it. He was a woodsman, a hunter. Afraid of nothing and no man. Bill could guess what that would-be assassin lurking on the wooded slope would do if he were a woodsman and a hunter, and determined to kill. He would know that if they fled they would go after dark, in that boat. He would watch the boat—and pot them at short range. Bill's instinct was always to close with an enemy. Bish would soon only be able to use one arm. Bill felt that he had to do something.

What he did over his partner's remonstrance was to ease himself out a cabin window at the back, crawl on his belly like a snake to the brush on the north slope. He carried a sheath knife on his belt. In a water-worn gully he knew he picked out four round, polished stones the size of a baseball and stowed them in his pockets. Then he stole warily along until he could cross the creek unseen. Once on the south slope he worked up and along until he got a bearing.

Then with the stealth of a hunting cat he began to stalk that hidden rifleman. A five-inch knife and four stones against a gun. Bill knew the chances he took. He had to get close unseen and unheard. If that killer sighted him at anything over ten feet he could kill safely, at his leisure.

Bill went on all fours, watching the ground for footprints, working foot by foot, silently, with infinite patience. The sun had gone off that slope. He had the advantage of shadow now.

The bullet that spatted the door casing and lodged in the wall had given Bill West a line. He had marked that by a tall, dead snag of a tree. After an hour of patient creeping he reached the base of that snag. Unless his man had moved he was within a radius of forty yards. Bill meant to work in a narrowing circle. He inched past the tree.

Something under a root caught his eye, a tiny glint of color. He felt and his fingers touched cloth, drew it out. The scarlet tunic of a Mounted Policeman folded neatly, tucked in a hollow under the root by the dead spruce. Bill stared at it. Scarlet and brass buttons. He edged into thicker brush and lay flat. What the devil was a Mounted

Policeman's coat doing there? So that its owner could go khaki-shirted through dun woods, blending with leaf and bough? Why would a Mounted Policeman lie hidden in ambush and shoot at the lawful owners of that camp? To Bill's knowledge Corporal Steele of the Whitefish detachment was the only arm of the law within seven hundred miles. Steele nursed a three year animus against Bill West. Had he gone mad? Had the North got him as it got solitary prospectors and trappers?

Bill shook his head. That scarlet tunic carefully hidden under the root of a dead tree puzzled him. But coat or no coat he had to locate the man gunning for him on that slope.

BILL came to a little ledge, moss-covered, open to the sky, one of a series of such ledges. The lower edge dropped sheer for a few feet. A low cliff lifted twenty feet to the next above. He lay watching for a minute or two, well hidden. He couldn't cross that narrow opening. He would have to skirt it.

His eyes, flickering over every opening, saw a head appear over the ledge above. A face peered down. The hair on Bill West's neck bristled. He knew that sallow, hawk face, the cold slaty gray eyes straddling a crooked nose. Samson. How he got there didn't concern Bill. There he was, and Bill West ached to get at him. The muzzle of a rifle showed by Samson's head. He wasn't looking down. He was staring across at the cabin where Bishop Wright lay with burning pains in his shoulder. Bill's strong fingers flexed as he stared up at Joe Samson's corded neck.

Bill backed up softly, worked uphill an inch at a time until he was level with that upper ledge. The brush was thick, the ground soft with leaves and moss. It was hot, close. Sweat trickled into Bill's eyes, made the dark hair on his head tighten in little curls. Bill had felt that same tension in big poker games, holding an ace full and betting more, with the chance that his opponent topped him. This was a bigger pot than he liked—and Samson held top cards, if Bill West gave him a chance to play them.

Samson cleared his throat and spat, so

close Bill's heart jumped. He couldn't see, but that sound located the man. Bill crept forward, foot by foot until a thin screen of low brush before his face was all that hid him. And he saw Joe Samson quite plainly.

He was standing up, feet apart, tense, bringing his rifle slowly to his shoulder. His lips were drawn up in a snarl of savage anticipation. But he was looking and aiming down over that ledge. Not at Bill. The gun barrel pointed at something directly below.

And as Samson's cheek cuddled against the stock Bill West jumped. He had a rock tight in the palm of one hand. He didn't strike. His arms clamped around Samson, his right knee came up viciously.

Bill had miscalculated the nearness of that ledge. They fell. A moment of struggle in which Bill clawed for Samson's throat. Then they rolled over the edge.

TWELVE or fifteen feet straight down! Moss and leaf-mold cushioned the shock. Bill lay partially stunned, breathless. His heavy body had turned under in the air, a mattress for Samson when they struck solid ground. The man sprang to his feet, making an animal growl in his throat. His rifle was still in his hands. He threw it up. A voice was challenging in a faintly English accent.

Bill West's faculties and his wind came back with a snap. Five paces away Corporal Steele, hatless and coatless was tugging at the service revolver in the awkward flap holster on his belt. Joe Samson was squinting over his rifle sights. The Corporal was saying in tones at once stern and shaky:

"None of that now, my man. In the King's name I warn you to surrender!"

Surrender! Bill West knew the corporal and his code, his child-like faith in regulations and authority. And he knew the Samson creed and breed.

Bill came to his feet like an uncoiled spring. His right hand snapped back and forward. Samson's rifle cracked, but he was off balance, falling, when the gun exploded. The corporal fired a wink after Samson's shot. Samson collapsed. Bill snatched the rifle from his quivering hands. The right side of Samson's face was a bloody smear.

"Well, Corp," Bill panted, "I don't know how you happen to be here. But maybe you'll admit now this tozo would shoot a man in the back if he took a notion."

"You are witness that I shot him in self-defense," the Corporal said hoarsely. "I warned him to surrender and he fired on me. I was compelled to shoot him."

Bill looked down at Samson. The cold, slate-gray eyes were filmed over. Bill bent over the body, examined it carefully.

"You didn't kill him, Corp," he said slowly. "You missed him slick an' clean with your pistol. I threw a rock at him an' it took him right in the temple. See?"

The Corporal stared.

"By jove, yes," he murmured. After a pause he said, "Then you saved my bacon, West. That was why his shot went wild. Why didn't you shoot instead?"

"No gun," said Bill.

"You mean to say you were after Samson bare-handed?"

"Had to," Bill nodded. "Somebody took my rifle outa the cabin. Were you huntin' him, too? Say, do you know anything about our camp burnin' up, an' where my crew, Dan Mallory an' the widow have got to?"

"Headed for Whitefish," Steele told him. "That fire was incendiary. Someone fired on them with a rifle, too. I stayed here to see that you observed that injunction. I made a bluff at leaving with them, and came back to investigate. This brute fired on me twice in the woods although I didn't see him. I've been trying to get at him for twenty-four hours."

"Then you saw him whang Bish Wright as we stood by the cabin?" Bill observed.

"Yes, those two shots gave me a line on where he was," Steele nodded. "So I hid my tunic, which was too conspicuous, and began stalking him."

"So did I," Bill said. "Damn lucky break we got, too. He mighta got us both. Maybe this will convince you he *did* murder Steve Jordan, even if a court turned him loose. Or do you still think I murdered Steve?"

The corporal reddened.

"The man was a thoroughly desperate character," said he. "No question about that now."

"You've accused me of bein' a desperate

character," Bill said lightly. "Seein' you missed him with your popgun an' I caved his head in with a rock, I suppose you'll be havin' me up for manslaughter or somethin'."

CORPORAL STEELE looked pained. "The man was killed in the act of attempting murder in an effort to resist arrest," he said soberly. "And killing him was as justifiable as shooting a mad dog. If I have seemed to regard you in the past with distrust and suspicion, West, I apologize now. I was wrong."

"Accepted as offered, Corp," Bill, who was too sure of himself ever to harbor a grudge, put out his hand. And the corporal gripped it heartily, without a word.

"Well," Bill said, "I got to get Bish Wright to a doctor. What do we do with this corpus delicti?"

"Bury it," Corporal Steele said with a shudder. "Can't lug a body hundreds of miles in this weather. An official report will cover everything."

They got Bishop Wright in the rubber boat and went down the Kulink to where the corporal had a Peterborough cached. Once in that canoe they clicked off the miles, aided by a fair current. At midnight they put ashore on a bar to make tea. Bishop Wright's arm was painful, badly swollen. But he joked as he drank his tea.

They debouched into the MacKenzie and by luck picked up a gas-powered freighter bound for Whitefish with goods. So that presently Bishop Wright was in a comfortable bed in Tubby Mullen's rooming-house with a doctor dressing his arm.

"You'll be easier tomorrow," the sawbones announced when he finished. "I'll look in now and then."

Dan Mallory had joined them. He and Bill sat by Bish Wright's bed.

"How'd you find Mrs. Jordan?" Bill asked Dan. "That rough stuff scare her any?"

"Not so you could notice," Dan told him with a laugh. "She wanted to stick an' fight it out. But the crew had the wind up, an' all our grub was burned anyway. Martha ain't scared of nothin'."

"Martha, eh?" Bill chuckled. "You're a fast worker, Daniel."

"Well—a—uh," Dan stuttered a trifle. "The fact is I met her in Portland—time you asked me to look her up an' explain about her husband an' this placer claim. So—ah—well, we just got married."

"Married," Bill West echoed. "God's teeth! Married!"

"Married," Bishop Wright intoned. "Congratulations, old kid."

Bill West shook Dan Mallory's hand. Bill had had visions of a triple alliance, once the Samson war ended. That was out, now.

"I got to tell her how things stand," Dan said presently. "See you later, boys."

Bishop Wright lay on his pillow, eyes half-closed.

"Married," he repeated dreamily. "There was a girl in Chicago, Bill. She'd been stickin' around, hopin' all the time I was layin' low, up here in the wilderness."

"An' so," Bill said gloomily, "you're goin' back an' get married too."

Bish nodded.

"Soon as I get straightened out," he said. "There won't be no more trouble, with Joe Samson outa the picture. She says she'll love the North."

"She won't," Bill said morosely. "They never do."

He got up and went outside. From the front porch of Tubby's place Bill stared over the blue-gray vista of Great Bear, a vast inland sea.

"Married," Bill repeated sadly. "I don't have no luck with partners. Darn the janes. Oh, well, I guess it's all right, if you get the right kind of jane."

A line of poetry Bill had read once, drifted across his troubled mind.

*Down to Gehenna, or up to the Throne
He travels the fastest who travels alone.*

"That guy knew what he was talkin' about," Bill announced firmly to the circumambient atmosphere. "I'll travel. He travels the fastest who travels alone! That's me. I don't know where I'm going but I'm on my way."

*The Cop Found Himself
Remembering Certain
Jungle Tactics*



ROOKIE'S RUSE

By PAUL DURST

NOT hidden, yet not conspicuous, the big black and white sedan with the Highway Patrol shield on the door stood just off the highway at the intersection. The two blue-uniformed men in the front seat sat watching the stream of cars bearing the city dwellers to worship at the sunny shrine of October in the many-hued hills. Sunday traffic. Dull and monotonous.

Sergeant Lasky pushed his uniform cap back from his forehead and relaxed behind the wheel. "Yeah, Jordan," he said to the younger man beside him, "I guess it was more exciting in the old days of Public Enemies and high-jacking hoods. About the only excitement we get nowadays is a stolen car—and that's a big day. More'n likely an overloaded truck is the best you can expect."

Jordan sat without comment and watched the cars swishing by. A double hitch in the

Marines during and after the war had left him with a thirst for adventure that he found hard to reconcile with civilian life. He had joined the State Patrol in hopes that his restless spirit would find some assuagement. But six months found him just a rookie with no more claim to fame than three arrested speeders.

"I remember," Sergeant Lasky was saying, "the time we got word that John Dillinger was coming across state after a big job in Illinois. We had road blocks and barricades, and tear gas and tommy guns. You'd've thought we were trying to stop an army." Lasky stopped and watched a car that started to pass on a hill, then pulled back into line.

"What happened?" Jordan asked, interested now.

"Wasn't Dillinger at all. Just some punks bootlegging liquor. They shot up a town constable who got nose when they stopped

for gas. But it didn't take the Dillinger rumor long to start."

Jordan listened as the dispatcher's voice came over the radio from troop headquarters. It was a routine stolen car report. Jordan copied the details on his clip sheet. Monotony—monotony—monotony!

"Bigs Bangston was the closest I ever came to any big time Public Enemies," Lasky volunteered. "Broke out of the federal pen across the river with five other cons—all cutthroats. It was night. I was alone, I'd just let my sergeant out at his place and was taking the car to the garage when the report came through. Those birds had raided the arsenal before they broke from the pen. By the time I'd reached the bridge over the Big Blue on State 14 the county sheriff was trying to put up a road block."

Jordan was more interested now. Lasky went on.

"We could hear the engine roaring before their lights came around the bend on the bridge approach. No time to set a road block—they must've been doing all of ninety-five. The sheriff had one deputy and the three of us stood there, not sure who was in the car coming at us—but sure enough to be worried. We flashed out red lights and the shootin' started. Man! What a spree! We ducked behind the girders. I can hear the bullets ricocheting off those girders still.

"All I had was a revolver. But the sheriff let his riot gun go off in the driver's window as the car went past. They took out four sections of bridge railing when they went over the side. How the three of us got out of that mess alive, I'll never know."

Jordan expressed polite wonderment at Lasky's tale. He was thinking of a dark night on Iwo—but, what the Hell! This was peacetime, 1950. And Sunday speeders to look for. He wished Lasky would tell more. It helped him to think that maybe, just *maybe*, there was a chance for some excitement still in the job.

Lasky sat up suddenly. A hot rod was passing four cars traveling almost bumper to bumper on the hill beyond the intersection. With inches to spare the hot rod pulled in front of the lead car, just missing a convertible coming head on. There was still a

smell of burning rubber in the air when the patrol car passed the spot, siren open.

The hot rod was souped up and it was five miles more before they caught it. Lasky was out of the car and trying to hold his temper as he approached the teen-age driver who was cussing a broken connecting rod. Jordan started to follow Lasky when the radio rasped forth again. He paused to listen disinterestedly, then his lean brown face grew taut.

IT WAS an all-car alarm! Four men who had leisurely spent all of Sunday morning cutting into the City National Bank vault after tying up the watchman, had been surprised by an insurance inspector. The insurance man had been killed, the robbers had scooped up a cool five hundred grand destined for a plant payroll on Monday, and had made their getaway.

Jordan feverishly wrote down the description of the men, their car and their license number. He yelled to Lasky who was handing the hot rod pilot a summons. As Lasky came running up Jordan held up a hand for him to listen. The dispatcher was talking.

"Attention, Car Four! Attention, Car Four! Bank bandits' car just reported passing city limits on State 21, heading east. Come in Car Four!"

Lasky looked quizzically at Jordan. "Did you get the dope?"

"Got everything. Descriptions and all. I'll brief you as we go along."

"Good. Get on the radio and tell troop headquarters we're five miles east of the Herndon intersection and we're heading to intercept the bandit car."

The hot rod driver stood open-jawed as the big sergeant spun the sedan around with a roar and screeching of tires, siren wailing, red light flashing. Jordan relayed their position to headquarters and acknowledged the dispatcher's request to stand by on the radio.

The speedometer needle quivered on the one hundred mark as they crossed the bridge over Cottonwood Creek. Feathers flew like a snowstorm when a hen and an overzealous rooster struck the front grille. Lasky barked out instructions for Jordan to get the

Thompson and two full drums from the rack in the back seat.

"If those babies have already knocked off one guy today they're not gonna worry about a couple of highway cops. If we spot 'em, don't wait for introductions—let 'em have it."

Lasky hunched over the wheel, lips set in a tight line. The traffic was heavy and the country rolling. A line of Sunday drivers poking along, admiring the scenery, would cause more grief right now than four carloads of gunmen.

"We've got a chance to trap those dudes," Lasky snapped as they roared around a wide curve scattering traffic along both shoulders. "But only if we beat them to Herndon intersection. If they left the city on 21, they can't find a decent side road till they get to the intersection. If they beat us to it they can take any one of a dozen state or federal roads between here and the state line. And we're the only car on 21!"

John Jordan, ex-marine, sat spraddlegged with the Thompson between his knees, swaying as they took the curves and wiggled the loaded drum into place. Then he sat and waited.

The patrol car slowed to ninety-five uphill, then they roared down the long slope on the other side. Two miles away on the flat bottomland they could see the wide white ribbons stretching out from the Herndon intersection. Long lines of cars converged there, some turning to go cross-state, others winding up the hill roads across the river. There was a bridge over the river—just beyond the intersection. Jordan thought of what Lasky had just finished saying about the bridge and that night long ago.

Lasky swore at the poking traffic, rode the shoulder at a mere sixty for a quarter of a mile.

Then they saw it. A big-black sedan coming across the bridge, passing the long line of cars. The driver couldn't miss seeing the flashing light on the patrol car up the slope. The sedan gathered speed. It was nip and tuck in the race for the intersection and devil take the hindmost!

The sedan made it first, roaring through the stoplight, sideswiping a truck and screeching around the turn to head for the

state line ten miles away on federal 106. Lasky was seconds behind. He hopped the low curb, cut through a roadside picnic ground and bounced back onto the concrete a quarter of a mile behind the black sedan.

On an open road it would have been a clear getaway for the bank busters. But there was that Sunday traffic! The patrol car with its siren and red light had the advantage there. Lasky gained, halving the distance between them and the black sedan.

Then the road was clear. The intersection traffic dropped behind. It was one car against the other, with the bandits having the advantage.

Jordan lifted the Thompson, looked at Lasky, then lowered it as the sergeant shook his head. "Not yet," he screamed above the siren.

Something went "thunk" under the hood and steam poured past the window. Jordan could have kicked Lasky for not letting him shoot first.

"The radiator!" Lasky yelled. "They put a slug through the radiator!"

Jordan took a quick look at the temperature needle. Already it was climbing. He heard the fan rattling off balance. In a minute the engine would overheat, burning out the oil. Then the bearings would freeze.

Leaning out into the screaming wind Jordan took aim. He triggered the Thompson lightly and watched for results. White powder kicked up from the concrete behind the sedan. He triggered again, short bursts, close together, moved them up. The sedan lurched once, straightened out. Jordan saw the gap widening, heard Lasky cursing as his engine began to labor. This time he held the trigger down longer. The sedan swerved suddenly and Jordan saw strips of rubber flying. He'd hit a tire.

The patrol car groaned to a dead stop and the two patrolmen watched, fascinated, as the sedan's driver tried to regain control. He didn't. The sedan plunged down the embankment, rolled once—twice. A body hurtled out and lay still. The big car came to rest with its nose in three feet of water in a slough.

"Come on!" Lasky yelled.

Jordan grabbed the extra drum and followed. Lasky was running down the shoul-

der, pulling his forty-five. It was a hundred yards to the wreck. They saw three men stagger out, groggy. One of them looked up and saw the running state cops. The bandit stooped down to pick something up. Jordan saw what it was and yelled at the sergeant but Lasky didn't hear. The gunman leveled his Thompson and let go. Lasky's legs whipped out from under him and he lay there groaning, the slugs kicking up little tufts of grass all around.

The gunman and his two cronies ducked behind the wrecked sedan before Jordan could fire. The one with the tommy gun held his fire. Another let go with an automatic pistol but gave up because of the range. Jordan, belly-down on the concrete slab, crawled toward Lasky.

"For God's sake don't move," he shouted to the sergeant, "or those birds will plug you!" He remembered Iwo and the B.A.R. man in his squad who didn't lie still. But Lasky was unconscious. Jordan knew he had to pull the big man out of the line of fire.

Reaching across the grass, head down, he grabbed Lasky's boot. Dragging a two-hundred pounder by the foot from a prone position is not easy; Jordan managed it by sheer guts. Taking off his necktie he made a tourniquet around Lasky's thigh. Cars were passing now and that brought an added danger. Jordan was afraid a curious motorist might stop and get himself riddled. He waved the cars on frantically.

BUT he couldn't stop them all. A car coming from the opposite direction saw the sedan in the slough and stopped. The three men remained hidden behind the wreck. Jordan yelled to the driver as he got out of his car but the man misinterpreted it as a call for help and came running. The three gunmen leaped from hiding, guns trained on the motorist. Frightened at the sudden realization of what he'd stumbled into, the man broke in terror and ran for his car ahead of the bank-busters.

Jordan knew that a hostage would be all the gunmen needed to make a clean getaway. He hoped he could distract them long enough for the man to get into his car and clear out. On elbows, he took quick aim and let go a long burst. One of the gunmen

screamed and fell, clutching at his stomach. The other two faltered for a second, giving Jordan the break he so badly needed now. He jumped up and landed on the run, headed straight for the bandits. The man with the Thompson brought it up but Jordan squeezed first. He heard only a click as the firing pin drove forward into an empty breech. His drum was empty!

He could hear the sub-machinegun rattling as he hit and rolled down the embankment. The slugs ripped the sod around him and he felt a searing like a red hot iron had burned across his shoulder. Jordan stopped his roll in a concrete culvert spillway and jammed the second drum into place.

In his roll he'd heard the screeching of tires and clashing of gears as the frightened motorist roared for safety. Removing his cap he hung it on the end of the Thompson and gingerly poked the muzzle above the lip of the spillway, grimacing at the dirt-kicking shots he expected. But none came.

Jordan winced at the pain in his left shoulder as he drew back the gun. A quick look told him it was only a flesh wound. Painful, but not serious. He thought about Lasky. The scared motorist or some other one would probably summon an ambulance. He dismissed Lasky as being taken care of. Considering his present predicament, Jordan felt that the sergeant was a sight better off.

Cautiously raising his head above the grass at the spillway's edge, Jordan looked for his quarry. Had he looked a second later it would have been too late. As it was, he caught sight of a pair of legs disappearing into a growth of willows on the edge of the marsh.

Fearing a ruse, Jordan waited a long minute, then jumped up and leaped back up the embankment. A group of cars had stopped and an excited crowd was gathering around the fallen sergeant. Lasky was still unconscious.

Racing back to the patrol car Jordan called headquarters. The dispatcher had been trying to reach him with a new report on the bandits. Jordan cut him short and gave a terse account of the gun battle.

Giving his own location Jordan asked for an ambulance for Lasky. Then he told the

dispatcher, "Get help here as fast as you can. I'm going into the marsh after those birds. If they aren't caught before sundown we'll play hell ever catching them!"

The dispatcher remonstrated, but Jordan snapped the radio off. Taking his flashlight from the side pocket he headed back up the slab toward the marsh. He tried to disperse the crowd by warning them that there might be shooting but his admonition only heightened their interest. Knowing the futility of further argument and realizing that time was precious, he piled down the embankment and waded the slough. Following high ground as long as he could he plunged into the marsh at the point where he had last seen the disappearing legs.

At first he tried following their track, but the bandits were smart enough to stick to water where they left no trace. Jordan could only guess that the two men would head deep into the swamp hoping for darkness. Then they would probably swing toward the river and try to find a boat moored along the bank.

He found himself remembering more of jungle tactics than he'd thought possible. He watched the willow branches for leaves showing their silvery undersides where passing bodies had disturbed their position. He found fresh mud on the sides of reeds where standing water obscured footprints. He found himself following them easily.

But Jordan had learned another danger in the tropical jungles—ambush! He found himself stopping to peer ahead into the shadows that crisscrossed on the patchwork of leaves and vines. He listened for sounds which might indicate that men were near. If a frog stopped croaking he waited until he could be certain that it was his own presence that had caused the silence. Jordan watched for movements of birds above the trees which might indicate movement below.

But time, which he counted on as an ally, could become a foe. If his quarry had penetrated far enough they could wait, quiet and motionless. The frogs would take up their croaking and the birds would grow bold if the men remained still. If he tarried too long he would be as damned as if he moved ahead too quickly.

It was hot in the marsh, and there were

mosquitoes. The natty patrol uniform which looked so nice in a patrol car or at inspection was no help here. He discarded his jacket, loosened his shirt. The jacket might be found and bring help.

Jordan didn't count on the two men sticking together. He knew that the elementary instinct for survival would make them want to part company, thereby enhancing their chance for escape. That made it all the more difficult when he came to the place where they parted.

He chose to follow the trail leading deeper into the swamp. Whoever might come behind could better afford to follow the gunman who turned to parallel the highway. Pushing ahead as quickly as he could with safety, he found the trees thinning and the reeds growing higher. It occurred to Jordan that he was entering a water-covered prairie, overgrown with tall marsh grass. It gave him an idea.

Turning toward the nearest trees he was planning to outwit his quarry. From the branches of a tree he could look down on the open marsh. Any movement through the tall grass would be easily discernible. Jordan could see no trees ahead and judged that the prairie was expansive. That was to his advantage for the chances were that his quarry had not yet had time to make his tedious way through any great distance through the retarding grass.

SLINGING the Thompson over his shoulder by its strap, Jordan began his climb. But he reckoned without the cunning of the man he pursued. As soon as his hands clasped the limb above his head and his feet were wrapped around the trunk he heard movement behind him. In his awkward position Jordan had no chance to use his pistol, let alone his Thompson. He knew he had trapped himself!

"All right copper," the voice behind him said, "you can stop making like a monkey and come down outta that tree!"

Slowly Jordan lowered himself to the mucky ground, cursing his own stupidity. Then he turned to face his captor.

At first the rookie highway patrolman thought his eyes were playing tricks on him. He squinted in the sunlight and moved his

hand to shake his eyes. His opponent seemed equally astonished. Then Jordan remembered!

"Lake Connally! But what—I mean, how . . .?" words failed him in his astonishment.

"Well what do you know!" Connally ejaculated, equally astounded. "If it ain't the pride of the Marines in person!"

Jordan was thinking back to 1945 and Iwo Jima. He was thinking of a big tough buck private named Lake Connally. Lake Connally, first class gold brick and the company bully-boy. Lake Connally, who thought only of his own skin and ducked along the beach to the safety of wrecked landing craft, carrying the squad's remaining hand grenades with him. The seven buddies he deserted were helpless without the grenades, pinned down on their bellies in the volcanic dust. Six white crosses in the shadow of Surabachi were left to tell the tale of Lake Connally's cowardice. Six white crosses and John Jordan.

"Old 'Semper Fidelis' in person!" Connally chuckled, poking Jordan playfully in the ribs with the snout of his tommy-gun. "You always were a sucker. Still playin' soldier, I see. Pretty uniform you got there. Pretty boots and all. Shame you had to get them muddy!"

Connally was running true to form, Jordan was thinking.

"Surprised to see me here, Jordan?" Connally asked with an evil leer that twisted his fat, ugly face into hideous proportions.

"Not especially," Jordan told him. "I'd have guessed you'd follow a civilian occupation about as honorable as your military career!"

Connally chuckled. "Always ready with the brave words, eh Jordan?"

"Now that you've got me, just what do you intend to do with me?" Jordan asked.

"Do with you? Why, friend, I'm so glad to see an old Marine buddy of mine that I'm goin' to give a cocktail party for you at the Ritz," Connally taunted.

JORDAN was getting angry. Stung by the humiliation of being captured by his own quarry as a result of his own stupidity, he thought about how it would look back at

troop headquarters. Further, he'd suffered a harder personal blow by getting himself into the clutches of Lake Connally. He sized up the bully. Connally was tough, though a coward. He would fight if he had the upper hand. And he certainly had the upper hand now. Jordan weighed the advisability of a sudden judo attack, but dismissed the thought immediately. Connally would riddle him before he could close in.

At Connally's order Jordan unsnapped his holster and handed it over. Then he unslung his Thompson and laid it on dry ground by the tree.

"Now step back," Connally snapped. Jordan backed off.

A cold chill ran down the rookie patrolman's spine. He could imagine what was coming. Connally would walk him to the edge of the prairie marsh where the oozy muck lay waist-deep under the shallow water. A single shot from his own pistol—the irony of it! His body would never be found, it would sink under the muck, leaving no trace.

But Lake Connally had other ideas. Picking up Jordan's Thompson, he slung it over his shoulder. "You never know!" he said. "Might come a time when I might need both of these—it'll save me changin' drums."

Connally walked around behind Jordan. Prodding him viciously in the back with the tommy gun he snarled, "Get movin', wise guy. I'm goin' to show you something that will make your eyes bulge. Jordan felt relieved. At least Connally didn't plan to kill him right away. That would give him time, precious time. Time to plan some way to outwit the ugly gunman. Maybe even time enough for help to come.

Jordan cast a look at the sun as he waded through the marsh and his heart sank. The sun was sending deep, horizontal shadows through the trees. In an hour it would be dark. There would be little chance of help coming before then. And after night fell no one would be likely to find them.

"Stop!" Connally called. Jordan stopped and looked around. They were on a strip of firm ground rising out of the marsh. Connally bent over and reached behind a clump of bushes, his eyes diverted from Jordan

for a second. The rookie shot out a hand, grasped a willow branch and bent it quietly back.

"That's enough of that!" Connally growled. "If you try to mark a trail once more they'll be able to use your corpse for a guidepost!"

Jordan swore silently. The cagey Connally had learned too many tricks in the Marines. He would be a hard man to fool.

Connally pulled a canvas bag from the bushes and opened it with one hand, the other balanced the tommy-gun on his knee, pointed at Jordan's chest. "Look!" he invited, stepping back as Jordan came to inspect the contents of the sack. It was filled with banknotes; twenties, fifties and centuries.

"Quite a haul!" Jordan commented, laconically. "Too bad you'll have to split it—but at least it won't be a four-way split, now."

"Thanks to you," Connally chuckled. "But I'm not too worried about splitting it with anybody."

"Running true to form, aren't you, Connally?" Jordan flung at him. Maybe if he could make the big thug mad enough he'd lose his head and give Jordan an opening. But Connally was too smart for that.

"Save your breath, Jordan. The guy who came in here with me won't mind—because he ain't goin' to leave here!"

Jordan puzzled a little at this. He knew he'd seen two trails split up in the marsh. And he hadn't heard a shot. What did Connally mean?

THE bank robber saw the puzzled look on his face and chuckled again. Jordan was finding that chuckle irritating. Connally patted the butt of the Thompson in his hand. "Nossir! Red won't care much about splittin' this swag. He can't spend it here, nohow!" Connally roared at his own joke and Jordan felt the chill return. He knew now he'd have to tread his way cautiously, for Connally was cold-bloodedly matter-of-fact about killing anyone who got in his way. The man was a maniac!

"You're gonna help me get this outta here," Connally said, indicating the canvas bag.

"Like hell I am!" Jordan spat back.

"Come, come now—let's not be a boy scout all our life. Use your head, Jordan! If you don't go along with me, you're a dead goose—you know that, don't you?"

"And if I do go along?"

Connally's fat face widened in a grin. "Well—I ain't got quite that far yet."

But Jordan knew that Connally had "got that far." He would use the rookie patrolman as a hostage until he could find a clear path of escape. After that? Well, Jordan didn't try to kid himself.

"O.K., Connally, you win—at least you win this hand. But if I get a chance to deal, look out!"

"Use your head, Jordan. Play ball with me and I'll see that you get a break."

"Yeah! Like Red got a break?"

"Look, I know you're stallin' for time. Now let's get goin'. Pick up that bag and head in the direction of the river."

Jordan's shoulder was beginning to throb. The heat in the swamp was oppressive, despite the sinking sun. The mosquitoes came out in droves, settled in the wounded shoulder. The rookie gritted his teeth and slung the bag over his good shoulder. He looked at Connally. "Well?" he asked, awaiting further direction.

"Lead off!" Connally barked. "Make for the river."

It suddenly dawned on Jordan that the pudgy-faced gunman didn't have a very good idea of which way the river lay. The state cop remembered that Connally's path had been leading *parallel* to the river when he trapped Jordan. There was one way to find out. Hitching his water-soaked breeches, the rookie turned and headed for the heart of the swamp. Connally made no comment but followed close behind. After five minutes the water and mud was halfway to their knees. Still the gunman said nothing. A plan began to take shape in Jordan's mind.

The shoulder was swelling now. His left arm was growing numb. Jordan could stand the pain and discomfort, but he prayed earnestly that he wouldn't lose the use of the arm. He would need it before the night was over.

The sun lowered itself slowly behind the

marsh grass. The receding treetops shone gold for a moment, then darkened into a bluish haze. Twilight lingered a while, then gave way to the dark swamp night. Stars came out overhead, enabling Jordan to keep his direction. He slogged wearily along, ever deeper into the marsh. The night sounds, the frogs and crickets, a raucous bird, fell discordantly upon his ears. He could hear the slosh, slosh, of Connally's footsteps following. Jordan thought of a storybook character who once played a flute in a town called Hamelin. He grinned to himself and said half aloud, "Except I've only got *one* rat."

"What are you mumbling about?" Connally wanted to know.

"Nothing," Jordan lied gleefully, "I just said, 'there goes a water rat.'"

THE lingering heat of the sun was soon dissipated by the night air. The water stayed warm for a while, then Jordan felt a chill around his knees. He began to wish for his discarded jacket. The bag lay on his shoulder like a lead weight. He stopped.

"What you stoppin' for?" Connally growled.

"I'm tired," Jordan told him truthfully. "And I can only carry this thing on one shoulder—that's your fault. You want to carry it for a while?"

The snout of the tommy-gun dug into Jordan's back. "Look, mister. This ain't no constitutional we're takin'. Move on!" Connally was feeling a little jittery now. You could tell by his voice. Jordan would give it time to work a little. A swamp night can do funny things to a man. Especially if he's lost.

"I wonder if there are any snakes in here?" Jordan commented as casually as he could.

"Shut up and keep movin'." Connally barked.

Jordan grinned to himself in the dark. He pictured the gunman behind him, straining his eyes to see snakes on the black water. Quietly Jordan loosened his belt and pulled it off. It would sink slowly through the water. Without a sound he eased the belt into the waist-high water behind him. A few seconds later he heard Connally gasp.

His legs had come in contact with the half-submerged belt. The gasp was followed by a wild staccato burst from the tommy-gun.

The noise of the shots brought sudden silence to the swamp. The night creatures ceased their chirping and croaking. Jordan and Connally stood stockstill in the water. There wasn't a sound for a second.

"You crazy galoot!" Jordan bellowed. "Be careful with that damn gun! You nearly shot me in the legs."

"A snake," Connally blubbered. "Probably a water moccasin! Right around my legs."

Jordan turned away so Connally could not see his teeth gleam in the starlight. It had worked splendidly. The bully was beginning to show his yellow streak! Jordan checked the stars again and swung left a bit. He was thinking of the night when a Jap sniper had tried to trail him through the dark Guamanian jungle. He bore left still more. Then he started the second phase of his plan.

Stopping in his tracks, Jordan glanced about the skies with a puzzled look. In the starlight he saw that Connally had stopped too and was watching.

"What's the matter?" Connally asked nervously.

"I'd have sworn we should have reached the river by now," the rookie lied.

"Y'mean you don't know where you are?"

"Well—not exactly." He stopped to let his words sink in. The bully rose to the bait.

"Get movin', Jordan. You can't fool me with your shenanigans. Keep headin' the way you were." But there was doubt in the gunman's voice.

JORDAN shrugged his shoulders and winced at the pain. He started to slosh through the chilly water once again—just a bit more to the left this time. Then he stopped.

"Keep movin', dammit!" Connally bellowed. "You're stallin' for time again! One more trick and I'll plug you and find that damn river myself."

"Listen!" Jordan said cautiously.

Connally listened.

"Did you hear it?" the rookie asked in a hushed voice.

"Hear what?"

"It sounded like a hound baying."

"Probably some farmer huntin' coons," Connally volunteered.

Jordan shook his head confidently. "Coon hounds don't bay like that."

"What're you gettin' at?" the gunman squeaked, his confidence ebbing fast.

"Bloodhounds," Jordan said confidentially.

"B-bloodhounds?" Connally dropped his bluff manner completely.

Jordan nodded, watching the pudgy face in the starlight. Connally licked his lips. "Let's get to that river—it can't be much farther, now!"

The rookie bore left again. He hadn't heard a thing but he was certain that the man behind him could hear a pack of hounds galloping along in full cry. He wondered what Connally would do if he stopped to think that bloodhounds couldn't track them through water.

Jordan was tiring fast. The pain in his shoulder was shooting down his side now. He knew he couldn't last much longer. He checked the stars again. This time he kept on straight ahead. His eyes bore through the darkness but saw nothing, yet. He felt the water recede ever so slightly from around his waist. His legs were tiring. Each time he pulled them from the slimy muck beneath the water the movement was slower.

Connally had the upper hand. The heavy sack and the shoulder wound were telling on Jordan. But Jordan knew where he was and the gunman didn't. Jordan prayed between clenched teeth—prayed that he could hold out just half an hour longer.

The water dropped to their knees. Underfoot, the muck was gathering firmness. Jordan's eyes bored through the marsh grass. Then he saw what he wanted to see. A tree-top loomed above the waving rushes. The water was around their ankles, then hummocks of grass appeared on firm ground. The trees drew nearer.

"Are we there?" Connally asked, stumbling behind.

"Just about." Jordan had to summon all his strength to make the words sound cas-

ual. Then his heart leaped. Through the trees he saw a light, moving along horizontally. Then another!

The ground was firmer now, with only meandering sloughs of slimy water to cross. Jordan watched the trees for more lights. He prayed again. This time he hoped that Connally wouldn't see the lights. Another one flitted by.

"What was that?" Connally suddenly rasped.

"What was what?" Jordan came back.

"That light!"

"Probably a lightning-bug."

"It was an electric light."

"Maybe a boat then, on the river."

"It moved awful fast for a boat."

"Probably moving downstream—there's a fast current about here."

Connally was skeptical and Jordan could almost feel his eyes boring past him, searching for another light. The rookie prayed none would come.

Then Jordan saw a red light and sighed thankfully as it went out. Time was important now, as it had never been before. Time and the lights. He prayed there would be no more lights. But he hadn't counted on voices. As soon as he heard them he struck up a lively chatter with Connally.

"What the hell are you gabbin' about?"

"Nothing—I'm just glad we're near the river, that's all."

Another light flashed by and Jordan groaned inwardly, for this time the sound of singing tires was plain on the night air.

"River, Hell! That's the highway!" Connally almost screamed.

Jordan knew the chips were down. He swung the heavy money sack, but his tired arms felt as though they weren't moving. The canvas caught Connally full in the face, but not before his finger closed on the trigger. The tattoo of shots echoed loudly in the trees. Jordan's hand closed over the gunman's wrist and he sidestepped and jerked. He felt the bone snap. Connally screamed and the tommy-gun dropped to the ground. Jordan slumped forward and the ground came up to meet him like a floating mattress. As he eased into oblivion he heard excited voices and running feet, and he smiled.

JORDAN opened his eyes in a white room like he thought he would. He turned his head gingerly on the pillow so as not to pull his side. Sure enough! There in the next bed was Lasky, one leg in a cast suspended from a series of weights and pulleys.

Jordan chuckled as he told the big sergeant the story. "I remembered that Connelly gold-bricked out of patrol duty that night on Guam when the Japs tried to trail us.

We just doubled back in a wide circle

until we led them straight into one of our own outposts."

The door opened and a cheery nurse breezed into the room. "And how are my two sergeants this morning?" she asked brightly.

"He's the sergeant, sweetheart," Jordan nodded in Lasky's direction. "I'm just a rook . . ."

Lasky cut him short. "As of yesterday you're *Sergeant* John Jordan, assigned to car Five—and, pal, I'm going to miss having you around!"

The Gold Diggers

By HENRY HERBERT KNIBBS



OLD SOAPY had a mine to sell, the richest mine on earth,
Met a tenderfoot with money, told him what his mine was worth;
"Here's one nugget, and the assay runs five-hundred to the ton,
It's a chance to make a million. She's a lalpalooa, son!"

The tenderfoot said, "Really?" though he meant, "Coarse work, my friend,"
For he hailed from old Manhattan and he worked the lower end.
Knew the game in all its changes—took a drink or so for luck,
Shook the dice for fifty dollars, and Old Soapy Simms got stuck.

Borrowed fifty from the barkeep who was helping all he could,
Though his trust was not in Soapy, but the tenderfoot looked good.
Paid his debt. To make it stronger, Soapy ordered drinks for all;
Tin-horns, cowboys, ranchers, miners answered nobly to the call.

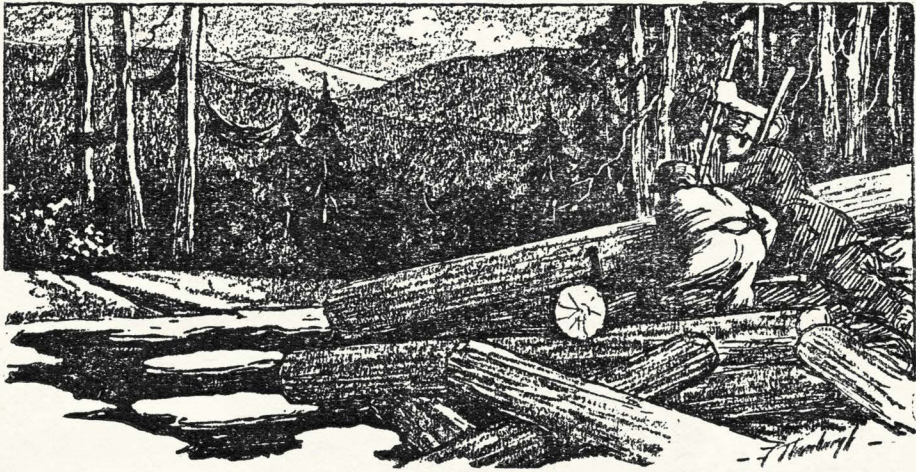
"It's a deal," declared the stranger as his check-book came in sight,
But the barkeep's feet grew clammy as he watched the victim write:
Then they heard the far-off whistle of the local, Nine, and due,
And the tenderfoot, though busy, heard that far-off whistle, too.

So he folded up his check-book; said, "So-long, I'm on my way!"
Gave the slip to sweating Soapy, made it plain he couldn't stay.
So he vanished in the darkness, and they heard the train depart,
While Old Soapy read his sentence and it made his eyeballs smart.

"August eighth" dash "nineteen-hundred." Then a business-like receipt,
For the sum of fifty dollars. Followed, underscored and neat:

"I got mine. Don't lose your nugget. Good-bye, Soapy Also-ran,
When you're East, drop in and see me. Yours, a New York Mining man."

*The Secret Trail Through the Woods Was Tim Kelly's Own—
Let Them Take It from Him. Yet the Time Was to Come
When Tim Kelly, Late River Boss, Shared His Secret*



THE TK TRAIL

By HOLMAN DAY

AS IMPERVIOUS to heat as a salamander, Tim Kelly sat outside his log camp, serenely submitting his person to the full glare of the July noon.

His big, brown hands were busy; he whittled a wooden toy with precise care. In each of the side pockets of his old canvas shooting jacket slept a couple of kittens, their heads just showing.

Up the crooked Pugwash tote-road trudged two men, their city-pallid faces streaked with sweat, their hard-soled shoes making tough work of footing it along the ruts and wallows.

They stopped suddenly. They saw the log camp in front of which Kelly was basking. In the clearing were several long, low, log houses, roofed with metal. Along one roof extended a sign which announced: MORSE & MCNULTY DEPOT CAMPS.

Evidently the clearing was a destination

for these outlanders; it was equally evident that the lone dweller in the place was the object of certain designs in which craft was involved.

One man dodged quickly into a moose-wood covert beside the tote-road.

The other plodder started along to Kelly's camp, mopping a streaming face and slatting out the soggy handkerchief.

"I don't seem to jump you any!" suggested the caller, who had noted the stark lonesomeness of the place and wondered because he was received in such a casual fashion.

"Oh, folks come drifting past all the time—all sorts!" Kelly kept on whittling and grinned amiably. "They get to the Umcolcus Carry by following this road!"

"Road!" scoffed the stranger. "And good gad, man! Where's some shade? How can you stand the sun?"

"A man's hide can stand anything after

it has been toughened like mine has been, mister. Winters wallowing in the snow; spring drives wading in the ice-water; and summers timber-cruising."

"Where can I get a drink of water?"

"In the camp, mister. Pail with the tin dipper in it."

From inside the camp the man inquired, "You're the custodian here, I take it?"

"Sort of watchdog, you might say."

"Do you stay here alone?"

"Except for the cats. The mousers carry on their night and day shifts in the grain storehouse."

"Do you mind if I sit just inside the door, out of that infernal sun?"

"Not a mite, mister! I'd join you—but I can't whittle so well except in the full glare."

"I suppose you clean up quite a lot of money, selling those things." The stranger tried to make the query casual, but he betrayed rather acute interest in Kelly's prospects of gain.

"Well, I should say not, mister! I'd be a nice kind of critter to take money for things that can make little shavers happy! But it so happens as how I spend a lot of time on chickle-fixings like these. Then I tie up a bundle of 'em for my nieces and nephews when I send down my pay orders to my sisters."

"Oh, they bank your money for you?" The visitor was still acutely interested in Tim's finances.

"Sure thing; bank o' happiness! I make 'em spend every cent on themselves and the youngsters."

"But you'll need money for yourself some day."

"Oh, no I won't!" There was grim finality in the tone.

"But you'll be wanting to run down to the city for a little spin around and some fun."

Kelly broke in sharply on this wheedling stranger.

"I shall never go out of these woods again till I'm lugged out on my back, mister. I've given my orders to be buried here—but you can't depend on relatives to carry out orders." Tim added disgustedly.

"But look-a-here, you can't be so very

old. If you had white whiskers I could understand this hermit business. Mind telling me how old you are?"

"Thirty-seven!" Kelly showed his stalwart vigor when he rose from the odd chair which he had finished from spruce saplings, weaving the peeled twigs into fantastic forms. He put aside the toy. "Mister, you have given me the excuse I need to declare myself. I always declare myself to strangers—and to all men, for that matter. I may have a queer way of doing it, but it's my way. Please hand me the rifle that stands close beside you just inside the door. I've got to take a right sharp aim, and I don't want to run any chances on shading my eyesight by looking into that dark camp."

Wisdom and human experience are behind the venerable saw to the effect that a guilty conscience is its own accuser.

"See here; I haven't said or done anything!"

"I don't know what kind of a man you may be, mister!" Kelly did not turn to look at the doorway. "But if you are as suspicious as that, you'd better start in associating with a better class of men." He stretched his inviting hand far behind him and the rebuked stranger placed in it the rifle. If Kelly had turned to look, he might have discovered a very singular expression on the caller's face. But Kelly was intent only on what he proceeded to do. With the manner of one who was sure of range and target, he drew a bead on an object affixed to a pine tree some twenty paces distant. He fired and set the rifle back inside the door.

"Now, mister, walk over there and take a look."

The man obeyed, evidently glad to be away from the enigmatical marksman for a few minutes.

The thing on the tree was a foot square of boarding, topped by an outjutting triangle of scantling which sheltered fairly well the space beneath. What was on the board was further protected by a square of window glass. On a section of cardboard were pasted two clippings from a newspaper. One clipping, marked with an inked date, gave a highly laudatory account of a heroic exploit performed by Boss Timothy Kelly of the Nemos Company's drive. Single-handed, he

had saved two men out of the crash of a breaking jam at White Broth falls and then, on a hastily contrived raft, had gone down the smother of the rapids and had plucked another timberjack from a ledge—the third man of the victims caught by the jam. The exploit was recorded some weeks after its happening in order to explain why Boss Timothy Kelly was to be given a dinner that evening at one of the city's hotels, and why he would receive a badge for bravery and a purse of gold from the Nemos Company after he had listened to speeches in his honor. The second clipping, dated the next day, reported how Tim Kelly, a riverjack, was fined for drunken disturbance, assault, resisting officers and wrecking a hotel dining-room. Over the clippings was printed crudely with a pen: **THE DAMMIDEST FOOL IN THE WORLD.**

And around the glass, which one mis-shot would have smashed, was marked a border made up of closely set bullet holes; plainly, this mourning band had been long, carefully, and painfully in the making.

"That's me," composedly announced Kelly when the stranger had returned to the camp.

"I think you're taking it altogether too hard. Men make worse mistakes than that and keep right on in the world with their chins up."

"Maybe they do. Most men tell me so. But either they're liars or else they're too mean and ornery to have any decent idea of what's fit and right. I tell all the same—as I'm telling you. Then I let 'em take their pick of what they are."

The visitor made no further attempt to console.

Kelly went on. "I didn't want to be made a hero. I shoved it away from me as long as I could. The job was all in the way of regular river business. The Nemos couldn't afford to lose three good men when the boss might save 'em with a little effort. I didn't want to have that gang hollering around at the railroad station when I got down-river. It would have suited me best to go straight to my sister's house. I was willing to take a drink or two all right enough. But when I didn't take a drink with everybody after they had finally got me cor-

nered, I was gaffered as a jillpoke and a quitter—and no riverman wants to be called either. And after about so many drinks a man can't keep count like he should."

"If you'll let me say a word. By giving you the hero razz that style—it was their fault, not yours."

"It was my fault this way—and I've thought it all over well—having plenty of time up here, mister. I had let 'em make me a hero. And after that they expected me to be what they had made me. They had put their trust in me. They had made their brags about me. But then they had to back down. I had put 'em all in wrong. It's like when a man is elected to a high office. It's up to him to make good. It isn't himself—it's the office. It must be held up."

He sighed, then continued, looking at the shrine of penance on the tree.

"I'll say this, mister. I done my best to square it as far as I could in my poor way. I took my purse money and all the wages I had saved and I settled for what I had done to the dining-room, and so forth. I have never found out any special details of just what was wrecked—I don't remember doing it. One fellow did get far enough to tell me that I done what the old rivermen used to do when they hit town—I began to peel off my clothes. That was only instinct; the rivermen always want to get rid of the duds they've been wading in, living in, sleeping in. But when I didn't know what I was doing, it didn't make any difference what kind of clothes I had on in that hotel, even though I was wearing a brand-new rig."

Kelly turned on the stranger who had taken his seat in the doorway of the camp, again hiding from the sun. The woodsman's eyes were like those of a stricken animal. "And ladies were present!"

He gasped the statement as if he were delivering himself of confession of that sin which is not to be pardoned on earth or in heaven.

The visitor avoided Kelly's woeful eyes and looked toward the covert of the moose-wood where the other man was hiding. "So you have a pretty high respect for women."

"They're noble, nothing else! Some nobler than others, of course. But even if

they're weak, any honest man ought to use his strength to help 'em. The Big Woods are honest, you know, mister. The real honesty. I have lived in 'em all my life and they taught me most of what I know. They have been talking to me—and I'll stay on here and keep putting a deeper mourning border around that card over yonder."

"Well, your is a mighty square stand on the woman question. By the way, I suppose this region is like an open book to you. Are there some short cuts to Oxbow station—dodging the gorge?"

"There's cuts, but only one cut that dodges the gorge, and I know that cut because I blazed it with secret marks," stated Kelly with quiet pride. "I wouldn't show it to nobody. It's one of the few things I keep for myself."

"Oh, I have no hankering to know it," retorted the other airily. "I'm not inquisitive about any other man's business."

"Nor am I," stated Kelly. The burden of his revelation was off his mind. He resumed work on the toy. "I haven't even asked you why you're up here, looking as if you have no business in the woods."

"I did intend to walk to the Carry you spoke of, to have a look at the big log carrier that's talked about so much. I'm told it brings logs six miles and—well, I don't just remember the rest."

A true woodsman produces queer effects in the way of startling those who do not know his nature or have not experienced his methods.

Kelly did not look up from his work. He drawled, not raising his tones, "I could tell you how ten thousand horse power has been developed into electricity at the falls, there, and how the power has been hitched onto a chain in a plank sluice, and how by that six mile haul of logs which are cut in four foot lengths the two watersheds that God set apart have been brought together by the hand of man. I could tell you that much, and a lot more. But there ain't no need; you have seen it all for yourself."

The man behind him made a funny sound.

"I cruise all over to scout for fires and to keep my legs well stretched," Kelly continued. "Yes, I saw you at Umcolcus."

"You must have seen somebody who looked like me. Furthermore, anybody's memory for faces is apt to slip," blustered the stranger.

"If you start to dispute a real woodsman about his eyesight and his memory for what he has seen, I may begin to have queer thoughts of my own about you, mister."

"Oh, well, if you're as shrewd as all that, I'll have to admit that I hoped to snatch a few ideas about the big carrier. Guess it wouldn't be stealing."

"Go steal the whole damn combobulus, far's I'm concerned," declared Kelly with a considerable show of hearty ire. "Such things as that carrier have wrecked the good old woods and have knocked hell out of timber-rassling for real men. That thought helps to keep me more or less contented as a watchdog here along with the cats." He plucked a fluffy kitten from each sidepocket and rubbed them against his cheeks.

"This heat has melted out of me all thought of Umcolcus," snarled the man. "I'm going back the way I came—it's downhill, at any rate."

Kelly became a bit whimsical. "I wish I'd kept to my usual plan of asking no questions about a man's business. Then you wouldn't have said nothing about the carry or about the business or about changing your mind." He was grinning, framing his face between the kittens. "If you had come here and gone back it would have looked like you took a lot of trouble to come up to the clearing just for a social call on me."

"Suppose you leave it that way," suggested the visitor a bit tartly.

"Can't. Wouldn't believe it if you swore to it. Nobody ever comes special to call on me." The smile faded; there was pathos in the tone.

"Never can tell what may happen some day. Even though you may drill a ball through me as a liar or a no-good, Mr. Deadshot, I'll say again that better men than you are have made worse slips and have got away with it."

"However, I take my firm stand that I'm the damndest fool in the world. Everybody tells me I have mis-spelled one special word on the sign over there."

"Yes, you have."

"Well, it suits me, because it seems to make the word holler out, good and loud. At any rate, mister, I shall stay right here where I can keep out of all trouble."

The caller had started away. He paused a moment. "When a man is able to pick a spot where he can keep out of all trouble, absolutely, it will be on some claim he stakes out in heaven, Mr. Kelly. Good day!"

"He may be right," Kelly confided to the kittens. "These fellows from the city are pretty sharp. But, anyway, there's less trouble here than in any one of those big places where he's going."

The man who had been lurking in wait for the emissary joined the latter around a bend of the tote-road, out of sight of Kelly's camp.

"What's the verdict, Clauson?"

"He has no use for money."

"Is there a short cut past Hagas, as I've heard?"

"He has made one of his own—and won't loosen about it."

"Get any line about his ideas on women?"

"Says they're all noble—and stands ready to help any woman who is in a scrape."

"What else in the way of our encouragement?"

"He not only claims to be the damndest fool in the world, but he has posted himself to that effect on a tree and calls everybody's attention to the bulletin."

"Is he?"

"Oh, yes!" Clauson circumflexed the reply. "That is, maybe."

"I don't like the way you say that."

"Probably no better than I liked the way that jebbo back there kept jumping me every little while. It's hard work, fitting a handle on these woodsmen. We'll talk on the hoof. I'll put in the testimony—you do the judging!"

II

WHAT was abroad in the woods, anyway, in those days of scorch and swelter? What boded? What sort of clouds were gathering on the horizon?

Kelly felt a premonition.

There in the wide spaces, a man of the out-of-doors, his senses had the clarity found

in the perceptive qualities of the native creatures of the forest. Every once in a while he felt like lifting his nostrils to the air and stamping in the manner of a buck deer that as yet has neither sniffed nor seen danger but has been warned by a sixth sense and strives to fathom the nature of that which threatened.

The recluse felt both foolish and fearful. He felt less foolish when he gathered scraps of gossip and found that other woodsmen, less acute than he in their instincts, were more or less puzzled in their numb and lazy wits.

For instance, Doe Hardy, fire ranger, stopping at the Morse & McNulty clearing for a dipperful of water and a casual chat, had something to say about strangers who idled in the neighborhood of the Umcolcus log carrier. They were plainly not woodsmen and were very poor imitations of sportsmen. There were peculiar night happenings along the sluice.

"There's a talk of ha'nts," said Hardy. "But most of the sluice tenders are Finns and them critters wouldn't know a ha'nt from a hoopus."

Not an illuminating comparison, to be sure, but the impression conveyed by Ranger Hardy was that, in his disgusted opinion, the Finns were wholly unqualified to judge the supernatural.

"If there is really a ha'nt at Umcolcus—and I shouldn't wonder, considering how the nat'ral woods' spirits must hate such a cussed contraption—if there *is* a ha'nt, I say, and I could afford to take the time off to 'tend to it, I'd send it skyhooting. It may raise the devil with that log carrier in the end. The Umcolcus Corporation could afford to pay a man like me to cross the ha'nt and put it out of business. But can't you imagine, Tim, what old President Jefferson Sprague would say to me if I went to his office and asked a price from him on ha'nt crossing?"

Kelly nodded.

"These new fellers who are all hell for machinery can't be made to understand what's under cover in the woods," Hardy added. "Takes the oldsters, like me, to know. Well, if Sprague's works bust up some night, let 'em bust! It'll be laid to a

cross-twisted pydunkus on one of them daminos in the power station. Leave 'lectricity alone for thunder and lightning, that's what I say. Dammit, look at how this drought is holding on! As a fire ranger, I'm a good mind to go to the lawmakers and have a stop put to this using the 'lectricity that's needed in this region for thunderstorms. In this dry spell I jump two feet off the ground every time I see no more'n a man's pipe smoke."

Ranger Hardy went on down the Pugwash road, muttering about his apprehensions and leaving Tim Kelly to ponder on his own.

Then came Oscar Wagg, plodding up the Pugwash road. He was a game warden and always had an eye out for strangers and their ways. He had something to say about certain conditions in Hagas gorge, the neck of the bottle between the Umcolcus region and Oxbow station. Whenever Mr. Wagg had anything to say he put on plenty of trimmings of his own fanciful cut. "I hain't got no way of knowing what it's all about, Tim, of course, and I only got glimpses of this man and that, but if any nice young schoolmarm was to come riding right now up the Pugwash tote-road on a shiny new bicycle and should ask me about it, polite and earnest, I'd tell her with my hat in my hand that the Hagas gorge is plugged tighter than old Marm Hasty's sinkspout is, after a freeze. Somebody particular is expected to go through there and another somebody is betting he won't."

"But you make it your business to find out so much," suggested Kelly, probing in the matter of his premonition and seeking something for the solace of his worry, "I should 'a' thought you would 'a' made it your business to find out what those men are waiting for—what they are trying to do."

MR. WAGG carefully laid a sliver of tobacco on his tongue, and with his tongue thrust the weed into the proper niche in his cheek.

Then he clacked the blade of his knife into place and winked at Kelly. "Oh, leave that to me! I've heard there's a convict loose out of State prison. I reckon that's the reason for the connoopus at Hagas."

Mr. Wagg shouldered his pack and trudged off toward the north to take firearms away from the alien workers at Umcolcus, provided they were still disobeying his orders.

Tim Kelly went on with his whittling and reflected, in his innocence of the methods of the law, that Warden Wagg had undoubtedly solved the mystery of the bottling of Hagas gorge. The law went to a great deal of trouble to punish men. He cast a glance over at the board on the pine tree—and then he added another bullet hole to the mourning border in order to keep up his accuracy of aim.

But while he went about the small duties of his guardianship of the store camps there persisted in him the consciousness of something impending in his own affairs. Neither Doe Hardy nor Oscar Wagg had brought any news to help in solving the problem with which Tim Kelly wrestled in his thoughts—what sort of trouble was brooding over him in this retreat in whose confines he had previously felt so secure?

Every now and then he whirled about, thinking he heard voices in low conversation behind him.

He would hasten his steps and duck around the corners of the log houses, convinced that he was about to catch intruders who were mumbling in undertones, so his ears told him.

Even the cats seemed to share his uneasiness. They were half-wild creatures, as domestic cats grow to be after a short time in the woods.

In his new and nervous state, exaggerating all the small affairs of his modest domain, he even found a certain amount of malefic suggestion in the stares the cats directed at him.

They were accustomed to range far when a taste for rabbits prompted such excursions.

One morning, when he was on his way to sharpen the whittling-knives on the grindstone in the dingle, as the roofed space between log camps is called, he saw a band of the cats come trooping out of the mouth of the Umcolcus road; they scurried as if in fright and scattered to various parts of the clearing.

Then Kelly blinked in good earnest.

A girl came running from the same direction. She wore short skirts and was gaitered for the woods trails.

When she caught sight of Kelly she began to scream. She flung up one of her hands in appeal. She carried a parcel of considerable size in the other hand. "Come to me! Help me! Save me!" she continued to shriek.

He dropped his knives and hurried toward her; here was a woman in trouble and the Kelly sense of chivalry was stirred.

She flung herself against him when they met.

"He is coming; he will kill me!" she gasped.

Out of the woods, on her trail, a man appeared. In spite of the fact that he was young he was making hard work of his running; he alternately limped and hopped. In his hand he carried an automatic pistol.

"I won't fool in this thing any longer—not now with a sprained ankle," he raged. "Come on back here! Come away from that man!"

"Will you let him kill me?" pleaded the girl in her anguish.

"No, marm," promised Tim Kelly, quietly. And he added for good measure of assurance, "Certainly not!"

Then the pursuer, halting, fired. The bullet went wild. "Damn you, I mean business! Stand away from the woman, you fellow."

She dropped her parcel and clung to Kelly with both hands.

"Be a man, not a hound!" advised her protector.

"By the hell, I'll take the two of you, then!" The attacker was fairly raving and frothing. He presented the appearance of an insane man and Kelly was immediately conscious of real alarm. He urgently appealed to the man, tried to reason with him; the response was a bullet which whistled dangerously near.

"My God!" shrieked the girl. "That man is crazy, I tell you. What kind of a man are you, anyway, in your protection of me?" She clung to Kelly with one hand and forced a gun on him, pulling it from her blouse. "You promised you wouldn't let him kill me. I'm a helpless woman. Save me!"

In the stress of circumstances, the matter having been put in a light which Kelly could not blink, he fired at the man as the latter was raising his arm to take aim.

Kelly meant to wound the antagonist—only that! After all his practice, the woodsman was a crack shot and could pick his place on a target. He aimed at the raised arm.

THE man swung slowly sideways in that sickening fashion which denotes a mortal wound and slumped down in a heap. His weapon did not drop from his hand; Kelly noted that much even in his horror and mentally damned a gun which was not his own and the accuracy of which he had not tested. Evidently the bullet had missed the arm and drilled the body—and the gun was held in a death clinch.

"Thank God, you've killed him!" cried the girl.

But Kelly, by his mutterings, was not thanking the Divinity; plainly enough a man had been killed. And Kelly had boasted with such confidence that trouble could not come to him in that retreat. The huddled bundle did not move; still there was a chance.

He gently strove to pull himself from the clutch of the girl's hand; he intended to go and make sure of the poor devil's condition.

But she held firmly to her protector and Kelly's sense of politeness, where women were concerned, was very keen; he could not struggle violently with a lady who was so much of a stranger.

She pulled the pistol from his limp hold and flung it away.

"I'm sorry you had to do it. I hate to see a gun in the hand of so good a man as you are. Now come! Take me away! There are others up there in the woods. We must get away from here as quickly as possible. I must go to Oxbow station," she cried breathlessly, her words tumbling over each other and carrying Kelly along with them as if he had fallen into a broken jam of logs. "That renegade is dead! Nothing more can be done for him. But everything can be done for me. Whoever you may be," she went on distractedly, "are you not a

man who will help a woman who is in such terrible need?"

"I am; I've always said it," gulped Kelly, finding this his first opportunity to offer to a woman in distress such assistance as he had dreamed about in his exalted moments of fancy.

"Please pick that up!" She pointed at the parcel.

He obeyed promptly, and at that moment he willingly took on the bonds of servitude to her.

"Do you know the way to Oxbow station—a short way?" she demanded, not moderating her manner of breathless haste.

"Aye, miss, the shortest way. My own way."

He kept shifting his eyes from hers—her gaze was so searching, her eyes so bright.

"When can you start?"

"Except for the tea pail and a snack for you—"

"No, no! I don't need food on the way. I feel now as if I never could eat again. Let us be off."

As for Kelly, as he stood in garb and moccasins, he was as indifferent regarding further equipment as a harnessed horse, waiting for the whip.

He led directly against the edge of the apparently unbroken wood and plunged in.

For the first few yards he was obliged to pause occasionally to hold aside branches which would otherwise have lashed her face. She came on, staring at him in wonderment.

"But how did you know where to come in—how do you know how to find your way now?"

He smiled on her indulgently—he was proud of that trail. "Probably you didn't notice the white rock at the edge of the clearing with TK chipped careless-like on it—all in one letter, so to speak! From there it's forty paces straight to the first blaze—and we're most to it." He walked on through the unbroken undergrowth. He stopped and drew her attention to the first "blaze" and explained it. He had shaved smooth with a knife a small circle on a tree and on the circle had carved deeply his monogram

of "TK." In the creases he had daubed black paint.

"Now look straight ahead, miss, and you can see another of the same—and from that other you'll be able to see still another one further on. That's all. It's my blazing. I spent a lot of time finding this easy way around the ridges—clearing the trail—marking the trees and—"

She broke in on him with a shrill cry, beat both hands upon the pockets of her sport coat, then turned from him and made a frantic search in her bosom. "I must go back," she whimpered. "I must go back to that—that—but I must! He must have taken it from me." Upon the iteration of the word "must" she rang expressive changes.

"Something you want—it's on—on the body?" he asked stammeringly, shivering in spite of the heat. "I'll go—I can get it for you—I'll—"

"How would you know what it is?" Over her shoulder she turned on him that look which bewildered him every time he caught it. "I cannot tell you or explain. But my life is at stake unless I have it. I must do it myself." She started back along the trail.

HE hurried in front of her to show the way to the edge of the wood.

"It's no job for you, miss." But Kelly did not sound very sincere in his dissuasion; he had no taste for fumbling about the corpse of the man whom he had shot.

"No—but it has to be my affair."

When they were at the white rock, she leaped past him and ran toward the place where the man had fallen. "You need not come. You cannot help me. Wait there so that I may see you when I come hurrying back," she called to Kelly over her shoulder. "The sight of you will give me courage to run the faster."

While he waited, Kelly turned his back, paying no heed to her movements. He had killed a man. The flame of excitement had died down in him. He had not the heart to look again on that huddled heap.

She came leaping, gasping on her return, doing something with the buttons of the breast of her coat when he turned to face

her. Kelly hastily whirled on his heel and led the way into the forest, avoiding any scrutiny of her.

"There'll be some tough tramping, miss," he informed his charge, his face to the front. "It's a crooked trail—up hill and down. But we'll take it easy!"

"Don't try to favor me too much!" she entreated. "I'm only thinking of getting to Oxbow!"

With her parcel tightly tucked under his arm Kelly set the pace.

The parcel was light. His burden—the one which bowed his shoulders and made his woodsman's lope almost a stagger—was the persisting and dreadful thought that he had killed a man that day.

III

AFTER a struggle for several hours along the tortuous trail, Kelly and the girl emerged from the woods at the edge of the sparkling lake which spread between the Hags region and Oxbow station.

Kelly had his own canoe cached there; he used it when he journeyed to the station to send down the railroad line his pay order and the toys.

The girl fairly fell, rather than seated herself, in a patch of shade and watched her guide while he dragged the canoe from its hiding place and set it in the water.

There had been no talk between them along the trail. Plainly she needed all her breath for her efforts and Kelly had not presumed to speak to a strange lady who showed no inclination for conversation. Both of them had plenty to think about without talking, he reflected.

What was to come out of all this he could not fathom.

What statement must be given to the world? To be sure, it was he who had killed the man who lay in the dread heap in the Morse & McNulty clearing. But outside of that, the affair belonged to the girl—or her friends. Kelly had acted on her appeal and in self-defense, but somehow that thought was not exactly consoling him.

When he had placed the canoe in the water she rose and possessed herself of the

packet which he had laid carefully beside her.

"Is that Oxbow—across there?"

"Aye, miss!" He was holding the canoe steady for her to step in; she delayed and looked down into his face.

"Will you dare to take me there?"

"Aye, that I will!"

She laughed slightly, mirthlessly. "I forgot! We are not in the city where murders are found out so quickly and all is hue and cry in a moment."

"I wouldn't be a mite surprised if somebody had found it—him, I mean, by this time."

"And will they think you have run away?"

That was a new thought for Kelly.

Naturally, such would be the opinion until some explanation could account for the absence from his duties on that day; and all his utensils had been left lying about. Even his breakfast tins had not been washed, and the hard-bread and tinned meat were on the camp table where he had left them. This appearance of a sudden flight would undoubtedly damn him as a guilty fugitive. What could he say if he returned to the clearing? He looked appealingly at the girl.

"They can't help thinking it strange, can they?" she persisted. "I'm sorry! But it's so hard to undo things. That man you murdered was my husband."

If she had plucked the paddle from the canoe, as Kelly held the craft ready for her, and had battered his head, his manner would not have expressed a tithe of what he showed in the way of bewildered woe. His lips moved without words; he was utterly aghast. And for the second time she had given the affair an ugly name.

"I am not blaming you, sir. By the way, what is your name, anyway?"

"Tim Kelly, miss—I mean missus," was the faltering reply.

"Mr. Kelly, I'm glad he's dead. He was a brute and a renegade. He forced me to steal all these stocks and bonds and other papers in this package and run away with him. He thought it would be better to hide in the woods. By not having these papers my father would be ruined. My husband was holding them to compel my father to pay over a great sum of money to save—

but perhaps you don't understand much about business affairs?"

"Nothing, marm."

"Then we'll drop that subject. I'll only say this: I found out the character of the man I had eloped with, or rather, my feeling changed regarding my father when I realized that he would be ruined."

She had dealt Kelly a dizzying blow at the outset of her revelations and his wits seemed to be merely so much whirling dust in the chamber of his mind. He had no ears for her words or clear judgment in regard to her inconsistencies. She took her seat in the bow of the canoe, still talking to him. He picked up his paddle and pushed off and dipped with the mere physical impulse of the canoeman who has his "ash-breeze" in his hand.

At last he was conscious of words from her, directing him to head for a wooded point at one side of the little lagoon by which the Oxbow settlement was reached; he obeyed numbly, his mind refusing to act on any reasoning as to how a girl from the city should have so much knowledge of the locality.

"I have managed to send word to my father—I suppose he is waiting for me near that point of land," she said, no longer bothering to be explicit as to how any word had been sent down from the country of the north.

Two men came forth in a canoe, one paddling, the other in the bow reassuring himself still further by the use of binoculars.

"There's my father. My brother, too," said the young woman. "Thank heaven, our troubles are over!"

KELLY suddenly flamed out; he thrust off his torpor; he put aside unquestioning chivalry for a moment. "Are you and your father going to report about that dead man, marm, telling the law folks the truth so that my troubles will be all over, too?"

She asked a question of her own. "You are the caretaker of that place where I found you, I suppose. What pay do you get?"

"Thirty a month, and my keep, marm."

"How can you be contented to stay alone in such a terrible hole—and for nothing—a fine strong man like you? You must talk with my father and take his advice."

The canoes met and the young woman trans-shipped herself with much nimbleness when the crafts were held together by the hands of the men.

Considering the tragic nature of the affairs in this family, the meeting was decidedly tame even to Tim Kelly's blunted perception of the dramatic. With the girl in the middle of the canoe, the three heads were close together while the parties mumbled and whispered.

Then the elderly man turned to Kelly. "You have been very noble, sir, in this matter till now. Are you willing to go a bit farther? Will you join with my son and myself in protecting the good name and happiness of my dear daughter?"

"I'll try hard, sir."

"It's best to let that renegade lie where he has fallen. He forced you to do what you did. It's almost as if he killed himself. It *was* suicide, as you might say! Let's all swear to keep still about the affair."

"But where does that leave me, sir, in regard to the law?"

"All you need to do is to stay away from that crack in the woods. Go out into the world and enjoy yourself. As a matter of fact, you simply can't go back there. Of course, you see that clearly enough."

"My father is talking good sense, Mr. Kelly," put in the girl. "You remember what I have already said to you about living in such a hole. Don't go back and get into trouble."

The father held toward Tim a fat roll of bills. "No amount of money can pay for the service you have rendered my girl. But take this as a gift. It will carry you a long way and buy you a good time in the outside world."

Kelly put up a repelling palm. This offer of money was spoiling all the wonderful, unselfish adventure of that day, though the father could not understand, of course. Tim reflected thus in the way of forgiveness; but he was having hard work to keep back bitter words.

The father tossed the money into Tim's

canoe and he and the younger man pushed away their craft.

"Don't be a fool, man," called the donor. "You'll have to face the thing alone, if you go back there. I have given you some wings. Now fly! If you stay around here and get into trouble it will be your own lookout. My family is out of it from now on. We know nothing about how a certain man met his death in the woods. Understand?"

He and the other man set themselves to the paddles.

"Good-bye, Mr. Kelly!" called the girl. "Don't be a fool! Don't go back!"

Tim sat in his drifting canoe and stared out across the facets of the ripples, narrowing his eyes against the glare.

The strangers were not heading toward Oxbow; they were paddling down the lake, toward the thoroughfare which would lead them to another station on the railroad.

Not moving a muscle, he watched them out of sight.

Then he looked down at the roll of money in the bottom of the canoe. The glamor of service to a helpless woman no longer persisted for the comfort of his soul. He had killed a man! He gazed at the dirty pay for that service.

It was a queer thing! What was it all about? His slow mind fumbled at the problem. When he heard the far hoot of a locomotive whistle he looked at the money again. It would carry him far from trouble. But the thought of the outside world did not tempt him; on the contrary, he was afraid—more afraid of the world than of the thing huddled in a heap in the clearing.

There on the surface of the sunflooded lake he kept on pondering. They had advised him and had given him money; the roll was plump and the bills showed yellow edges. He pushed at the roll with the toe of his moccasin.

What was good advice, anyway? Unless it should come from true friends was advice good? Those strangers had used him and had urgently counselled him to run away, be a hunted man, give up his work and his good name, such as it was among men, in spite of the shame of one affair which he insisted on nursing for his own penance. They had shown an eager desire

to stampede him—to get him out of the region. Again—what was it all about? What was the general trouble up in Hagas country?

He remembered his queer uneasiness and his premonitions! He gave some thought to the visit of that stranger who had lied awkwardly. Why didn't the world keep its devilishness outside the honest woods where a man was trying to live a decent life and mind his own business?

It would be easy enough for a plain and humble man like Tim Kelly to hide himself in the common herd of that world, he pondered.

He gave the roll of money another touch with his moccasin. Then he lifted his paddle, dipped it deeply and swung the nose of the canoe in a broad arc.

He headed toward the north and paddled sturdily, his bearings the purple cleft in the mountains where lay Hagas gorge. Every once in a while he glanced down at the roll of money in the bottom of the canoe. He did not trouble himself to pick it up. He could not bear to put his hand on the hateful thing.

IV

IN HAGAS gorge, neck of the bottle which broadened to the north was the headquarters camp of the wild-land rangers of the State police, Captain Ben Doak commanding.

Captain Doak was a veteran woodsman and was placid, prudent and conservative after the best fashion of the type. He proceeded on the principle that it takes a long time for a good tree to grow, but that any blamed fool can chop it down in a few minutes. He was not slothful—he could act quickly enough when an emergency demanded—but he was not pleased, to put it mildly, when anybody, merely for the sake of action, went about slashing impatiently at saplings instead of waiting for the tree to be ready for the cutting.

He had not been enjoying the presence, person or performance of Inspector Jack Frye of the Federal narcotic forces.

Inspector Frye was a new arrival on a special mission and was directing his men

from the State police headquarters, by permission of the ranger captain.

The Federal men had hurried north to Hagas on what was declared to be a hot tip and a big one. Frye, in charge for the first time in his experience, was young, impetuous, assertive and his clapper tongue rang all the changes of self-exploitation. He smoked cigarettes constantly; as a fire warden in his past experience Captain Doak had grown to look at a cigarette with only a little less disfavor than he would have bestowed on a rattlesnake. And when Frye cursed the woods and the heat and the mosquitoes and urged haste at the risk of prudence because he wanted to be back at the beach and have a good time with his best girl, Captain Doak packed his pipe hard and stuck the stem between his jaws and bit down grimly in order not to say something unofficial in reply.

A VERRED Ranger Booth to Ranger Doty, "Wonder when the run-in is coming off! There's going to be one—you can see it on the way as well as I can."

Frye was rather fat and the other inspectors were set to do the running around. Their chief remained close to headquarters and pestered Captain Ben.

Late in the afternoon the ranger captain was standing with Frye in front of the township map on the wall; for the tenth time, suppressing certain acid emotions, keeping the hateful cigarette smoke out of his nostrils as best he could, he was trying to pound into the careless attention of the Federal man some indubitable facts about the lay of the land.

"Even if the carry at Umcolcus is being well watched—and you say it is—you still have a better show at 'em here in Hagas. It's no use to put men between Umcolcus and Hagas—there are too many trails outside the Pugwash tote-road which runs through Morse & McNulty clearing. If your men are keeping the Hagas plugged—"

"Worry not; worry not, old top." Inspector Frye had the habit of banging an interlocutor on the back. He banged Captain Doak at that moment and never knew how venomously the latter longed to coun-

ter with a left hook under the ear. "Uncle Sam never sleeps."

"Then if they've headed this way you'll catch 'em—take my word on that."

Tim Kelly had entered. He waited respectfully while the two were absorbed in their study of the map.

They turned away and beheld the new arrival. Captain Doak gave Tim a cursory but kindly greeting. Tim Kelly had been no stranger on the Hagas road previous to the completion of his own carefully wrought-out trail, but not even Captain Doak knew of that secret route around the gorge.

"Cap'n Ben," gulped Kelly, then as bravely as he could manage courage and manner, "guess you'd better take me up. I've killed a man!"

Inspector Frye had a match half way to the end of a cigarette. He dropped the match and spat out the tobacco.

"Gone crazy with the heat, Tim?" The ranger captain smiled blandly. "Or does this come of living too much alone?"

"No, Cap'n Ben! I've done it. It was early today. Girl come running into Morse & McNulty clearing, chased by a man. He was shooting. She handed me a revolver and I aimed to wing him. But it not being my gun—well, all is I killed him."

"Good jossifur!" yelped the ranger captain. "What do you mean by letting any girl get you into a mess like that?"

"I've always said I'd stand by any woman when she needed help from a man," declared Kelly doggedly. "I'm sticking to my principles."

"Where is she?" asked Doak, peering through the doorway, suggesting that he needed further proof of this amazing performance by placid Tim Kelly.

"I took her down to the lake and set her across. Her father and brother met her in a canoe and they all went south by way of the Thumbcap thoroughfare—to take a train, I reckon. They was the city kind, all of 'em!"

By this time Inspector Frye was occupying a ringside seat. He was goggling at Kelly. Here was a man who had walked through the Hagas cordon in broad day. Frye whirled and stared hard at Captain

Doak. The captain caught both the rebuke and insolence in that hard look and was perturbed—and revealed as much confusion as Ben Doak was ever known to show.

"Took her—took her how—by what way?" yelled Captain Ben.

"That's my own business. Has nothing to do with killing the man. I won't say how I took her. Don't ask me no questions. You know me, Cap'n Ben!"

BY a masterly effort, Frye had been holding his tongue because information had been flowing freely till then. Now he exploded. He leaped forward and waggled his forefinger under Kelly's nose. With the other forefinger he tapped on his badge. "However, I propose to know you. From the Morse & McNulty clearing, you say. What's your name?"

"Tim Kelly, sir!"

"What's your business?"

"Caretaker of the store camps."

"How did you get from that clearing to the lake?"

"I tell you, as I told Cap'n Ben, that's my own business."

"I'll put you under arrest and make it my business."

"Just a minute, Mr. Federal Man!" drawled Doak. He was slow and serene, but anybody who had an eye for expression might have guessed that the predicted run-in was approaching fulfillment. "As I understand the situation, Kelly has charged himself with a killing and has turned himself over to me."

"But I suppose you'll allow me to ask him a question or two," urged Frye, smoothing his manner a bit.

"If it's strictly in the line of what you're investigating, you may ask him. But no more of that browbeating!" Doak smacked his hand on his table. It was like the first thunderclap of the promised storm.

"You say you took a girl to the lake. Ever see her before?"

"No, sir."

"Describe her looks."

"I kept my eyes off'm her as much as I could, sir. It ain't my style to peek and pry where a woman's concerned. 'Bout all I feel like saying, so as to be inside of what

I really know, she wasn't what you'd call bad looking."

Frye snapped around sharply when two of his men entered the camp.

"All serene, chief, up to date," one of them reported. "We're in for supper while the others stay out."

"You hang right here, both of you, and listen in on this!" He turned to Kelly. "Didn't she have light hair, and didn't she keep narrowing her eyes when she looked at you"—Kelly remembered those disconcerting eyes—"and didn't she clip her tongue against her teeth as she talked?"

Kelly took a few minutes for thought in order to bring up all his reserves of recollection.

The silence inside the camp was broken by Otis Wade, a timber cruiser for the Umcolcus Corporation. He stamped through the doorway and gave Captain Doak the usual hearty greeting and then had something to say to Kelly. The cruiser was one of those interlopers who slam in and pay little attention to the affairs of other folks who are in conference; in this instance the dramatic tenseness of the situation entirely escaped Cruiser Wade. "Always have thought till today as how you're a tidy housewife, Tim! What do you mean by running away from home and leaving everything in a clutter?"

"So you have come through the Morse clearing, have you, Ote?" asked Doak. He was serious and significant.

"Sure! I'm on my way down to the main office with caliper checkings on the Yoke tract." Wade looked from the grave Doak to the others and amazedly sniffed at a serious state of affairs without in the least understanding what it was all about. In that astonished demeanor of the new arrival the ranger captain found his own satisfaction, but he proceeded to clear the matter up with a question. He laughed when he asked it. "Didn't find any dead men along the trail, did you, Ote?"

"Oh, I kicked a half a dozen or so out of the road—but that's nothing unusual," retorted Wade humorously, his Yankee style of negative more conclusive than mere denial.

Kelly gaped at Wade; that huddled heap had been left squarely in the trail.

"Anything here on the nest that the hen can't hatch?" queried Wade of the party in general.

"No, reckon all the setting will prove good when the hen gets ready to cluck," replied Captain Doak.

The urban Mr. Frye scowled; in his official opinion the interchange of gossip was cryptic and irritatingly silly. At that moment his mind was burdened with affairs which he found weighty. Kelly jumped out of his dazed abstraction when the inspector banged at him with another question.

"Well, what about the girl?"

"I guess you've hit her off about right, mister!"

Frye and his men divided blazing looks and chewed upon hot words. They discussed the identities of certain persons unknown to the up-country listeners.

Then Frye went at Kelly again. "Did she have luggage of any kind?"

"She had a package about so big!" Kelly measured air with his big palms. "I carried it for her." The woodsman's face was clouded by what seemed to be utter stupidity; really, his faculties were benumbed; he was in the fog of doubts and dolorous misgivings. He had served as best he knew at the call of a woman, chivalrously and unselfishly. He had returned to face the law and do penance. He had fought out his bitter battle on the lake under the sun—and had resigned himself to make atonement as the law might demand. As far as Tim Kelly was concerned, in his soul and his conscience, he had gone through the hell and horror and the agony—and it all had been real.

But these men in the room were laughing. It was not a pleasant sort of merriment.

Frye started off in the harsh mirth; his men joined him. Then Frye took the mystified Captain Doak into the confraternity of sarcastic hilarity. The captain winced under the accompanying handslap, but he listened patiently to what the Federal inspector had to say.

"I've been playing a hunch all the time, figuring on the possibility of Betty Deshon being in on this job we're watching. Along with the rest of what she has handed this

poor tree-toad, here, she passed him a gat of blanks. Why, her flash name is 'Blank Betty.' She has run a lot o' men out of the country for good and all by making 'em believe they've done a killing. But they were drunk or doped. It's old stuff—but new up here, according to the looks of the thing."

Again he turned on Kelly. The laugh became especially nasty. "We had this place plugged. A good tip and all set. And you have slipped the greased skids under us. If there wasn't \$10,000 worth of hop in that package you carried for her, I'll eat this cigarette. Can't you size up a double-crossing dame at your age? Dammit, man, where were your wits? Her story must have been full of holes. Remember back—the holes must have been there. Of all the damn fools—of all the extra special damn fools—you win the belt!"

He began to stamp to and fro, all the laughter gone out of him. "Anyway, there's one excuse for me when I clean myself in my report! I'll explain how Hagas was split open. I'll send in your name, Kelly. I'll give you full credit. You'll be put on the records as absolutely the damndest fool in the world. Because she caught you cold sober and has pinned the boob banners all over you."

Kelly remained dumb. To be sure, he had relentlessly posted himself to that effect, but it was on a tree in the woods for his own private penance, according to his choice in the matter. Now he was left no choice; his name was to be heralded once again, a third time, in the newspapers—and branded with the red flame of more utter folly.

He stood there in the middle of the room, his arms dangling at his sides, his eyes staring into misty vacancy.

In his furious patrol Frye passed and repassed the stricken man.

All at once he bit off the word "fool" in the middle and the result was a violent exhaust of amazement and anger through mouth and nostrils. He dipped his hand quickly into a side pocket of Kelly's shooting jacket; the pocket sagged open because the kittens had often made it a nest.

Frye fetched forth that roll of hateful money and shook it in Tim's face. "I take

it all back; you're no fool! They came across pretty, eh? Well, that's only square, after the trick you turned for 'em."

Kelly looked past Frye. "I was intending to hand over that money to you, Cap'n Ben. But my mind has been terribly took up with other things since I've been here. They threw the dirty stuff into the canoe. I haven't even counted it."

"You have owned up to smuggling. Now I catch you with the goods of the split," insisted the inspector skeptically. "You're under arrest, Kelly. This time by *me*." The inspector turned to the ranger captain. "There has been no killing, Captain Doak. You can lay no charge against this man. I can. Now, Kelly, come across. What hole did you bring that girl through?"

"That's my own business," faltered Tim. His mind was not working well; he merely repeated what he had told the captain.

"It's the business of the United States Government, my man. You have been paid a damnation good price for a rat-hole, and I intend to find out just where the hole is." He was incautious in his rage. He scowled at Captain Doak. Frye should have known better, but he raved on. "No chance past Hagas but by the gorge trail, hey? What kind of merry greenwood con is being passed to me up here?"

"Are you intimating that I should or could have stopped Kelly?" inquired the veteran balefully.

"Don't you let him rub anything into you, Cap'n Ben," wailed Tim. "It's my own trail—a new one—a secret one—and you don't know nothing about it."

Doak rose and walked to Kelly. With comforting hand on the latter's shoulder, the captain said, "I'm trusting you to clean me in the matter, Tim. I know you're square. I'm sorry to see you in trouble. But we'll straighten it all out."

"What I'm going through—I don't know how to talk about it, Cap'n Ben. I've been trying to keep up with this thing, but it's tearing along too fast for me to understand. I guess I'm getting the main drift a good deal better now, but won't ye let me go over there into a corner by myself for a minute or two? I want to think it out," he quavered.

Doak sent him along with a hand-thrust which was kindly and consoling.

Tim put his forehead against a log in the wall. There was solace in the touch of what had been a tree in the honest woods. There seemed to be no honesty anywhere else. The thing was plain enough now, as he put thought on it. He had not suspected even when the girl made an excuse to go back to her shamming confederate to impart the secret of the trail. And then they had endeavored to put the panic of flight in him so that they might use this poor little property of his for their future operations. They had made careless and callous use of the best motives a decent man can have. And only to make mock of him as a fool. Under the tough skin of his face a flush crept. In his breast started the slow fire of that righteous anger which only vengeance can quench. They had played with his tenderest feelings. They had put him through a hell of their contriving for the sake of profit from their devilish dealing in drugs. They had—

He turned from the wall and looked squarely and honestly and with humble appeal into the eyes of the ranger commander. "Cap'n Ben, you know me, and the life I've been leading up there in the woods. You know what's behind it all—since I've had to quit as a boss."

"Never a better one on the river, Tim."

"They're threatening to post me before the world again as a fool, worse than I was before. Not that I amount to much of anything; nobody outside the woods would care. But I would care—because I've got so much time to do thinking. Seems as if I've been through hell enough for one man. I want to ask of ye a favor, Cap'n Ben."

Doak nodded. "Let 'er come, Tim."

"Won't ye allow me to square myself in this thing in my own way—manfashion? Let me walk out and tend to some business I have in mind?" While his forehead had been pressed against the log, Kelly had been dealing in his thoughts with the matter of his trail; he had been pondering on the motions of those strangers whom he had seen at Umcolcus. These motions had meant little to him in his past indifference; now that he was filled with desperate resolve to

purge himself of shame he was canvassing all circumstances.

"Go ahead, Tim," consented Captain Doak with the utmost placidity. "Report back to me."

"Nuth-thing doing," yelled Frye, dividing the words into veritable bullets of sound.

Captain Doak turned up a mild gaze of inquiry when the inspector came raging in front of the table.

"Didn't you notice me put that man under arrest? Didn't you hear my charges?"

"Perhaps I don't notice as much in these days as I did when my hearing and eyesight was better. However, you're a younger man and ought to have done a little noticing of your own. Kindly note this—I haven't un-arrested Tim up to date. I remember as how you did that much for me. I'm certainly obliged, but I ain't taking you away from close attention to the business of the United States Government."

"Do you dare to stick your State stuff in ahead of Federal matters?"

Captain Doak lighted his pipe before replying. "Wa-a-al, now you've opened up quite a question! State rights! It's bothering some of the best heads in the country. Now if you want to argue—" He whirled in his chair and flapped his hand to dismiss Kelly. "You needn't hang around to listen to a joint debate, Tim. I don't believe you're as much interested in constitutional history as Frye and I are. Hiper along about your business, whatever it is."

The Federal man pounded his fist on the table. "Look here, I have told you—"

Captain Doak leaped to his feet and pounded both of his fists on the same table. "You have been telling me too devilish much. You have told me how well you can play golf and poker and about your automobile and the color of your girl's hair and have showed me her picture till I'm cross-eyed. You have told me how the United States Government can't run unless you're on the job. But when I want you to tell me about my own business for this State I'll either drop you a registered letter or have notice served in due course of law."

He pointed at Kelly who had lingered meekly in the doorway to make sure that

permission would not be withdrawn. "I know Tim Kelly. He's as square-edged as a set o' calipers. Just now he's a poor cuss who has tumbled into a lot of trouble that he don't deserve. And I'm giving him the man's chance he has asked for. That's all. And if you open that mouth of yours again, Frye, I'll jump down your gullet and break the world's foot-race record galloping around inside of ye. Tim, I tell ye again—get moving! Come back to me when your job is done."

Five minutes later, after a period of silence in the camp, Inspector Frye ground a cigarette butt under his heel. "I want to say this," he muttered for the benefit of his two men; "they have their own sweet way of handling police matters up in these woods."

Evidently Captain Doak's hearing was not as imperfect as he had intimated. "Thanks, Frye. If you find anything worth copying go ahead and use it. And when you get to the next job and are telling some other old codger what you have done at your age, claim all the credit. I like to see young fellows get ahead fast."

V

EYES deeply sunk after the vigil of a night, jaws set in a clinch of grim determination, Kelly appeared at ranger headquarters the next morning.

He teamed two men whose hands were lashed behind them; he carried a sizable package.

"They sneaked along my secret trail, using flashlights, just as I figured they'd do," Kelly confided to Captain Doak. "I slipped up behind and noosed 'em and that's all there was to it."

The captain hailed the bunk-camp and called out Inspector Frye.

Kelly and Doak swapped glances which made up a complete and pregnant commentary on the Federal man's violet-hued pajamas; words would have anticlimaxed what the woodsmen put into looks.

However, Inspector Frye, in his omniscience which had previously offended Captain Doak, called the two captives by name after he had rubbed slumber from his eyes with his knuckles.

Kelly turned over to authority the men and the package; he started for the cook camp.

"I'll tell the pink-gilled universe this is some job!" declared Frye, grinning into the flush of the dawn. "Now, Kelly, come back here and give me the story; it must be a corker."

"I see you know the men, sir, and all about what they've been doing. So that part of the story is attended to. I have just explained it out with a long yarn to Cap'n Ben how I caught 'em. He'll tell you. I can't stop to talk. I haven't finished the job I've set out to do."

Standing just inside the cook-camp door he drank hastily from a pannikin which the cookee refilled with coffee several times. Then with a sandwich in each of the side pockets of the old shooting jacket and munching from the one in his hand, he departed along the Hagas trail, paying no attention to the questions which Frye called insistently.

"He's saving his breath," averred Captain Doak when he was questioned in turn by the inspector. "It ain't the official style, of course, but it's Kelly's way."

"I get you all right," acknowledged the inspector. "It's a great place—these woods—if you don't weaken. I'm afraid I'm weakening. But it won't be before I get after Betty—and her father and brother! Dutiful daughter that! I'll get on their trail easy enough with a telephone tip or two. They won't be able to figure how anyone could be so dumb as this Kelly—to come back and stick his head straight into a noose. So they won't be very cautious in their getaway. I'll land them and their package, all right, all right."

AT LAST, making sure that he was not watched, Kelly plunged off the Hagas road and made his way to his blazed trail.

After a long walk and not far from the Morse & McNulty clearing, he arrived in front of the man named Clauson who was tied to a tree.

Kelly freed the man from his bonds and offered a sandwich.

"I don't know as I can chew it—after that clip on the jaw you gave me last night."

Clauson was sullen though he was cowed.

"You tried to fight me after I had noosed the other two. That was your mistake, sir!"

Clauson devoured the sandwich, holding his palm to the side of his jaw to ease the ache.

"Well, take me in; I suppose there's no other way for it!" Clauson had been uneasy under the steady gaze of Kelly.

"There's yet a matter between us two, mister."

"Shoot!" advised Clauson, after a skeptical grunt.

Kelly pointed up at a blaze on the tree at the foot of which the other sat. "By your trick you have come into knowledge of the secret of my trail. You'd never go to such lengths, as you have, if you wanted to use it only for a night. Turn about is fair! You shall tell me your own secret now. Where is the rest of the devil stuff? It is your plan to bring it through here. Don't lie any more."

"You grabbed the whole of it last night," stated Clauson, leaning back against the tree and gazing up into the branches.

"You shift your eyes from me when you lie—just as you did the first time you came to me, mister. Can't you look at a square man when he is talking straight business?"

Clauson met the challenge with indifferent success.

"You were up to monkeyshines at Umcolcus, mister. You must tell me what they were."

The captive made no reply.

Kelly was sitting on a tussock of moss opposite Clauson. "Look here, mister—here at me!"

Again the eyes of the other only flicked across Kelly's face.

"If you can't look me manfashion in the eye, put your gaze on these hands." Tim spread them, big and brown and knotted. "I have brought only these to do the work I have set out to do today. But I can depend on them. You'll never know what hell you put me through by playing your trick on a man's honest nature and his sacred respect for women. If I should tear out your tongue—and it's the tongue of a liar—it would not be too much punishment for what you

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have done to my trust in man's square-dealing and woman's decency."

In his stress of emotion the fellow was finding speech as he had never found it before. But the thoughts which he had been crowding back must needs find vent in words. "If you want to tell me, coming half way in the matter of secrets, we'll be man and man in the thing. What say you?"

"Make one of the others tell. Why do you pick on me?"

"Because you came to me, when I was minding my own business. You went to talking money first in your own sly way. And when you found you couldn't buy, you went ahead to make mock and shame of what I was trying hard to keep from such dirt. Come now, man." Kelly flamed suddenly out of a melancholy that was half plaintive. "Shall I use these hands?" He held them forth, crooking his fingers. He bared his teeth. "I'll break your bones and twist your arms out of their sockets."

Clauson did look at Kelly then. He beheld a man who was slowly growing to be beside himself with the mounting fury of a patient victim who had restrained his righteous wrath as long as human limitations would permit.

"It's a \$100,000 squeal," said Clauson, "but I'm not going to let myself be broken into kindling wood for the sake of the rest of 'em. I'll go to Umcolcus with you and show you how the game was played. I'm pretty much cramped and stiff, Kelly. Give me your hands and help me up, will you?"

Therefore, the big, brown hands performed a kindly service instead of a ferocious one. The two men started away toward the north, Clauson stumbling along ahead.

VI

LATE in the afternoon of that day Kelly led another prisoner into the presence of Captain Doak. Inspector Frye was in the office and copied the bark of amazement which he had uttered in the early morning.

"Pop-eyed Hannah! This looks like a clean-up, Clauson."

"It is," agreed the sullen prisoner.

Kelly swung a bulging crackersack off his back and set it in the middle of the office-camp floor. "It was all there was in the hiding-place at Umcolcus, Cap'n Ben." In all this affair, Kelly was consistently setting Ben Doak above the United States Government and its agents. "The man was honest with me."

"Honest!" jeered Frye. "Cleck Clauson honest!"

The subject of this comment was promptly offended. "Do you think there was any chance of my being anything else than honest with this combination of a human monkey-wrench and pile-driver? Look at his mitts! Most any poor slob knows when he's licked. He doesn't have to be 'specially bright. But let me tell you, Frye, neither you nor your nosers-out were bright enough to catch the trick at Umcolcus till this fellow made me lay down the cards!" Clauson snapped a derisive finger and turned his back on the inspector.

Kelly noted Captain Doak's interest and hastened to satisfy it. "They've been boring and plugging pulp logs for carriers, Cap'n Ben. They put a private mark on those logs when the stuff was stowed in 'em and then sent 'em along with the regular run through the six miles sluice in the night. Then it was only a case of picking up the plugged logs over in the deadwater this side of Umcolcus."

"Well, I'll be good and plenty damned!" snorted the inspector. "And six good men of mine up there watching the carry road!"

"Am I still arrested, Cap'n Ben?" asked Kelly wistfully with an apprehensive side glance at the Federal officer.

Doak rose and walked to the door of the camp escorting Kelly, an arm about the latter's shoulder. The ranger captain, searching his soul for some method of assuring Tim of absolute and honorable freedom, searched also the outdoors with his gaze. He beheld an eagle scaling above the heights of the Hagas cliffs. He drew Tim's attention to the emblem of liberty. "Yes, you're still arrested, just the same as Old Baldy up there is behind bars! You cursed fool, get out from under foot." He made a pretense of kicking Kelly off the premises.

Tim found this hostile demonstration much

more understandable and complimentary than handshakes and praises. He grinned and walked away up the trail.

Frye ran to the door and shouted after the woodsman, but Tim kept on his way, not turning his head.

"Look here, Captain Doak, there's a good bit of reward money coming to that man!"

"Doubt if he takes it," snapped the captain, filling his pipe. "Furthermore, he has been well paid."

"How in the blazes do you make that out? I haven't given him back that roll he brought in here!"

"And I'd advise you not to try to do it, Brother Frye! You'll be lucky if he doesn't make you eat it!"

"Then how do you figure he has been paid?"

"By being let loose by me yesterday to go out and collect a debt, manfashion, in his own way. I reckon it's going to be a long time before you understand the woods and the men of the woods and their ways and their natures, Mr. Frye!"

However, before he left the region to take his prisoners and the booty down-country, Inspector Frye made a really manly try at a further understanding of and with Tim Kelly.

The Federal officer trudged all the way to the Morse & McNulty clearing, and that was a distinct compliment to Kelly, considering Frye's avoirdupois and his hatred of hiking.

He found Kelly whittling a toy, kittens asleep in the sagging pockets of the old shooting jacket.

The inspector did not offer money; but he did ask Kelly to take a job on the new border patrol.

"Reckon not," said Tim, after meditation. "I'm a fair sort of a watchdog, but there ain't much hound in me. Meaning no offense to you, mister. What I want to say is, I don't like to be trailing men regular—it's only when I'm after 'em on a matter of personal business." He straightened back his shoulders. "Furthermore, I'm feeling different these days about getting back onto the old job—amongst men. I'm a river boss, you know. I guess I've been through something that has sort o' woke me up and done me good."

"I should think so," assented Frye heartily. "I can see where you're a good boss, all right. Mind if I go down and look at that board on the tree? I have heard about it."

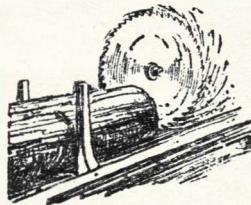
"It's there for all to look at, mister," said Kelly meekly.

Inspector Frye walked to the tree and did some careful inspecting.

Then he marched over to the dingle, secured an ax, returned to the tree and smashed Tim Kelly's placard of penance into fragments and splinters. The Federal man appeared to be having an especially good time doing the job and Tim did not venture to spoil a guest's evident pleasure.

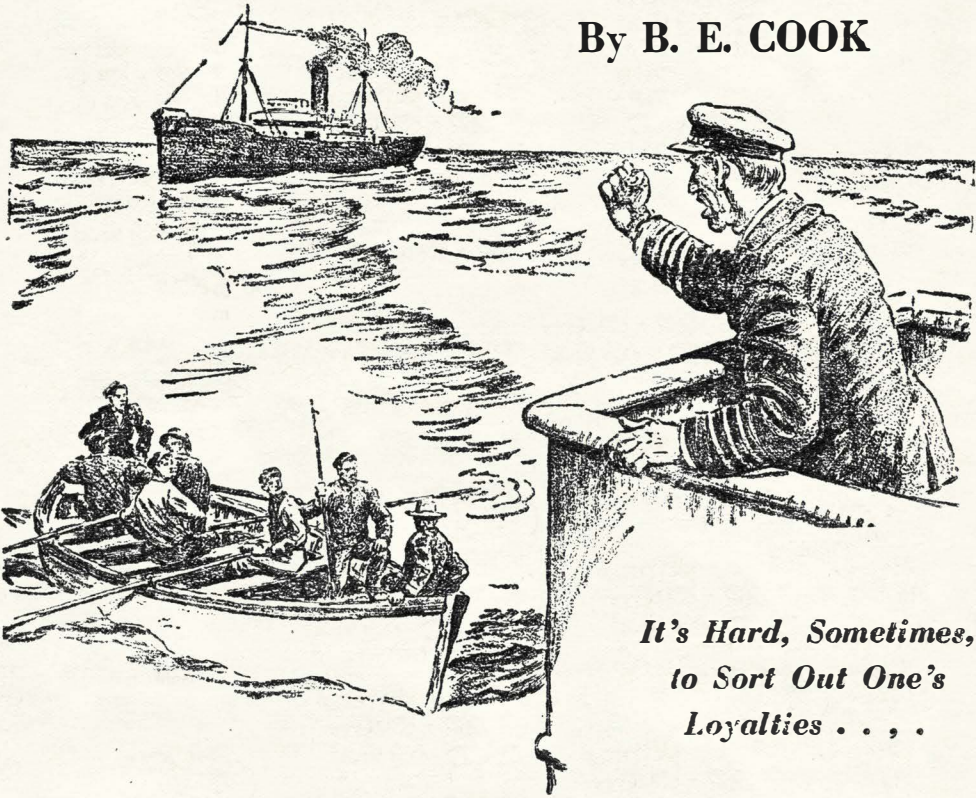
"You're going to get into the newspapers again in a few days, Mr. Kelly," stated the inspector, returning to the camp. "I'm going to put you in there right—and I know how to do the job. And I'm going to send a big bundle of those papers up to Captain Ben Doak to pass around. Any objections?"

"I'm naturally kind o' shy and modest about newspapers puffing me up," said Tim; "but in a case like this I ain't going to be no damn' fool about the thing."



SLOW BOATS TO LAGOS

By B. E. COOK



*It's Hard, Sometimes,
to Sort Out One's
Loyalties . . .*

TIMES were hard. One cargo entered a textile port and the Sunday sheets featured it as a phenomenon. Avery Alcott, the Seaborne Transport Co., laid his paper aside, cursing the Great Depression. How had anybody discovered freight in New Orleans anyway?

He re-wound his length, ran long tentacles through iron gray hair and pinched down the ski-jump nose; his *Sirocco* had been out of that port in cotton when she'd broken down—which further reminded him of chief engineer Moss. Mere recollection of the man forced his teeth through his cigar; the doughty old veteran of engine-rooms had not asked to be taken back at all, curse him.

Delivery on time had been a critical item

in that charter, not so long ago, and Moss had reinforced the weakened main shaft in the storm east of Henlopen and actually had made up the time lost. But, once in, he had demanded a new shaft, or else, and Alcott had refused it in a battle of salty words. "Aw blame yourself," Chief Moss had thundered from deep in his hoghead of a chest. "She needs a new one with bearin's to match. Needed it last time in drydock and you took the chance, not me."

The Alcott eyes had become living green neons between lids narrowed like half drawn venetian blinds. So Moss reviled him as much as he resented Moss, huh? But the stocky chunk of temper still was a genius with engines and boilers, and genius did not often reveal itself in one person for two departments. So "Long Avery" Alcott had

swallowed the curds of wrath, declaring curtly, "She'll have to weather it till next inspection and don't you give us another breakdown meantime. Make cussed sure of things before sailing; do I have to tell you your stuff?"

The short, rugged body had stiffened against that jibe. How he despised this Alcott! All Alcotts whoever. "Go to hell," he had spat back, clamping white tight fists round the spanner he had held.

The Alcott cigar had glowed unduly red, firing bright the green slitted eyes. He had spoken in labored patience. "Moss, a lifetime in this business hasn't taught you yet to see beyond your engine-rooms. I have to. I compete with the big shippers by shaving costs. Ever think of that? Run her as is."

Old Moss had lost his cud. He had dropped the spanner loudly. "That," said he, "just about wraps things up. I'm through." And that might have been the end of their feud; but Mr. Alcott had a son and Chief Moss had the youngest of three daughters around home. And the next chief of the *Sirocco* complained that her former chief hadn't left things permanent: "What I mean, it looks as if he had expected dry-dock."

Which forced Alcott's hand; he had to get Moss at least on a phone for an accounting.

Moss assumed he was being sounded out about returning to the Seaborne Transport fold. "Hire kids for chiefs," he had bellowed, "they're cheap. Yah. That one you got after me drove her into the teeth of a gale and you know it. You're no ignoramus, but he is."

Alcott's voice had changed to calm. Too calm. "I'm not asking you to come back," he had said. "You owe me a technical accounting for that shaft condition."

That did it. The connection died. Avery Alcott had hung up, almost grinning.

A CHANGE came over the Alcott interests. Son Webb, sometime out of school ship and professional teething, so to speak, must be either taken in by Avery or forever lost in a career elsewhere. Avery took him in and immediately he began to make his son over to his own pattern. In

his mind, Webb still was a boy, a novice on the bridge; and he was wrong.

In his way, Webb Alcott saw in his father a widower who never did become accustomed to widowerhood, a seaman ashore in business which also irritated him and kept him one jump ahead of defeat, a master mariner who never had learned to appreciate the power plant aboard ship as much as his boyhood aboard schooners. Therefore Webb weighed the situation maturely and chose to be patient, to take into account the times and his father's severe competitors, and to accept Avery's irritating attitude—for the time being at least.

Lately, however, he had begun to ask himself: how long? Then a small flurry of charters returned two Seaborne Transport vessels to sea and Webb decided to take advantage of the change. "I've recognized conditions and made no demands to harass you," he began, addressing his father. "I've accepted second fiddle chores, going relief skipper and mate when you granted officers trips ashore and so on. Now I must get going regularly, sir."

The gray eyes focused him down the long nose. "Come to the point," Avery ordered crisply, concealing his impatience at this attitude. Wasn't Webb in line to inherit the business? But in due time—which he, Avery, would name.

"I'm asking for command of the *Sirocco*. Her master, Elwin, is through."

Avery Alcott's lips pursed to match his scowl. Quick anger flushed his bold cheekbones. "Schoolships graduate them heady," he muttered. More loudly, "You a regular master! Fancy yourself suddenly ordered to Turkey for latakia or up some fiord for pulp. What do you know about such cargoes?"

Avery Alcott said more. Much more that was beittling. It awoke Webb beyond further doubt that his father still rated him a novice and only his cultivated habit of self-restraint prevented a scene. How much longer could he endure the situation?

May Moss forced the showdown—or was it that junior engineer off the *Buckiborn*? For several months Webb and May had done their courting outside the city itself. There were floor shows and theaters and

beautiful drives to enjoy together without haunting Tremont Street or the like where venomous old Moss or Avery Alcott would discover them together and use them as an excuse for another fight. The Lowells might speak with the Cabots, but not the Moss tribe with the Alcott clan. Now May broached the subject as to how much longer Webb expected to be a me-too for his father?

"He's a cap'n; his word is law. He came ashore and founded his own company and the struggle has filed his tyrannical disposition to a ragged edge. Ever since Mother died, I favor him. I'll not make matters worse. I tried for the *Sirocco* only the other day without results. In fact, she's tied up."

"Webb, I sometimes think you ghost him, serving his beck and call."

He felt her arm harden in her sleeve. "I don't get it," he declared.

"No, you don't realize how people think of what you're doing, Webb. Why, they're calling you his stooge. Are you?" She faced him squarely, hopefully.

Webb's eyes turned that Alcott green, fiery, narrow. He looked her up and down, thinking how much she had grown into his life. But respect must precede love, he well knew, and he said, "People—who?" An idea hit him hard—"Name him. Who've you been out with while I've been at sea?"

She had not wanted this, but his face was determined; no evasion would end it. Haltingly she said, "Well, we aren't—aren't exactly sworn to each other exclusively are we, Webb?"

It had taken courage, that, but he stood adamant. "Name that guy."

"Now don't get furious, please. Please, Webb." She caught her breath. "He was Dick Humbolt. To a concert on the Esplanade, that's all."

They were on thin ice indeed until he laid his hands on her shoulders and said, "How about a diamond, dear? Right away."

She did not slide into his arms. Out of a long, tense silence, she said with difficulty, "Webb, be yourself, not your father's handy-man. I mean, dear—"

They were very distressed individuals when they parted, that night.

Webb found his father at the icebox

munching ham. "Getting to be a reg'lar nighthawk," Avery remarked between bites, but Webb was in no mood to admit or deny anything. Which set the father to speculating no end. Within forty hours he wangled a charter for the *Sirocco* and sent Webb to command her; it would keep him at sea for some time anyway. There must be some girl. . . .

THE *Sirocco* cleared Santos in a cargo of coffee beans to be sprinkled among three ports. Tropic heat, trade wind dampness, a fog mull wound up in an onshore wind that fairly blew the ship in past Boston Light at long last.

Webb Alcott had arrived at certain conclusions during the long trip and now he scanned the wharves through binoculars with a purpose. Aye, the cursed *Buckthorn* was in. He hurried to shore, hurried to the Moss's where he found May at home. He walked in and there stood old Moss with battle in his eyes. It was quite an hour for all three. The testy old chief, out of a ship and calling it retirement, vented his enforced discomfort on the intruder and ordered him out pronto.

"Don't try to put me out before I tell you," Webb fired back at him. "I'm going to marry May."

"You—over my dead bones," Moss choked and thundered.

"Okay, rattle 'em; we're engaged"—impervious to May's wide stare. "Just to be conventional, Chief."

Eventually, the girl ended the war of words, but Webb took her along with him. "Webb," she demanded on the street, "where are you taking me?"

He indicated a quality restaurant. "We eat there later tonight." Minutes later she was practically shoved aboard a 29-foot, mahogany trimmed power boat. She rebelled, stamping a neat oxford. He started the motor and down she sat in the stern willy-nilly beside him. "So you go for engineers instead of the deck," he shouted on the wind. "You think they're the real seamen like your father, eh? This job's ours for one hour."

High spilings flew astern. The harbor glinted full of whitecaps ahead. May Moss

hung on for her life. I'll show you what a grease monkey can't do," he threatened and drove the boat into the sea at full speed.

They rounded an island, flirted with breakers close upon a lighthouse base. They flew into the weather to the lee of the *Buckthorn's* very side plates, swerved on beam ends under the combined stares of Humbolt and others who mattered less, shot into spray again and thus completed the trip. Webb had heard the *Buckthorn's* engineer cry out May's name; she had been too deeply engrossed in remaining aboard the sea-going bronco to hear anything.

That night the world still spun around May Moss's senses and her feelings were a mixture of vexation and admiration for the man across the table from her in the half-lighted restaurant. Why she had permitted herself to be put into the hands of an Alcott again, she couldn't quite explain, even to herself. Now that the meal was served, she said, "Webb, what got into you today? Are you often subject to such fits?"

"You're not going to waste your good looks and nice ways on an engineer," he declared as matter-of-factly as he could. "Also, said engineer now knows you're not on his list hereafter."

"But my father and yours. They'll hear about this and Avery Alcott will raise the roof off your head. I tell you we're in for trouble. Your father has a mean temper, Webb, and mine can be extremely—must I say ingeniously?—foxy."

"Say what you like, May, but no more of this Humbolt; and as for the old folks, we'll handle them as they come. Let's be going. Ready?"

THAT midnight, Avery Alcott shoved a newspaper into Webb's hand. "Read this item," he ordered grimly.

Webb scanned the story—a lurid one of his escapade aboard the launch—and discarded the paper, concealing his irritation in the face of his father's wrath; one rage was sufficient at a time.

His poker face loosened Avery's ready tongue to say, "So May Moss is the answer to your late nights. Was that show in the harbor her inspiration, may I ask?"

"You may not," came the quick rejoinder.

"Leave her out of this. A-and, sir, get over the notion I'm a child in your hands. Listen. We'll settle this all right here. I'm a licensed master and I want a regular command. No more of your chores, relieving skippers and mates as Avery Alcott's ghost, his me-too."

Avery forced a scornful laugh that stung. "Furthermore," it provoked Webb to announce, "I'm going to marry May Moss."

Through his white hot temper, Avery asked sarcastically, "That all?"

"No. Leave us out of your silly feud with Chief Moss."

"All through now?"

Webb's ears tingled in anticipation; his father was making the setting for a coup, as usual. He never took a challenge lying down. "All through, sir."

"You certainly are," came the blow. "Weeks ashore should cool your hot head. You need a pause, young man, to consider your duty to me and Seaborne Transport. Years I've been building it against the big companies and men like Buckley, the owner of that *Buckthorn* who let a reporter aboard her witness your fool stunt and publish it to our shame. Years! And I've had to work against that Chief Moss while using his talent, the double-crosser; and now you prate of marrying his youngest daughter into our midst."

"Oh, be sensible," Webb cried in disgust. "You let Moss sour you, and anyway I'm not marrying him."

Avery's wrath reached heaven. "Enough of your prattle," he cried thickly. "Go repent at leisure. Take a vacation."

Give the man his due; next day Webb admitted to himself alone that he had made quite a show of the Alcotts, quite a risible news item in the papers. None the less, he and not Avery would manage his affairs hereafter. And vacation be damned; either Avery gave him a ship or he'd wear the man ragged importuning him. If that failed and patience wore thin, Webb Alcott might look elsewhere.

TWO long weeks of doing nothing but receive refusals had accomplished things inside Webb Alcott. And that wasn't all; May Moss had told him tactfully to make

up his mind. He was a captain, wasn't he? And after that, old Moss had always answered the phone with a sharp, "She's out. Who is talking?" As if he didn't know!

This morning he walked in on his father for the eighth time and Avery read the concern in his face. He congratulated himself; the policy was working, wearing away the brashness. In due time, thought he, I'll give him the *Sirocco*! that mahogany log charter may come along anytime, now. But he said soberly, "My ships are at sea, thank God, except the *Sirocco* and she's tied up as you know. No mates' or masters' openings. How do you find vacationing? Why, I haven't had one in years."

Webb snapped on his hat. "Not really, sir!" he said evenly and went out.

Now the mahogany logs proposition wasn't exactly the sure prospect that Avery Alcott had presumed; not an offer of the charter to him as the lowest bidder on it. Other shippers, at least one other, had done some figuring and it happened that the latter's figure was lower than Avery Alcott's.

In this connection, someone was designated to meet Webb. As he stepped out of the elevator, a man waited for him. That man's instructions were: if we can appropriate Seaborne's Captain Webb Alcott for our ship to Africa, Seaborne won't have a master for their one available ship, the *Sirocco*.

"Oh, Captain Alcott," the man called. "In a hurry, sir?"

"What's in your mind?"

"Business. Let's have coffee."

Inside the hour, Captain Webb Alcott sat in Mr. Buckley's office receiving an offer of command of a vessel to get a cargo of mahogany logs before somebody should catch on and grab the entire charter. "If we get them here fast enough," said Buckley, "we can put in for several trips. A large furniture manufacturer has bought those valuable logs at a very low price—such are these times, you know, Captain—and he expects them to be delivered as cheaply. Oh, other bidders will horn in, but we want the lion's share. Now what do you say?"

Cap'n Webb's head swam. He would be walking out on his father; but he was ut-

terly fed up with leisure, childish treatment and truculence.

"Time is important, Captain, and it's on a mere three-mills profit. But it is positively the only charter in sight and we must decide quickly and get going."

"What ship?" Cap'n Webb asked, still thinking of the shock Avery would get.

"The *Buckthorn*."

Webb bit his tongue; that ship had a reputation for carrying too young engineers, and who was it that had told him that Humbolt had been advanced to first assistant? "I could take a chief engineer of my own choosing?" he asked.

"I can't lay off a good young man on pay, not in these times, Captain," Buckley objected gently.

"You haven't named the port."

"Lagos. It's got modern loading gear, good wharfage and experienced native stevedores."

Captain Webb Alcott stood up decisively and Buckley feared he'd lost him. "Wait. We shall compromise. Take along any chief engineer you choose as your guest. How does that strike you?"

Webb's eyes narrowed on him. "You're cagey, mister. I'm not setting to bring a Seaborne Transport Company engineer aboard your ship."

"Oh, well!" Buckley relaxed. "I wondered. It looked a bit like Avery Alcott's hand in the pie."

The captain's response was convincing indeed. "He shan't even know about this matter, mister. Forget him."

"Splendid. Come in after lunch with your decision, Captain."

OLD Moss didn't like to get caught riding the club rooms, those mornings, but Webb caught him and talked fast. Moss listened because he couldn't get in a word of protest. Finally he braced as though riding rough water and roared into the offer, "No use propositioning me, Webb Alcott. What the hell are you sailing for Buckley for, anyway? If you couldn't sell yourself to May, b'gawd, you sure can't to me."

Webb's ears burned. Couldn't sell himself to May when Moss answered all his attempts to phone her! "Why, you double-

crossing old reprobate," he exploded, "for two bits I'll knock your—"

"You heard me. She's seen you take Avery's gaff two weeks, now, without doing a thing."

"I'm doing it now," Webb countered. "Use your head for once. Come along and forget your feud with my father. Be yourself, Chief."

Moss knocked a chair over to thunder, "I wouldn't go shipmates with an Alcott if it was the only chance on earth. Fancy giving Avery that to gloat on!"

"Listen, Chief, I've heard May say you'd like to cross the Line once more."

Moss righted the chair. "So I would. Look, I'm awful busy, mister."

"Where's May? Home?" Webb awoke to this one chance when Moss wasn't within reach of the apartment phone.

Moss gave him a nasty chuckle. "I'm pleased to tell you she's gone for the day. Flower show in Worcester," he gloated.

"Alone?" Webb asked, just to keep him talking.

"Of course, a nice package like her went all alone," sarcastically.

Webb refused to satisfy him with further probing. He switched back to his purpose in coming, but Chief Moss remained adamant.

Webb came closer to say, "Anyway, Chief, please keep my plans with Buckley to yourself. Be a good guy this time, please." Moss gave it a twisty grin. "If I ever hear you spilled it to Seaborne Transport, mister, I'll knock your ears off."

He signed on at three that afternoon. He hurried home for his things and Avery Alcott opened the door with: "You damned young traitor!"

Webb was stunned. How had his father got the information so quickly? He refrained from asking, feeling that at last he

had the upper hand despite Avery's discovery. Avery scalded him verbally, threatened to disown him, grew livid at no comeback to match his fury and cursed him. Webb went upstairs and collected his clothes and sextant.

But Avery wasn't done. He blocked the way out and announced, "I shall go after those logs myself."

"Are you out of your mind?" Webb demanded. "You operate a fleet, sir."

"I shall race your *Blackthorn* junkpot. You're the insane fool in this. You can't match the *Sirocco* in that ill-found tub."

"Have it your way, sir," Webb retorted coldly and off he hurried to clear ship and sail before his father could even begin to make a race of it. He would leave Boston as soon as dark, slipping out unexpectedly.

But nine o'clock came and the crew had been standing by nearly an hour. "I say, mister," he demanded irritably, "who keeps us waiting so long?"

"The first assistant, Cap'n, and we can't replace him at this hour. Beats the devil how some men dally ashore. But he had all afternoon off—all day, in fact—so he didn't know about leaving tonight."

"That Humbolt!" the skipper muttered. Then he put two with two and knew what Moss had intended to make him ask; Humbolt was the man who had taken May to that Worcester flower show. And Webb's tongue was tied; the man was a member of his crew.

Pacing the bridge, he peered frequently up the pier. In vain. Once he was positive he heard feet coming on the planking, but the man on gangway reported, nobody yet, sir.

Humbolt arrived about ten o'clock, frankly surprised that she was sailing. Later, while taking a bearing off Highland Light, the skipper could chuckle to himself; his



father wouldn't dream of this move in the night. He'd get his papers from custom house in the morning. There still was not the slightest semblance of a race and he laughed at that ill-considered threat his father had made in just another of his high tempers. Come to think of it, the *Sirocco* was very unlikely to sail at all. Avery's secretary would be the only person left around.

THE Gulf Stream gave the *Buckthorn* a thorough going over. Too high out in her ballast and laboring with her screw not all under, she pitched and dove and rolled her bulwarks half full. But she did make headway fairly well because it was a sea on her quarter, following and shoving by turns. He was widening the miles long gap between him and his father in case that doughty individual should actually attempt to race him.

Early that afternoon he caught himself keening an ear to a noise. He traced it to a lifeboat chafing loose between davits and sent for the bosun. Presently bosc had two men working around it with him. The next the skipper knew, just as the ship fetched an exceptionally high heave off a sea, the cry of "Man overboard!" rang along the ship. Bosc hove a lifering. Men off watch aft hove two more toward the black head bobbling in the green and white swirls astern. Webb brought the ship around. Fortunately the lost sailor caught one of the rings and was picked up, little the worse for his carelessness.

But the *Buckthorn* had lost valuable time—and her skipper discovered a pair of black masts and a lively pennant of smoke rising over the rim astern. That, he suspected, was the *Sirocco*. Avery had meant it. Here he came! Right away he surprised the chief engineer with a call to the bridge. "Chief," said he seriously, "that is why I wanted to get away so quickly in Boston," pointing to a black hull astern coming much too fast for comfort. "He is racing us to Lagos for logs and he's a faster ship in ballast. What are we doing?"

The chief mentioned ninety r.p.m. without any enthusiasm whatever.

"Well, what can she do?" impatiently.

"Do, Cap'n? In this sea? I'd hate to

guess. I'm off one of the other vessels and I don't think she can take much of that punishment."

The skipper sent him below to get all he dared out of her but by no means to court trouble. "No breakdowns out here, mister."

That apparition far astern tormented the skipper the remainder of the day. It had come into view, yet it did not, for unaccountable reasons, appear to walk up on the *Buckthorn* and breeze past her. Mess call rang on a tin pan and he did not go below. Darkness thickened and he walked the bridge incessantly. (If I ever allow Father to race and beat me, my prospects as his successor to Seaborne Transport control will die promptly. He despises a loser.)

The ship had left the Gulf Stream's turmoil astern when he heard the relief mate inside taking over and headed that way. Outside the door, his eyes noted a dark spot in the lee wing of the bridge. It hadn't been there when he'd walked to cool his anxiety. It looked from here like a dark garment held against the inside of the forward dodger by the air currents there.



He made his way there and a voice said, "That feller astern went north; must be heading for Landsend." That voice sounded composed, but the dark blob took form. The voice registered in startled memory precisely as Webb discovered the build of the man and he cried, "Well, I be damned, Chief Moss! So you decided to cross the Line after all." He spoke hopefully but officially, too.

"I didn't come to cross anything I haven't crossed before," Moss rejoined in his more natural acidity. "I came to see Avery Alcott made a fool of and I shall."

"You're a stowaway, Chief, and I believe

I heard you come down the wharf. Now what makes you so sure about my father's making a fool of himself. I think he already did that by threatening to come."

Moss sighed heavily, elbows on the rail, and said out the side of his mouth, "You think!" He snorted disparagingly. "He's miles ahead of you in the *Sirocco*—and you watch for him astern."

"None of that talk, mister; I don't scare that easily."

His very tone of voice angered Moss to growl, "You don't, huh? Young man, I sent him ahead of you. On the phone after you spilled your business to me."

Webb grabbed his shoulders and wheeled him around face to. "You double-crosser," he thundered. "I told you to hold your trouble-making tongue."

"And I laughed in your conceited face," Moss retorted, enjoying the power to arouse Alcott tempers. He faced Webb, shaking free of his fists, and folded his arms confidently. "Webb Alcott, I taunted him about your move. He took it as a challenge—as I knew he would. 'I'll get those logs myself,' he shouted at me and I said, says I, 'Not before him you won't; he's sailing to-night.'"

"I didn't tell you that," Webb put in angrily.

"Nor had to. I phoned customs house and had this ship watched till I could get aboard."

A sharp idea struck into the skipper's mind: "Humbolt took May out for the day and you got him to allow you to get aboard before he'd come down. Answer me."

"What wisdom!" sarcastically.

"You've stated a reason for coming; now how do you expect us to beat Father and make, as you call it, a fool of him when you foxily send him to sea far ahead of us. Damn you, we probably couldn't even overhaul the *Sirocco* now. You've attempted to make a monkey of us instead and I could brain you for it."

"Now, now. Take your Alcott temper in hand. I showe your chief engineer how far he can drive this ship across the Gulf Stream and in this easier going or you'd have maybe been patching up leaky steam lines before tonight. Cool off."

Webb resented his presumptuous intervention in the operation of the ship. His immediate impulse was to lock old Moss up; but the crafty talker still hadn't answered his question and he repeated: "Again, mister. How do you expect us to outrun the *Sirocco* home? Come to the point or you'll pay for this."

It became Moss's turn to spill temper. "You greenhorn young squirt of a half-baked skipper," he bellowed into the wind, "that *Sirocco* hasn't been to the machine-shop since I patched her up for it at sea. She's had trouble again since then. Avery Alcott loads and drives vessels beyond their capacity and he doesn't keep them fit for even ord'nary running."

"Never mind venting your feud against him, come to the point."

MOSS peered up into his long face under dim starlight. "You look sane," he mused sarcastically again, "almost. The *Sirocco* travels better than this one in ballast, yes; but she'll never take the driving he'll subject her engine and shaft to when homeward bound and too deep in."

Captain Webb let that sink in. He knew Moss rarely allowed the truth to interfere with making a trumped-up impression. At length he said without fervor, "Moss, you lie. Nobody knows the ship will break down at sea under him and you're not even aboard of her."

Moss sighed again in pretended patience. "Who knows her boilers and engine better than anybody living? I do and you can't deny it."

"Flimsy talk, mister. You'd better invent a better story."

Moss smarted under that one. He threw discretion to the wind and shouted, "All right, I know what ails her driveshaft!"

Webb saw him lick his lips after that shout and the man squirmed as he usually did after he'd said more than he'd intended. "So you came all this way on the thin presumption that we'll pass the *Sirocco* lying adrift with a broken shaft."

"You bet," Moss snapped, "and how I'm going to give him the horse laugh!"

Webb had heard enough. "Mister, keep out of my engine room hereafter. That's

orders and that's final. Get off of this bridge."

CAPTAIN WEBB ALCOTT was perusing his information about the dangerous sand bars off the west coast of Africa when he had to admit that in at least some details old Moss had his father's number. Five hours west of the bars, along came the *Sirocco*, homeward bound and too far ahead of the *Buckthorn* to allow the most sanguine of enthusiasts the slightest hope of beating her to Boston.

But Moss had forecast a few matters, too, and again he was correct. Avery Alcott was driving her and he had her laden so deep that her plimsol marks showed only between the long, low ocean swells as she eased lazily upward on her near side.

Captain Webb overheard his mates vowing that it never had been a real race, that from here on home it would be merely a matter of delivering the cargo in good condition as comfortably soon as the *Buckthorn's* power plant permitted. A routine trip.

The skipper answered the *Sirocco's* jubilant and lusty three toots on her whistle with spurts of escaping water, sputtering steam and no spirit in either. The whistle, however, did not represent his own feelings. His father had long been a captain who loaded too deep and fretted about time. Today he was making his habitual errors in magnified degree. If he continued to drive that ship as he did now, with black smoke pouring off the lip of her funnel, she might break down at sea. She might.

He paced his bridge alone, weighing the possibilities, and he decided not to join in his mates' attitude. As long as both ships were at sea, this could be a race for port. He would push the *Buckthorn* as fast as her chief engineer judged it reasonable and advisable.

But another possibility rose before him. Suppose he saw himself passing his angry father homeward bound and observed that the latter had suffered a break in boilers or machinery, would he blow a saucy, exultant whistle at him and race on? After what that revengeful, tricky old Moss had disclosed regarding conditions in his former engine

room? Would he give the scamp that satisfaction? Indeed, would he want to put his father in such a hole? After all, they were Alcotts and Moss might have left things in that engine room in a condition to almost assure such a misfortune. He had said that he expected it, that he knew conditions there as no other man did.

It all looked suspicious to Webb today. It made him feel that he could no longer hold aloof from the Avery-Moss feud. He would make what time he could and sail the most careful course to follow the *Sirocco*. The original concept of a race had taken on brand new angles after seeing what Avery was doing.

LAGOS surprised him. At least three cargoes of the logs lay ready. He wound his way to dock with a native pilot and the loading began at once. The sultry heat was deadening to all hands—except Webb Alcott; he was impatient to get to sea. He hurried his mates, the mates hurried the stevedores, the stevedores worked the loading machinery with surprising speed. All this in any hot African port was something extraordinary, but it happened.

The *Buckthorn* stole out of the fetid swelter in a sickly haze. She was down to her summer line and no farther. Her engineers had gone over all her engine and auxiliaries with meticulous care under the skipper's orders and close watch. Even her boilers and steam lines had been tested as much as possible under the conditions. Now she was on the broad Atlantic, as fit as could possibly be expected.

And she was logging better than usual while fine weather held on. Old Moss who had kept out of sight most of the time since sighting the *Sirocco* now appeared on the decks, yamming with whoever would listen to his boastful, persistent forecast that "we'll pass that overladen tramp yet. You'll see. I happen to know we shall, the way she's being handled."

Webb heard the mates repeating it all and it only confirmed his suspicion: Moss had played a nasty trick on Avery Alcott, in the first place to drive him into drydocking the *Sirocco* and later to sting his pride into racing his son in a cross-ocean drive

which Moss had known the ship couldn't take.

The more Webb overheard of this talk, the more deeply a single purpose hardened in his soul. He would not see his father tricked and made fool of by Chief Moss for revenge.

The *Buckthorn* ran afoul of severe weather on latitude 32 west. It held on for twelve hours and the skipper ordered her slowed to 80 r.p.m.'s. As its end appeared in the evening, he left orders for resumption of speed whenever the rough sea rounded off, and turned in.

In bed, he regretted every lost mile, due to weather, but he had come through without trouble below and he wondered if his father had done as well. He found himself actually hoping so. For it was plain now that Moss had converted his, Webb's, contract with Mr. Buckley into a scheme for using the son to belittle the father. The full realization of this troubled the skipper's sleep.

Something woke him before daylight and he blamed it on this realization. Presently he was counting the engine-shaft revolutions with watch in hand. The count reached ninety-four. The watch below was overdriving the *Buckthorn* without his orders.

Getting up, he awoke to the fact that Humbolt was on watch and that man had no reason to exceed orders; rather, he was on his good behavior for coming aboard late, delaying departure. Captain Alcott waited only till the watch ended to send for him.

"Who ordered you to turn up ninety-four?" Webb noted the man's set lips, his fists deep in his dungarees. But he looked worried as a cat caught with the cream as well. He did not reply.

The captain peered into the dark eyes that bored into his stubbornly. "I want a report from you. And now," he said sternly. "For personal reasons you well know, I'd hate to log you."

Humbolt couldn't afford such a thing in his climb for a chief's rating; he would go up for the examination inside three months. His lips parted. His dry tongue snaked out onto them. "I can't talk, sir. I mean I just set the butterfly valve—"

"And somebody else told you precisely where to set it," Webb added.

This drew a sharp cut in breathing, a tell-tale flash in the eyes. "Very well," Webb said finally, "you've told me."

The tight mouth blew wide open. "Like hell I have," Humbolt blurted. "I haven't said a word."

"You don't have to. That's all, mister." The skipper watched him go and a thin smile widened his face. But it wasn't there when he sent for Moss.

Before Moss could cross the main deck toward the bridge in his lumbering gait, half of the crew was on deck talking, gesticulating, venting guffaws and pointing away over the starboard bow.

What caught Webb's ear was Moss's strident shouts. He went outside and the second mate explained it all. "We've picked up something away ahead to starb'd in the glasses and the lookout, sent aft for sandwiches, has spread the news. Here, sir, have a look," handing Webb the binoculars.

It certainly was the *Sirocco*. She lazed and rolled like a sick animal; her excessive deck load threatened to start its chains and go overside. Webb Alcott boxed the binoculars and identified old Moss down there with the crowd below him. The man was beside himself in sheer ecstasy crying repeatedly, "What did I tell you! We got him cold, he can't turn a revolution. This is where we leave him in mid-ocean and beat him to Boston. This'll learn 'im to let his repairs go."

THE skipper's Adam's apple took a few bounds but he held his fury for a better move. He ordered the mates all up and directed the First to heave the ship to, an eighth mile off the *Sirocco*. Then he went down on deck and before he could speak to Moss the latter turned on him, outraged. "What in hell are you doing, heaving to?" he demanded without the slightest decorum. He was beside himself.

The skipper waved him to the guest room aft. Moss eyed him, belligerent and uncertain for a few moments, but he went on ahead.

The captain sent for his second mate, a man with two hitches in the Marines behind

him. He ordered the Second to pick four men to row across the gap to the *Sirocco*. "Mr. Moss is changing ship," Webb informed him. "Perhaps without enthusiasm?" The former Marine reached instinctively to his belt and fondled its sharply edged buckle. "I always wear it," he responded sternly and they understood each other. "Lower the starb'd one and lead it aft almost to the break of the poop. Then stand by, mister."

On the bridge, the skipper spoke to the *Sirocco*, using a light hung overhead. He was saving his father radio expense and pride; the messages wouldn't have to be recorded for other eyes to gander. And the replies came quickly because his father, having taken the long chance unwisely in his intensity, had failed. He reported that what "that cussed Moss did to this main drive couldn't take it in the storm. Damn him, he left things that was to force me to dry-dock this ship and quit her as was."

All this was just as Webb had come to believe from Moss's talk and manner about winning. "Moss is a stowaway aboard me," Webb declared. "I shall send him over to right his wrong-doing, sir."

Avery Alcott burned the air at this revelation. Moss and Webb had connived. They had joined against him to put him into this mess. On went the tirade until Webb considered that he'd let Moss cool his heels in the guest room long enough. Then he ended the dot and dashing episode. He still would send the engineer over.

Down inside the after passage again, he gave a messman quiet orders, then got the bosun on standby with a short maul. Now he was ready—prepared to cure old Moss once and forever of his vindictiveness with the latter's own hands.

He entered the room. The square face scowled in fighting mood and stubborn. Webb noted that the deadlight had been closed and secured. Crossing to open it, he said evenly, "So you disobeyed orders and induced Humbolt to overspeed. Ninety-four a.p.m.'s."

"Close that damned port," Moss growled. "I'm quartered here, not you."

The skipper reflected on the maul; he hoped bosc was on hand with it. He said, "I

caught on then. You created this race out of nothing but your nasty influence on Avery Alcott. We in the *Bucketborn* were to be your pawns. Now, mister, you're going aboard the *Sirocco*. You're the only man—as you have boasted to me—who has spliced a shaft. That shaft. You left it in bad shape."

Moss wanted to hold his fire, but it escaped him. "I'm not a licensed member of either crew. I'll not go."

"Either you go or you'll not be a licensed engineer much longer. Moss, I shall bust you in a court or before the commission, somewhere. Get going."

MOSS well knew the Alcott determination when he saw it. Without the slightest warning he charged like a sprung trap. Webb was slammed backward beside the door, the breath knocked out of him. He barely managed to keep his feet. But he had to work himself clear of this madman whose long years with heavy machinery and tools had made of him a human bomb.

The captain upped one knee and braced his charge from the doorframe at his back. The very thought of a crew learning that he had been knocked cold drove him desperately and he did make breathing space. But only for the moment. And he needed time. He would have to resort to the plan involving the bosun.

He slid free of the next assault, bidding his time, husbanding strength, and got outside. The door slammed and the lock clicked in a burst of oaths. Moss had won that bout and he sounded sure of it. Webb located the messman down the passage, a covered bucket not too near him. He went on deck. "Bosc, hook the maul inside your belt." He beckoned to the messman. "If the deadlight to this spare room is shut, stave it in."

The messman set the bucket down and stood clear of its fumes escaping from around the improvised cover. Webb indicated it to the bosun who gave the thing a dubious stare. "Ammonia water," said the skipper. "Heave it inside from out on the guard. Take care, now; I'm going into the passage to receive him."

Glass crashed inboard. Awkwardly one-handed but quick as lightning, the bosun

hove the ammonia water so hard it flew clear across the room. He hurried back along the gang, crying.

Webb braced outside the door. It flew wide open and out came Moss like a college fullback, knees high and fists cocked. Webb swerved aside from the charge, this time, and hoisted a vicious uppercut that rocked the head backward. It came down promptly, eyes streaming and tongue cursing. Moss threw one to the stomach, but he took one to the jaw again and it knocked him back into the fumes pouring out from behind him. His head swam and he staggered downward. He had shot his bolt.

Men passed him over the rail and down where the ex-Marine viewed him very professionally. Moss would go directly to work in Avery Alcott's deadened engine room or the belt buckle would leave its marks.

Recovering his wind en route, old Moss's first thought was the threat to his license. Nothing did he cherish quite so dearly. And he wanted no other engineers given the opportunity to gossip about his being in court or before the commission, whichever it might be, accused of wilfully leaving a ship's shaft in debatable condition. True, thought he, it could be argued his way; he might even win; but he wanted none of the experience involved. His family had to be considered.

Webb saw him climb above the second

mate and head below; no, Moss wouldn't give Avery the satisfaction of reporting topside. For he was eating crow and it still tasted of ammonia and a swelling jaw. He had lost the final go.

The *Buckthorn* went on into the west.

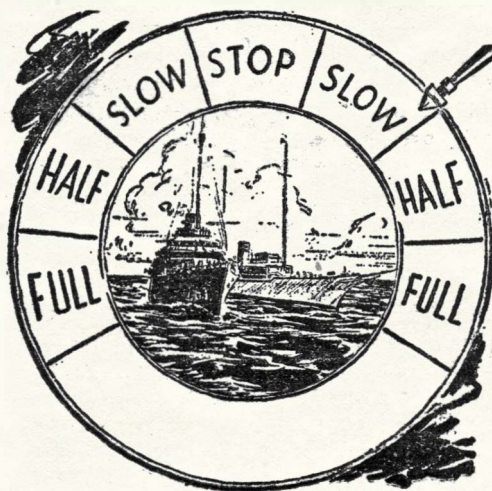
THE Moss apartment could be a cozy spot for its two inhabitants, dimly lighted with a diamond sparkling under a shaded lamp. The old Chief had not reported here as soon as he'd got the *Sirocco* into port, and May was worried about him. But her mind was taken off her father by the arrival of a tall creature, looking down his nose. "Oh," she cried gently, "you, Captain." The elder Avery's eyes had darted from the diamond's flashes to his son while he said as though aside, "He's going to machine-shop aboard the *Sirocco*. Then to Lagos," giving Webb a questioning glance.

Webb wanted his recognition of the situation, at least for May's sake, but he asked, "Who's taking her to Africa, sir?"

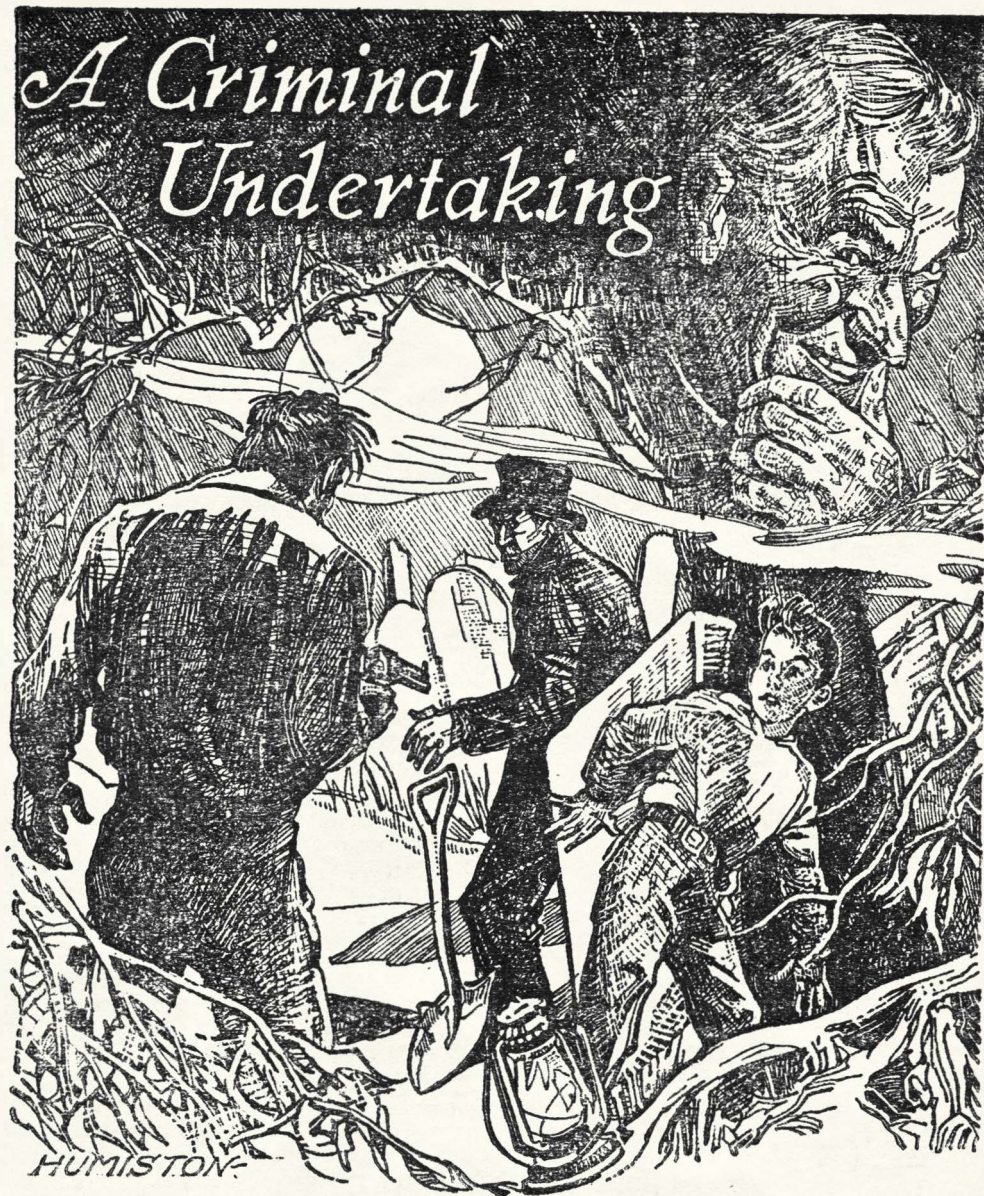
"Congratulations," said Avery, obviously ill at ease. "I got my wife in just the same way."

Webb squared away and declared, "I'm taking the *Sirocco* east, sir." He added, "It's that or else— We're getting married—"

Avery dropped his mask and pretended severity to shout, "Then get aboard and give the lady a wedding trip to Africa!"



A Criminal Undertaking



By JOHN B. COVEL

IT WAS the summer of the year, 1934 that my free school education at Totnes-on-the-Dart, had come to a close. Since I was in no wise an honor student, and my background, financially and socially, greatly inhibited the further progress of any academic learning,

the importance of this event went unheralded except in the unvoiced elation of my aunt and uncle. They felt that now, I was free to find employment or enter a trade, thus relieving them of a burden they had in patient duty borne since my father's death some years before.

The Man from Cheswick Was Intensely Proud of His Artistry, It Stirred Him to the Point of an Insane Obsession

I was glad, too—despite a vague sadness at severing myself from school and its contacts, I sensed a surge of manliness in dropping the fetters that bound me to the whim of an adult influence. I had come to manhood and was my own agent.

But I was not through with the interfering direction of grownups. The economic state of matters was bad, and I did not suddenly or miraculously exchange a present world, for one in which I had expected I must become the principal factor in developing my future along lines that had perversely dimmed and faded, all during the height of excited and swelled ambitions. Then, there was my total lack of experience in a man's world of work, where willing hands and backs were being rejected right and left in those depressed levels of time.

Aunt Milena became disagreeably articulate at my futile forays into the empty outdoors. She accused me of frittering away my time—that I was heedless to the matter of the business at hand. One night, she cornered me in the living room with the evening paper.

"We are not being systematic about the thing!" she declared in her flatly resolute tone. "We are neglecting an important aid to the whole program!"

She opened to the rear section of the paper and began to read from the advertisements. I had been doing the same right along, however, I had kept quiet about it because I had not dared interpret anyone of them as applying to me—or rather, as the case was, applying *for* me. There were so few of them anyhow, and they demanded such skills as I had never known to exist, that I began to feel a dread, cold inferiority that began to blind me to the occasional opportunity that befitted even the greatest lout seeking an honest shilling.

Milena must have read and rejected a dozen insertions when she stopped and beamed a smile that seemed to hold the solution of our dilemma.

"Mr. MacKellar want a young man to 'elp him!" she almost shouted triumphantly. "It always takes your old Aunt Milena to solve a problem!"

"Now, go get pen and paper!" she commanded. "We'll answer this before the posts close tonight and he'll be sure to get it in the morning."

With a show of alacrity, I hurried to her bidding and returned to her side with the necessary paraphernalia.

"May I read the advertisement, Aunt Milena?" I inquired meekly. She had the facility for appearing to reduce the small family to the most meager of intelligence whenever she fancied herself as having plucked a chestnut from the fire.

UNCLE HORACE rumbled his throat in the comfortable wingback of his lighted corner where he had been cleaning his acridly pungent pipe that had clogged in the middle of his after supper smoke.

"Is that the MacKellar in Cheswick?" Cheswick was a town some dozen miles removed, west of Totnes, along the main road to Plymouth. It is on this highway at some point closer to Totnes than Plymouth that the prison of Dartmoor is situated. That placed Cheswick within the shadow of the famous old gaol whose bulking silhouette rose above the misty moors and revealed its hazy outline to the traffic making haste in passing along this route. The little town, or village really, had no newspaper of its own and received coverage through our local news organ.

"I don't think Wilfred will like that," he stated in the calm reflection with which he was wont to weigh all of his wife's proposals.

"Is it necessary that 'e does, when work is so 'ard to find?" She turned to regard her husband acidly at this puncture of her inflated mood. "Besides—it's a chance for 'im to get a footing in a lucrative profession. It is a dignified occupation and will keep 'im above the laboring classes, which

is the only thing left. The pressing question is 'ardly one that involves any choice!'

UNCLE HORACE shrugged in resignation, his head shrouded in the blue-gray clouds of smoke that hung about him like a mountain peak ruffed with sheet-like layers of vapor on a still day.

I grasped the paper eagerly, looking for the name MacKellar and Cheswick. As I read, my heart plunged into icy black depths; my eyes hypnotically glued to the print as though each little letter were some tiny black bug and that surely they must all stir from an imposed immobility and scurry away off their contrasting pale background that spelled so clearly to me, a thing of earthy repugnance.

Raging inwardly at my aunt, at what I held her want only forsaken regard of me, I remonstrated in fear, my voice trembling. My anger habitually gave way to fear under all conditions because I had always secretly feared this aunt who had impressed upon me from the start, that having become a guiding deity, my every action must be governed in such manner that emotion should never overwhelm me to a point that reflected adversely on her influence. The gods and their goddesses could do no wrong, no matter the whimsy of celestial tedium that prompted them to switch the courses of the stars that they might reassure themselves of their own potency.

She was adamant. Time was slipping by, and here was opportunity. I would answer the ad!

With a silent fervent prayer that MacKellar would not consider my application for employment, I acquitted myself in modest style on a sheet of paper, passing along to Aunt Milena for appraisal.

"Hm-m-m-mp! The boy writes well!" she complimented, although I sensed this more a selfish appeasement of conscience that had come into jagged prominence after the ebbing, flash-flood waters upon whose tide the mood to help me in my problem had resided. At that date in my life, my penman's effort had me continuously at sea in black waters that had made classes both for me and my instructors, hours of hopelessly becalmed dereliction.

The following day was marked in no way by any untoward event in the household and passed quietly, all pretending to have forgotten the tentacles of communication we had stretched forth in the direction of Cheswick. I breathed easily again, wisely refraining from any oral reminder that Aunt Milena's flash of inspiration had failed to be of any account in the effort to make me self-supporting and to remove me from under foot as it was in her home.

Milena behaved in kindlier fashion toward me than was her usual custom. It is not to be construed that she was in any way cruel to me or that she had mean and petty ways. Like some people, born with only nine toes, Milena was cast into the statuesque figure of a woman with something missing. She had never been given the capacity for reeling the joys and anxieties of others. The stony hearted creature had just the spark of the feeling for warmth in that square flat bosom of hers and probably the bellows of her chest, in an involuntary quickening of action, had fanned the spark into tiny flames that flickered almost cheerfully in her eyes, somewhat like the little panes of mica in the door of a newly stoked cast iron stove, such as used to heat the austere and seldom used parlors of earlier American homes.

We were all in for a reversal of the hasty conjecture we had formed as to the fate of the letter on the second morning when the bell-pull jangled the announcement of a visitor at our door. Milena was on the second floor making beds and at the moment, I was doing nothing of greater consequence toward my future than stroking the white belly of the large gray house cat in the boredom of a pent up, cold and rainy day. Uncle Horace was at work in distant Plymouth, where he held the position of master brewer.

The tinkling bell broke upon the spell of my idleness, providing the hope of some interest or activity which would remove my thoughts from the nettle bordered ditch in which they had rankled for some time. Aunt Milena clumped down stairs, feeling it too, a refreshment to receive a visitor and have an excuse for the procrastination of a chore she particularly despised.

I reached the ornamentally frosted, glass paned door first and threw it wide to admit what through the curtained window had seemed to be the dark figure of a man.

"Er—hello! I'm Mr. MacKellar from Cheswick—is Wilfred Cotter at 'ome?"

Rudely, Aunt Milena brushed me aside.

"Why—'ow do you do, Mr. MacKellar! I'm glad to meet you! I'm Mrs. Bedell—and this is my nephew, Wilfred Cotter. Won't you please come in?"

I felt a cold stiff hand in my own hot, moist clasp. It was a wonder there was no fierce sizzling as of hot steel being tempered in a cold bath.

Mr. MacKellar was absolutely a stranger to me. I had not, as a matter of reflection, even known that any man had as yet gone by such a name. Yet, as this dour Scot poised assuredly in our living room, I experienced the inner conviction that he was all the things I had attributed to him and his alien name; so suggestive of the dark pits and fancied nether regions was the sound of "kellar" or cellar as the English pronounced the root stock of the appellation.

His figure was long and lean, possessing the characterization of poor nutrition, as Cruikshank has so ably portrayed in the satire of his times. His face had a pasty pallor that gave the flesh a thinly translucent quality, as though his blood neglected to circulate in this area. I thought as I beheld his countenance, and fidgeting nervously, that somewhere in his throat, there must have been burning a dull yellow light, for as he conversed in suppressed, low tones that sometimes rose in a forgetfulness brought on by the stimulation in meeting us the first time, his opaque skin turned from milk white to a parchment yellow as the electrical current of his lamp burned high and then low. Although a comparatively young man, he seemed to encourage the desire in one to behold him in the light of a greatly advanced age.

His eyes and hair were of jet, but lusterless. In his black suit, which was outgrown, he looked like some dead creature that had burrowed out of its grave and was bent on haunting the quick with those staring black beetle's eyes of his. His was a body that from every angle of preconceived judg-

ment, seemed so far, to conform to the "cut" of his profession.

Mr. MacKellar, then, bore out faithfully, my imagery of Cheswick's undertaker.

IN RETROSPECTION, it is amazing to appreciate the resiliency of both the mind and body in those shrinking years, and to look somewhat proudly at a record of stick-to-iveness that I had established in the face of three, spirit-pummeling, nightmarish months. Had the atmosphere at Bedell's been one degree warmer, it might have been all I needed to chuck up my apprenticeship with MacKellar on the very first day of my arrival at his home in Cheswick.

Both the business of life and death were conducted under the same roof and with a gravity which struck me, a robust youth of sixteen years, to be ruled in both spheres by the preponderant dead, dread weight that was housed in that half of the building where the departed reposed in the various stages awaiting their transport to eternal rest.

Beside MacKellar and myself, the only other occupants on the premises were his wife, a gaunt, dry looking blonde (who must have been hastily assembled by tying together a few bent whisks of straws) and a hungry, vile smelling great dane, that ever dogged my tracks with his softly padded stalking.

Mrs. MacKellar consistently fed us with puddings at all meals, except breakfast, of course, no matter what other tasteless fare was supplied from the menu. She was quite proud of them and would press them upon us in doses that were out of proportion to a balanced diet. Indeed—I had begun to understand the reason for Mrs. MacKellar's ghastly coloring. She made puddings in two tones of coloring; only one was sickly white, and the other was jaundiced. MacKellar always displayed the color of the pudding that he had put away and if he had mixed them within the same day, his face became mottled with smears from both puddings.

In all my time as his assistant, I never overcame an attitude of revulsion and even antipathy toward corpses. I desperately

wanted to flee from the scene of each new case as MacKellar started the course of embalming fluid throughout the arterial network and had to force myself almost in the state of nervous collapse, to witness the complete operations that disinfected and rendered the body presentable for its funeral.

MacKellar, on the other hand, was a completely changed person in the preparation chamber. Here, the yellow light that suffused his face, glowed its brightest in the excitement of performing the labor that he loved. It may sound strange, but it is a fact that MacKellar was extremely happy, or at least showed outward signs of being entirely enraptured, when he was restoring the semblance of life to the medium, or vehicle that it had fled. I could not help but feel that I was associated with some ghoul-like character that reveled in necromancy and wanted to desperately sever our connection, yet fearful of accomplishing it in a manner that might bring disgrace upon the Bedells, who had been instrumental in committing me to this servitude.

Both MacKellar and his wife regarded me in the light of a talisman that had brought with it good fortune to them in the greatly increased number that began to affect the profit of his practice. This must have been true, for I had suddenly become suspect in a terrifying sense, that the entire population of Cheswick and its environs had conspired, because of the abhorrence of my situation, to die in abnormally swelled numbers that harassed my every waking and slumbering hour.

Why a people should go to such length to mortify the sensitive spirit of one of their unfortunate fellows, I could not understand, but I had become sure that such was the very case until I had begun to hate even the living populace and read in their faces when they confronted me in the streets, the story that they too were dying and that soon, they would stare in the silent death that relentlessly tortured me within that grisly anti-room at MacKellar's Mortuary.

THE occasional evenings when we had some respite from our gruesome toil, which had no regular hours, Mrs. MacKel-

lar would have neighbors in. They were in main, the old folks of the community and seemed to be attracted by some peculiar fascination to this home that they all must have grimly recognized they would some day pay a final significant visit to. They made no bones about the fact. The conversation taken up at such soirees dealt in the very nature of the subject. Mr. MacKellar was ever tactful on this score and faithfully noted and remembered each detail that slipped their mouths, which might later impart to them a state of repose and that prompted a remark I had so often heard at funerals as to have to control an impulse to strike the one who uttered it.

"She looks wonderful—as though she were only asleep!"

MacKellar's yellow light blazed with unsurpassed intensity in the passing of this critique. He held himself in the giddy exaltation of a creator and an artist who had achieved another triumph of his dreams.

But alas—there was a bitter taste to his victories that I had learned after three months to have intuitively detected and to watch it gnaw at his soul until that some day soon, this defeat he repeatedly suffered must erupt in some fiendish manifestation.

Secretly, MacKellar raged internally with a turbid passion in having to relinquish to its yawning grave, each cadaver on which he had lavished his every tenderly artistic care. In a depravity of mind, he felt a keen frustration with the law that required that the dead be either cremated or interred. A painter's works were not seized from him and committed to the limbo of the lost forever. Why couldn't he just once, retain one of his very own masterpieces to gaze upon and feed the creative instinct that stirred his own peculiar talent to the flower of fruition?

Days went on, and MacKellar's face wore only its pasty coloring. The jaundice pudding had lost its power to impart its tint to his features. He became almost apathetic in his impotency. Two large jars containing hundreds of red and gray pills which had been prescribed for his nerves began to disappear like gumdrops at the local apothecary's.

Mr. MacKellar became the slave to a strange habit.

In the rear of his undertaking establishment was a big garage. Overhead, in what had once been servant's quarters, was now installed a showroom wherein he had displayed various types of caskets and coffins such as would befit the tastes and pocket-books of a wide range of clientele.

In one corner of this salle, before a backdrop of purple, velvet curtains, was a heavy oak coffin with handles of burnished copper. This was MacKellar's own final repository, the container he had reserved for his own remains upon his death.

During the daylight working hours, after lunch, he would unfailingly take a thirty minute nap in it, claiming that all his anxieties which had accumulated up until the moment, were completely drained from his spirit while in this sanctum's keeping. Of late, he had taken to spending all his time not actively disposed to the attention of necessary business, in his receptacles of macabre surrender. The coffin was lined in frilly plaits of cream colored satin that barely contrasted with the pale face but revealed boldly, the severe etching of the black brows and shock of hair on its pillow. It was so constructed that the lid opened in two sections.

Whether MacKellar was reliving his past triumphs over death in this juxtaposition, or whether in the complete relaxation which he found in the coffin's embrace, he sought to make himself vulnerable to some strategy of the supernatural that would enhance the possibility of his mad obsession to preserve a relic of his forte, I do not know for a fact, however, I strongly thought the lat-

ter. Surely, all things come to those who wait and hold out hope. MacKellar had not entirely despaired of a consummation and each extended period spent in the dormant subjugation of his coffin brought us closer to the time verging on happenstance, when a gratifying brief space of time, engendered the supreme orgasmic experience of his suppressed passion.

OF ALL England, the quarter that coaxes the deepest note of nostalgia from my heartstrings, is Devon. On a rough mammoth scale, certain parts of New England can be admitted to somewhat of a sympathetic similarity, however brashly robust its colors and grooming compare to that county's meticulously preened countryside, with its softer, almost gravely refined tones. Particularly appealing to me, are the narrow, winding roads like a network of capillaries, that reach out from the main arteries of traffic that course through the verdant, gently swelling downs, to climb of a sudden, the sheerer faces of deeply wooded hills and then dash themselves mysteriously to nothing as they spill upon Dartmoor, which in direct contrast, provides a sterile, forbidding aspect.

Cheswick is one of those junctions in which these delightfully pleasurable roads of travel are either clamped off from the moors, or shunted through the richer acreages bordering on the immense rock garden of heather.

By day, that is, these roads have always been to me, channels of moving inspiration. Since my travail at MacKellar's however, I had as the result of the nature of many a nocturnal expedition into the sur-



rounding wooded fastness, come to look upon each stolid roadside oak along the way, as a camouflaged demon lulled into momentary passiveness and regarding my business abroad, in the light of trespass upon its proper domain.

Of a night when MacKellar and I, with myself at the wheel of the black hearse he also used as a service car, would be chugging homeward behind its dim lamps, an oak branch would reach out and smite, in a vengeful tearing blow, at the paneling of the vehicle as though it sought to protest the transport of a cargo we had loaded at some grieving farmer's cottage, to MacKellar's home in Cheswick.

With secretly harbored thoughts akin to those I have just attempted to describe, we were one night, or to more closely approach the exact, summoned by the superintendent of the hospital in Totnes, to come away from our warm beds, on another errand of sorrow at two o'clock in the morning.

I trembled under my coverlet on the sound of the telephone ringing; its very alarm was a death knell. From his own bedside, directly across the hall, I heard MacKellar's solemn intonations.

"MacKellar's Mortuary!" Every syllable was caressed in a lingering music that intended to convey a most heartfelt lament. In a moment, came a tapping on my door.

"Wilfred! Get ready—we have a call!" He could now voice his true feeling unrestrained.

It so happened to be, the case of a stillbirth at the hospital, which was general in its scope and treated everything from dog-bite to maternity cases. I was relieved. Somehow, a stillbirth was powerless to ravel my nerves into the nodules of fear that the common course of deaths so easily fomented.

I dressed leisurely and went out to the garage to roll out the hearse.

THE trip to Totnes was uneventful; the vehicle performed cooperatively. Returning home, it was only a matter of minutes in which the embryo was made ready for burial and tucked into a small box bound in white muslin.

Ordinarily, on the rare occasion of this

type of call, MacKellar would not disturb me, but would handle the case entirely alone, as all it required, since it had not breathed the breath of life, was to be buried clandestinely in what would have been its family plot had it lived long enough to be christened.

Tonight, however, MacKellar seemed to relish the matter of my company. Perhaps it was the fullness of the moon and a nagging loneliness of the spirit that had pricked his slumber, for he was unusually talkative and as we motored at a slow pace toward the cemetery beyond the outskirts of Cheswick, he commented with a concerted effort at enthusiasm on the truly beautiful qualities of the night and our surroundings.

At the cemetery gate, we stopped at the caretaker's house. We had to wake him out of bed with a sharp short toot of the horn so that he would unlock the gate for us.

"Oh—it's you MacKellar! Wot is it tonight?"

MacKellar explained the simple nature of our business and received directions as to the location of the graves we sought, although he was familiar enough with the territory to have found it himself. It was mere formality that was being considered in this case plus the fact that the caretaker had to unlock a ponderous iron gate to admit us. As we were about to go on our way, he leaned into the cab of the machine and leering, imparted a warning.

"You wants to be careful, laddies! Black Tom has broke prison and it's said 'es about!" The crowing voice ended in a discordant cackle of laughter that raised the hackles along my spine.

Black Tom had been a notorious footpad with a record of murders that had never been proven against him in the courts. However he had cheated justice to its full measure, he was incarcerated for the rest of his natural life on numerous other counts and had made the boast that he would flee any coop the London authorities might designate as strong enough to hold him. He had made good his boast, and at the moment was a very much sought after personage. I could hear now, the baying of bloodhounds as they worked a scent—no doubt, Black Tom's evil, malignant spoor.

Mr. MacKellar became suddenly excited and animated. He took over the wheel and guided the hearse unerringly to the farthest edge of the cemetery, where, the lamps of the machine shining on a cluster of upright markers looming up against a background of thickets and gnarled oaks, we debarked and ascertained our position by reading a few of the weathered inscriptions.

"'ere we are!" The sound of a spade biting into sod, and MacKellar's panting were amplified a dozen times in the stillness of that consecrated ground. It was wondrously clear and bright, and the moon's light made long inky shadows of the tombstones and mausoleums.

Ordinarily, a gravedigger would have been dispatched to this section in advance of a burial, to lay open the face of the earth to which a body had been consigned. In this instance, we performed the entire task ourselves, with a shovel Grimes, the groundskeeper at the gate, had provided us.

MacKellar gave the tiny mound a resounding smack, denoting the end of the job, and handed the spade to me, that I might put it in the rear of the hearse. He stretched and yawned; perhaps he could sleep better after his exertion. I chafed, nervously anxious, wishing to be gone from the spot.

ONE of the long inky shadows on the sward moved. MacKellar calmly regarded it as it advanced toward us. My blood froze and I repressed a desire to scream, swallowing madly in a throat that threatened to tear itself to shreds in its constricting dryness.

"A bloomin' undertaker! Haw! Haw! Haw! And who's that Nancy Pants 'idin' out in the machine? Come down out o' there me bucko!"

My heart racing in sickly fear, I tumbled out of the cab, and picking myself up trembling off the ground, I straightened slowly to the height of a pistol barrel leveled at, and held close to my head.

"Why—you're just a brat!" The voice was a derisive bass carrying with it a quality of mirth, that under other cir-

cumstances might be adjudged of uncommonly pleasing timbre.

The apparition stayed out of the beams of our headlamps, but its proportions were discernible as being ably at the ready for a nasty business should we lose our heads and bolt.

"Me nime's Tom—glad to meetcha! One peep out o' you, or the lad, 'ere, and I'll blarst both your 'eads orf!"

"We wouldn't think of it at all—Mr. Tom, would we Wilfred?" MacKellar neither showed, or did he seem to feel, a particle of fear, and the ruffian sensed the fact immediately and curiously, coozied up to us with, however, our undeniable respect for the cards that he held in an unwavering hand.

"N-n-n-o, Sir!" I stammered, my voice breaking though its paralysis.

The noise of the hound pack came to us, producing a varied reaction in three faces. I took heart at the yelping, feeling a security at the approach of the law. MacKellar's face became a white of intensity of incandescent metal, as the muscles of his face wrestled with what appeared to be their first struggle with the expression of fear.

It was a strange manifestation, as I tried to interpret it there. Somehow, I did not feel that he feared for his body—it was Black Tom's body he was thinking about!

Black Tom's face clouded. In the bright light of the moon, lines of worry etched themselves about his eyes and forehead as those canine notes impressed him with the need to think and act quickly.

"Git in the machine—both of you! You're takin' me out o' this spot right now!"

We climbed into the cab—MacKellar taking the driver's seat. I was thankful of this foresight. I must surely have wrecked the auto and leveled all the headstones about, had I been commanded to pilot the vehicle.

Black Tom crept up to us through the rear doors of the hearse and held his pistol at cock, against MacKellar's stringy neck.

"You'll not make a sign to a soul! Ya hears?" MacKellar shook his vulturine head, and his face, which was turned away from the prototype of his infamous namesake, in the direction of Cheswick, was creased in a

benign smile of happiness, such as I had never seen him display. He was indeed, an extraordinarily brave man I thought, and for the first time in our association, I found him not so repelling after all.

AT THE gate, Grimes came out to us again, a lantern needlessly hanging on one arm. He took the spade MacKellar handed him through the window.

"Didn't fall foul o' Black Tom, I see!" he chuckled giddily.

"No," answered MacKellar truthfully, "he didn't touch us!"

As the black iron grille clanged shut on us, there issued a roar of approval from the blackness in the rear of the rattling hearse.

Dawn had begun to break on our return to Cheswick with our unwelcome passenger. I say "unwelcome" in so far as I was concerned. MacKellar, on the other hand seemed to have taken a tremendous fancy to his unusual guest, and Black Tom, no doubt struck at the unique circumstances under which he had escaped the searching party, clung to the wholly disarming guise of his surroundings above the garage, and foresaw it a further advantage to his position in respect to his plans for the immediate future.

He was ravenous and commanded MacKellar to fetch him victuals, keeping me as hostage until MacKellar returned to the showroom with some scraps of ham and—a large dish of the jaundiced pudding. As he noisily ate, MacKellar admiringly remarked, "What a perfectly splendid specimen of a man you are! It's a shame you have fallen into such bad ways!"

Black Tom demurred, suspicious for a moment in accepting a favorable regard of himself by any member of a society which he normally held in contempt. In a way, he must have reckoned MacKellar, because of the oddity of his profession, to be a member of some strange and nefarious venture and that they were met on a common ground. To be sure, death was not uncommon in either man's metier.

"Haw! Haw! I does 'em in and 'e covers 'em up! Haw! Haw!" MacKellar's face blanched at this raucous reminder of the poignant frustration he bore.

"You can't stay 'ere long—we must get you out o' 'ere somehow—today!"

"Tyke it easy, mate! Wot d'you think's going on in this noggin o' mine? You thinks I'd be wantin' to spend the rest o' me days in this carnal house o' yourn?"

MacKellar's face blazed its darkest, excited tint—he had been seized with a great idea.

"Where would you like to 'ave us take you, Mr. Tom?" Black Tom thought, fuming sullenly.

"I got it!" he exclaimed finally. "Torquay-by-the-Sea! No one will think o' that place, and I 'ave a friend ther'll 'ide me out till this thing quiets a bit!"

"Good!" said MacKellar. "It's not too great a trip from 'ere and I can find business in town with an undertaker with whom I was once associated."

They had both become fired with the grisly humor of a plan MacKellar suggested to aid in spiriting Black Tom away from Cheswick to his friend's in Torquay.

I SHUDDERED in horror at it and suddenly felt like crying out to Black Tom to refuse to see it through. It was in nothing that MacKellar had actually said in any statement to the criminal that I experienced any dread suspicion of evil doing. It was rather in the unbecoming manifestation of excellent humor that had come over MacKellar and in which he spoke to Black Tom, in accents almost wheedling, to accept his idea and offer to be of serious assistance.

Intuitively, I was not altogether uncertain something was not according to Hoyle in the scheme afoot. Physically, I was positive that a live body could not withstand the trip to Torquay in MacKellar's coffin and arrive in the same state.

MacKellar, in having it manufactured, insisted that it be absolutely air-tight and exclude any agent, with the help of secret locks, that might deteriorate or despoil his remains.

"'ow about the lad? Suppose 'e peaches?"

"I doubt Wilfred could be that fool-hardy!" He turned to me and pleaded earnestly, "Say nothing of this to anyone—not even Mrs. MacKellar! If you are careless, my death by Mr. Tom's pistol will be for-

ever on your conscience!" Mr. MacKellar and Black Tom appeared both satisfied this warning had struck home.

As sure as I was that MacKellar was the one person in the world that did not fear death—nay, even looked forward to it, I suspected he knew I was his antithesis and would do all in my power to combat it in any of its forms. Once, he had given me a psychological work that treated the subject of fear in cold contempt. Had someone given me a treatise on the potentials of various explosives with which to hold down the lid of a smouldering powder keg, the advantage gained would have amounted to the same. The author had missed much in the fearless analysis of his subject! Had he but spent a night in my shoes!

I helped MacKellar wheel the coffin, on its movable four legged stand, to the small lift that rose up and down between the showroom and the floor of the garage on a system of ropes and weights that were manipulated manually, creaking like the shroud lines of a sailing ship. We slid our burden over the roller, on to the red carpeting of the hearse's flooring. The uppermost lid of the coffin was raised a few inches by Black Tom's one hand that did not clutch his pistol.

For all his bodily strength and armament, Black Tom could not realize his helpless position. I could have made him prisoner easily then, simply by sitting on the lid and shooting the bolts of the hidden locks. No man had the strength to lift even a small weight from this cramped disadvantage. As for his pistol—it would be powerless to penetrate the thick sturdy oak and the gases from the discharge would only deplete the store of oxygen more quickly. The noise of its fire, if not completely muffled, would be regarded as backfiring of the refractive motor.

I was intensely relieved when the black hearse, with its deep carvings about the large plate glass windows in its side panels drew out of the drive and headed away from Cheswick. I went into the house and told Mrs. MacKellar that her husband had found business to do in Torquay and would not be back until late in the evening. If he were needed in Cheswick, he could be reached

by telephoning his former associate in Torquay, and should we have a call, a friend of his in business at Totnes would pick up the body and deliver it to Cheswick in his absence.

Nothing of note happened during the day and I wandered the village streets trying to shake off a vague, yet oppressive feeling of an impending disaster. About three hours after Mrs. MacKellar and I had supped, the headlamps of the returning hearse flooded the drive and the tires crunched on the gravel of the court between the mortuary and the garage. MacKellar was backing the vehicle in.

"Go out an' 'elp 'im! Lorsh! He must be 'arf starved, being away all day!" I moved reluctantly to do as I was commanded. Outdoors, I came upon MacKellar closing and locking the garage doors. His face was overwrought and fretted for an instant into lines of deep annoyance on beholding me. Recovering himself, he threw an arm around my shoulder, and unburdened himself cryptically.

"'es free o' the law now, Wilfred—they'll never get 'im. We must keep 'is secret—both of us! If the authorities knew we 'elped 'im escape, it might go 'ard on us both. There's naught to be gained by telling now, and it's the fault o' the law that 'e escaped in the first place!"

Some few days went by, and drawn to the display room one day by a thought that haunted me continuously since MacKellar's trip to Torquay I found its doors jocked. The worst of my young mind's imaginative power made the most of this incident despite the fact that the newspapers had put forth Scotland Yard's opinion that Black Tom was back in London. Every criminal left his trademark at the scene of his crimes and it would not be long hardly!" He turned to me and pleaded earnestly again.

THE hue and cry finally subsided. People stopped dying of a sudden and MacKellar talked of letting me go. My mind became buoyant again and relinquished its foolish preoccupation with grotesque fancies. All had become right with the world again.

The evening on which I was expected back at the Bedell's in Totnes, a strange man came to MacKellar's.

"I'm Inspector Brooke of Scotland Yard!" he quietly announced. "I'd like to 'ave a word with you, Mr. MacKellar."

"Indeed! What might it be about may I ask?" inquired MacKellar foolishly.

"You might arsk and you might answer! It's about that prison break you 'ad around 'ere a week ago. I'm conducting an inquiry and naturally 'ave to arsk some questions of those close to the scene."

"We don't know anything about it 'ere at all!"

"The night Black Tom escaped, you were in that cemetery beyond Cheswick, were you not?"

"Er—yes! That's quite true! I had business there!"

"That's so—Grimes, the caretaker vouched for that. He said you and your lad entered the place in early morning, about an hour after Black Tom 'ad made 'is escape. I say that two o' you entered and that three o' you left that cemetery!"

"What do you mean, sir? How could that be?" MacKellar was trying hard to appear calm and devine what Brooke was trying to arrive at. I was unable to contain myself for the excitement of this sudden turn of events.

"The searching party's dogs trailed Black Tom to a freshly dug grave in the cemetery where the scent became lost."

"So—what possible connection could I 'ave with 'is escape? It would be as good a place as any for Black Tom to 'ide out in."

"Then you deny having seen him that night?"

"Of course Inspector—to think otherwise would brand me a liar that had withheld valuable information from the police."

"Aye!"

"What do you mean—aye?"

"In that earth thrown up from the freshly dug grave, we got a fine set of footprints—yours, the lad's and Black Tom's! A big man like that just doesn't disappear into thin air!

"Tell me, MacKellar, where is Black Tom?"

"I'll tell you everything, Mr. Brooke—" MacKellar seemed on the point of a difficult confession, "but 'e's threatened us with our lives if we informed on him!" MacKellar gave him the facts surrounding the encounter in the cemetery and the trip to Torquay.

"We traced that trip you made to Torquay after we had begun to suspect you knew something of Black Tom's disappearance off the face o' the earth. Mr. McKinnon of Torquay, says you embalmed a man's body on that trip—where is it? You 'aven't 'ad a funeral since before that case!"

Something snapped in MacKellar's mind.

"You can't 'ave 'im! 'es mine! 'es the best looking one I ever turned out!" He reached into a desk drawer and pulled out a bunch of keys and a revolver. It was Black Tom's property!

"Tyke it easy, MacKellar—it'll only go the harder on you!"

"Don't you dare to follow me! If you do—I'll shoot to kill!"

Inspector Brooke followed him in spite of the warning, after a minute's wait, to the garage in the rear. He pounded on the door for MacKellar to come out and give himself up.

Mrs. MacKellar did not seem to be too greatly upset or concerned. She was an odd bit of humanity after her own fashion and viewed everything in the apathy of a mentally deficient child.

Suddenly, there was the roar of an explosion. The windows shattered in the upper story of the garage and huge tongues of flame shot out of them. Heavy black smoke billowed out of the fire which converted the structure into an inferno.

MacKellar had put the huge storage drum of petrol on the lift, letting it drain on the wooden floor of the display room. A lighted match provided the final touch that set the scene for a holocaust.

We saw him one last time, silhouetted an instant in the fiery frame of a window with a clenched fist raised skyward. He sobbed in raging screams.

"They won't take you away!" Then he turned and vanished into the annealing heat and eternal fusion with his deathless art!

*It Was an Axiom of Old Man Denoier That There Were Two
Sorts of Men—the Givers and the Takers. And Truly No
Greater Test of a Man's Breed Can Be Found Than
the Grim Winter Struggle of the Great
Lakes Fishermen*



THE TAKERS

By HAROLD TITUS

QUIET DICK DENOIER was a man's man, and any kind of a man's man.

The ministers of Tawadin respected him because he was God fearing and severely just. The town banker esteemed him because he was as dependable as the compass of his tug, *Aurora*. The other fishermen looked to him as their leader because for forty years he had met the vagaries of Lake Michigan with prudence and courage, was at once conscious of man's inferiority to wind and water and a heavy-weather sailor whose name was significant from the straits to the head of the lake. Rascals feared him, weak men avoided him, any man would turn to look twice at him.

He was a large man, with his body in good proportion. His hair and short beard were iron gray and his blue eyes were as piercing as needles. He carried himself erect, mouth firmly set; in his working clothes, hip boots and visored cap or sou'wester, shirt open at the throat, he was picturesque; in his Sunday black he was every inch a Christian gentleman.

He was thrifty and so determined that

his manner might often be considered stubborn. He had little to say, ever. He asked nothing of any man except fair dealing, and had no use for a whiner or one who could not stand alone. It was not in memory that he had ever openly spoken praise or that he had done an unwarrantable thing. When angered, as he rarely was, his bitter sentences were more effective than the hottest cursing. He could have used anything that any of us had, property or credit; he could have been an elder in the church for life; he could have been president of the village indefinitely. He knew many a family secret, because when men reached the point where they must talk they knew that their joy or sorrow or shame would be safe with Quiet Dick, and the trustworthiness of the repository offset the lack of external warmth.

His wife was a loyal, demure woman, and it is likely had never been an influence in his life or thought. But his Jean—Ah, that is another matter! His daughter was an influence for sure, probably the only influence in Quiet Dick's life which stirred in him sentiment and any show of emotion. Fair-haired and slender, from her mother; blue-eyed and quiet from Dick himself. Her grace, her poise, came from the state of having an assured position as the daugh-

ter of the patriarch of the town. Her gentleness, her sweetness—those were from God Himself.

She was the only child, and all the interest and love which were otherwise buried in Dick's heart were lavished on her. Lavished is not the word, either, because that indicates ostentation, and there was no ostentation about Denoier. But those who knew him best realized that all life might hold for him was centered in his girl from her babyhood until she became a woman and was enough to stir the blood of any man, old or young.

There came the rub: She was bound to stir the regard in men to which she herself would respond. Denoier was no fool; he had no notion that he could keep the girl by him always; he did not even think that he could select the man who would take her from him. He used to say, though, that he had only one wish and this was that Jean marry a fisherman so that, not having a son, his daughter's husband could take the wheel of the *Aurora* when he was through and run the big rig. He used to say this half-humorously, but he wished for it; he was not a young man, he was growing a trifle weary, but he was proud of his accomplishments and he wanted his tradition to keep on under the guidance of someone almost his own. Still, it is not likely that he would have done much to influence the girl had the one who stood out among her worthy admirers been any but Tom Harris himself, son of Old Tom.

THE incident which made Quiet Dick the enemy of Old Tom marked the first time in memory that Denoier had been stirred by anything but contemptuous silence by another's misbehavior. There is on the Lakes an unwritten law that rigs fish their own water. No boundaries are prescribed, but if a rig is established in one port its owner is supposed to fish the water that men have fished from that port for years and not go wildcatting about, picking the best ground. If a man doesn't like the water reasonably near him he is expected to move out and establish himself elsewhere and not go trespassing on those grounds that are, by tradition, forbidden precincts.

The Tawadin fleet has a ground all its own. Of course, the rigs fish the water north and south of us, but when the run is bad elsewhere the Doughnut can be depended on to yield. On the chart you may find a spot which is marked seventy fathoms deep and from it the water shoals quickly up to thirty and twenty fathoms; that shallower area extends in a wide circle about the deep spot and then shelves off again. Trace it with a pencil and it gives the crude outlines of a doughnut; hence the name.

In a scant season the Tawadin fleet fell back on this spot and was nosing just ahead of losses. There was no more than enough to go around and matters were getting no better when Old Tom Harris came steaming up from the Straits, set his twine among the Tawadin gangs and began taking his share. It was his by legal right, of course, but by no other, and by fishing there he caused other rigs to run at a loss; anyhow, they did commence to lose and our men blamed Harris for it.

The natural resentment to this stirred Quiet Dick to his memorable outburst. The fleet was windbound, at anchor and most of the men ashore; the rebuke was not the profane excess in which another might have indulged. The strongest thing Denoier said was this, "I'd have more respect for one who plundered a net house at night." But coming from him it meant much. It delighted the other Tawadin men, it humiliated Harris and stung him to a remarkable retaliation, because the next spring he moved to Tawadin and grimly set about the task of making our men take him in, accept him as one of them.

Of course, there were those who believed that Tom was not honest in his intent, and that instead of joining a hostile group to prove his mettle, he was only hiding the lower motive of selecting better ground. But it is not likely that this suspicion was well-founded because, though bad luck clung to Harris from the start, he never whimpered and never lost his strong show of enmity for Quiet Dick which was, in itself, something in his favor. And after he had been a pariah among us for a dozen years men came to discover that Old Tom was not a wholly bad sort and that many a good ex-

cuse might be offered for his initial invasion.

Denoier was not one of those who unbent toward Harris. He ignored him and would never forgive. So long as he held that attitude, just that long must Old Tom be an outsider. Some might like him, some might see an injustice being done, but none had the temerity to cross Denoier and openly accept the man he had marked. Before the thing could happen which would give Old Tom standing, pneumonia took him, and his creditors took most of his property and his widow went to live with a married daughter. All that remained was a ramshackle net house, a little twine, the decrepit and mortgaged *Blue Boy* and Young Tom, who had grown from a stripling to manhood under his father's cloud. Young Tom took these other things and lived alone in the net house and set out to pay the debts which, with the run-down rig, he also had inherited.

He might have ditched the debts and let the men who had helped his father whistle, but that was not in him. He had tools—such as they were—and strength and youth. Of course, being a Harris, he also had the enmity of Quiet Dick and had the distinction of being an outsider, though he had spent over half his life among us. He felt this keenly in the beginning, especially in those first evenings when he sat alone in the net house between his bed and the cook stove which made the place a sort of home. He resented it and grew hot, and told himself that he would pull through, would make a place for himself in Tawadin and that Dick Denoier could go to the devil—that no Harris would ever ask a thing of him.

He believed that—but it was before he had beheld the charm of Jean Denoier. Of course, he had seen her. He had grown up with her, gone to school with her, but until one September afternoon he had been blind, he knew; had looked on her with sight strangely warped because never before had he realized her beauty or felt that sweet pain of desire sweep through his heart.

He saw her first—with the scales gone from his eyes, that is—in the doorway of the post office. She was turning away from

a girl friend, laughing, and all but collided with him on the threshold. He had, first, the sound of her laughter, more gentle and melodious than any music he had ever heard; next, he caught the sweet warmth of her breath in his face; then, from her surprise, the wonderful mobility of her features; and when, lastly, Jean saw him there, bludgeoned off his poise by these charms, she flushed hotly and he knew that she was the most lovely creature that had ever walked the earth!

"I almost ran you down, Young Tom!" she cried and laughed again, self-consciously, because his confusion confused her.

When she ran down the steps to the sidewalk and went on it seemed as though he had possessed and lost something that was very precious and not to be spoken of along with his want of freedom from debt or Quiet Dick's good will or a recognized place in the town.

True, it was an unreasonable thing for Young Tom Harris to fall in love, but whoever heard anything reasonable about love, anyhow? He did not will to love Jean Denoier! the phenomenon engulfed him as some great wave might have swamped his old *Blue Boy*. He did not want to bring on a direct clash with Dick Denoier, but he was as helpless as he would have been if caught in an ice pack. The thing just was, that was all, and he could do nothing but face it and try to be sane and cautious.

He took stock of the situation. Looking back he could see that, as a schoolboy, he was not discriminated against. He went around with other boys and girls of his own age, did the things they did; he had even been in the Denoier home many times after sleigh-rides or skating parties. That had been long ago, though; he had not gone through the Denoier gate since he commenced fishing with his father. Had occasion taken him there now, with a group, he believed that he would not have been barred. But alone, ah, that would be another matter!

Then there was Quiet Dick's plan that his daughter's husband should be a fisherman, would take his place—Tom laughed unhappily when he recalled that! He reflected on all the evidence he had that Denoier's

chief interest now was in Jean and that, among the men of the fleet, at least, he was an outcast. Also there were the debts, and his meager foundation for hope that he would ever make much headway without years of waiting. He couldn't bring a girl here to live; he had nothing but himself to offer. It was quite hopeless!

But all this reasoning only increased the ache in his breast, only drew him closer to the girl in spirit, while the timidity common to young lovers kept him away from her in the flesh. He did all the things that swains have done for ages. He followed Jean to church and gorged his eyes on her; he strolled past her home at night with his heart hammering; he picked up and carried with him a handkerchief which she dropped one day at the Tawadin soda fountain when he was in the drug store. He was self-conscious when he passed her most casually and he had a choking sensation when he tried to give her the most usual greeting.

He kept away from places where he would come face to face with Jean for weeks and then, against his will, his heart dragged him to a dance, a Tawadin dance, where everybody knew everyone, where the fun was natural and unsophisticated. He found himself in the boisterous intricacies of a circle two-step; Jean Denoier was laughing into his face, glad to have him hold out his arms for her—and then she was close against him and his head whirled faster by far than their bodies.

He was helpless longer to keep away! He walked home with her that night, scuffing through the tawny maple leaves on the board walk; her face was alabaster under the frosty moon; her hand on his arm was like hot metal. They were both silent but once he felt that hand tremble.

Perhaps she was sorry for him, perhaps she was only uneasy with him, but she said, "You haven't come to my house with the crowd for a long time, Young Tom."

He shook his head and could not look at her. "I'm Old Tom's son, and your father——"

This embarrassed her and she tried to be little the difficulty.

"No, you're wrong," he insisted, growing bolder. "It's not that I don't want to

come. I'd rather come to your house than any other place, but it would make it hard for you and do no good."

She said something that was another attempt to make him take the situation lightly, but he did not hear and broke in almost savagely, "But I'm going to come some time! I'm going to come to see you. I've got to come!"

"Do come," she said breathlessly, and for a long moment looked into his face as though seeing something of overwhelming importance; and when he turned and walked away she stood at the gate watching him, wondering, confused, aware of the mounting import of the thing she had seen.

Other gatherings brought them together; other autumn nights found them walking under the stark trees. He could not keep away, now. He was dumb when with her; they said only the commonplace things, and yet each knew that the other was thinking of mighty words to say. Young Tom told himself that he was using his head, that he was marking time, that he was being reasonable.

Being reasonable! The night came when reason and caution and discretion went to the fresh west wind! He had been downtown and was walking back to his net house alone. When he passed the Denoier house he slowed his step and looked in and saw her sitting beneath a light, head bowed over some task. She was so lovely, so tempting, so maddening!

He found himself inside the gate and up the steps and rapping on the door; she was before him.

"Oh, Young Tom!" Something like glad triumph in her tone. "Come in. I'm alone."

The door was closed; he stood looking gravely into her face, seeing her flush mount high, wondering what to say first because he could not say the thing which clamored for words without preface. He heard his own voice, strangely detached from his body or his will.

"You're glad I came! You meant it, when you asked me to, Jean? You want me here? You're glad?"

She said very slowly, "I'm so glad, Tom!"

"You know why I'm here? You've guessed?" He had her hand, then, and she

made no effort to draw it away. "I'm here because I can't stay away. I'm here because you're here, and I've got to be where you are because I——"

His arms were about her and his heart was leaping madly.

"I know that, Young Tom. I've known it so long. I've wondered when you'd come."

A QUIVER in her tone, which indicated fright or misgiving or great joy or all of these, and he had her close against him and his mouth was on hers and she had her arms about his neck and, in a moment, was whispering his name over and over and crying a little.

Ten minutes, twenty, an hour; they could not know. At the end of that interval Jean was sitting in a chair and Young Tom leaned against the table with the shine gone from his eyes as he looked soberly down at her.

"It'll be hard, at first," he said. "There's debts, but we can get along if we have luck. We're young and what's tough luck, anyhow, when we're young?"

She did not respond and her gaze fell away from his face. "What is it, Jean?"

"Nothing but—my father."

He moved his leg sharply. "Even if he don't like me, Jean, you wouldn't let him stand between us, now?"

She rose then and put her hands on his shoulders and looked squarely into his face.

"Of course not; not between us. But I know about you two, as the whole town knows; and I know him better than the town does. I'm all he's got and he's looked forward to stepping out and giving the man I married his place."

"But I don't want his place or any man's place but my own!"

"You know him no better than that, Tom? You think he'd let you make a place for yourself here if you crossed him? He's so hard—so hard!"

"But you wouldn't have us wait for his blessin'?"

"It would be so much easier."

"It may take long."

"And we're young!" She tried to smile.

"More reason why we shouldn't wait. It's these days and weeks and years we need,

now, while we're young. It might take a long time. If we lost a year, think what happiness we'd miss; if we lost ten years——"

"And think what it would mean if I did go with you, if I married you tomorrow, Young Tom! We'd be marked people, here in Tawadin. My father would dislike you more because you'd taken me away from him, because I'd followed my heart to you, We'd have his scorn and all the trouble he could bring on us," tears showing in her eyes. "Oh, I know, I know! I believe in you, but I know him, and I know how hard it would be. And if we didn't stay here, if we went somewhere else, it'd be like running away, wouldn't it? And neither of us could stand that, could we? We couldn't be happy, running away, could we?"

He saw, behind her earnestness, the things which she did not speak; fear of her father, respect for his power, and doubt that any man she had ever known could cross him with success. He saw those things with great clarity and they meant doubt of him, doubt that he could make her happy in the face of Quiet Dick's disfavor. Strangely, he did not resent this, it did not hurt him; it made him seethe with rage that a man could put such terror into such a heart!

"We won't run, ever," he assured her. "We'll try all the ways. We'll face him and do nothin' behind his back; we'll have it out with him and when everything else has failed—if it does—I'll take you and keep you and——"

"You'll do all that ,eh?"

Quiet Dick's voice, breaking in on them, was more startling than a gun shot. Still in one another's embrace, they turned and saw him, looking in the open doorway.

"You'll do that?" he repeated, and advanced until he stood close by them, nostrils dilated, lips in a hard line.

"Oh, Father!"—a wretched moan from Jean, but she only tightened her arms about her lover as Young Tom turned to face the elder.

The boy fought back the pride and rage that clogged his throat and spoke.

"I never thought I'd ask anything of you, Captain, but it seems I've come to it. I want your Jean and she wants me. I'm askin' you for her."

There followed a moment of breathless silence.

"After what I heard? After the threat you made her?"

"No threat! It wasn't a threat—and anyhow, I'm askin', now."

Denoier rubbed his palms on his hips as though they itched to be at Harris.

"I don't need to speak my answer," he growled. "A Harris, askin' me for favors! A Harris, comin' to me! You pauper, tryin' to take my Jean for wife! Let her go," he said sharply, and when Young Tom only put an arm around Jean's body he cried out again, "Let her go, you——" and his voice trailed away as though he had no epithet which would serve.

For a moment the boy defied him, watching the distress in Jean's face. Then, quite slowly, he took his arm from about her. He was white and his voice not steady, but that tremor was evidence of determination, not misgiving.

"I'll let her go for now," he said, "but the time'll come when I'll take her, and without the askin'. You—you, Dick Denoier, who'd put such fear into a girl—your own girl, too—that she's afraid to answer the call of her heart! It's shame on you—shame! I'll come again and I'll take her the next time. And it won't be long; it won't be long!"

This last was to Jean, and he turned to take her hand. An inarticulate exclamation from the father, another step forward and Tom's face flared at him.

"Stay there!" he cried, and in the warning was a ring that balked the other. "Stay there!"

And then he kissed her, most lightly, and though Quiet Dick shouted, "You fool!" he gave no heed to the words or the up-raised fist, but said quietly, "Good night. It won't be too long." Then he turned and went out the door.

THE story spread. How it started is both unknown and of no importance. Perhaps Jean, in an uncontrollable moment, sobbed fragments of it to some girl friend; possibly her agitated mother blurted the essentials to an alert neighbor. The significant fact is that the tale did run like fire through

Tawadin, inaccurate and exaggerated, and set the town by the ears. Young Tom had crossed Quiet Dick. He had boasted that he would take his Jean from him!

Of course, none spoke of it to either of the men. Denoier was more silent than ever, evidence of his wrath, and Young Tom was so busy, so intent that the most curious could not have found a moment when prying could profitably begin.

The lad could not see Jean again because her father kept a dog-like watch, and her misery held her close to her home. Anyhow, he had said all that he had to say; he had seen the trust and belief and hope come from behind the fear when he last kissed her. Words are cheap things among men like our fishers; deeds count, and now his job was to do something, to make a place for himself from which he could make good that threat or boast or promise—whatever men might take his assertion to be.

That was in November, with the season closed so trout may spawn, and Young Tom had excuse enough to be busy preparing for the winter's fishing, for the ice and the cold and the treachery of the lake which heaved outside, gray and hoary-crested and increasingly threatening.

Much should have been done about Tom's rig which was not done. His old tub of a boat was none too good, because the fish slime had rotted her planking beneath the lifter, and between him and the lake was only the faulty cypress and the thin sheet-iron which kept the edges of new ice from cutting her life out. There had been a note of his father's to meet, and he must have a small balance in the bank to start the winter's work; so no repairs were for the *Blue Boy*.

He told his men that, "She's none too good. It's a risk, fishing in her in the ice. If you quit me I'll not hold it against you."

But somehow old Jerry Hankin and Bert Goode, who were his helpers, did not consider the risk as cause for quitting him. They liked his courage; they knew that if they left he might have trouble finding another crew, and as for risks—they were reared on them.

It was this item of risks which gave the Tawadin fishermen their distinction and

made Dick Denoyer's name known from one end of the lake to the other. Fishing any part of the Great Lakes at any season is a man's job, and fishing the upper lakes in winter isn't done, except out of Tawadin. The first places to freeze are the harbors, and the tugs cannot get in and out. Besides, not many men are eager enough to fish to brave the vagaries of these fresh-water seas in the season of biting winds and thick, swirling snow and vagrant ice fields.

The reason our men can fish all winter is that Tawadin is a car ferry port. Four of them, great, square-sterned, ugly, wonderfully seaworthy craft, ply from Michigan to Wisconsin summer and winter, bearing freight trains locked to the tracks on their car decks. Summer squalls whooping across the four-score-mile bosom of the lake bother them no more than flies do a busy man; vast stretches of ice pack which drift the three hundred-odd-mile length of old Michigan from December until April are no worse, comparatively, than a stony field for a tractor plow.

To be sure, a ferry gets gripped in the pack occasionally and roars and bites for days before she is free. Now and then come blows which the masters wait out in safe harbor, but in the years that they have been in service only one ferry has been lost, and they go about their business with a regularity and calmness that would make a grand tale in itself.

The ferries, moving around in the harbor to dock, and, when loaded again, swinging about to enter the narrow channel between the piers, keep the ice inside broken up all winter, and this keeps our fishermen at liberty. That in itself would not be enough, a share of the time, because the ice pack hangs persistently along the east shore of the lake, but the ferries crush their way through the floes, making it possible for the small fishing craft to get beyond winter's barrier and into open water where nets may be set.

This sounds simple enough; it is seldom that eight hours pass without the arrival or departure of a ferry. When the pack has moved up or down the lake, the fishing fleet comes and goes as it chooses, but when the way is blocked, our men wait for a big ice



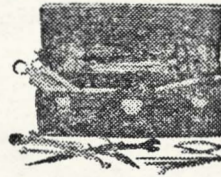
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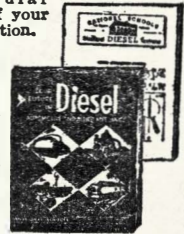


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crusher to go out. Then they follow close behind, the two steam tugs in the lead, the smaller gas boats threading the lane that their sturdier companions have made in the ferry's ice debris. Beyond the pack, they leave the ship and go their ways, lift their nets, set fresh twine and wait.

There is where the thrill comes! They wait for another ferry to bore a way through the ice and let them back into the safety of the harbor, but they have to wait! There is no other way when the ice is along the Tawadin shore. If a blizzard starts, if the seas run to tremendous heights, they must ride the hours out, trusting to the strength of their bottoms and their engines and the hearts of the men in them to survive until the monster looms through the weather and batters a lane in the pack that otherwise would sink them. Now and then, in a pinch, the fleet can make a lee thirty miles to the northward, but as often as not that safety is cut off by moving ice that has been ground up in its drifting and windrowed and packed and frozen again until it is fathoms thick in places, and which would crush small craft like cardboard boxes.

And it was for this sort of fishing that Young Tom Harris made ready his rotten old *Blue Boy*; it was against such odds that he planned to make the beginning that would enable him to defy Quiet Dick and still the tumult in his own heart.

ZERO weather came in December, setting the lake steaming like a stew pot, forming the early ice across protected shallows. Winds moved the ice and smashed and piled it and the cold welded it into growing cakes of drift until, by mid-January, great fields of it floated sluggishly before bitter gales. The car ferries came and went, hoary with ice made from their spray, bows carrying tons of it, rigging festooned with it.

For the first week the run was only mediocre, but a change came. Young Tom, gaff in hand, leaned out of his housing beside the lifter, said nothing that particular morning when his gang started in over the drum, but Jerry and Bert, oilskins over their thick woolens, swore excitedly as they worked their reddened hands at top speed

to clear. Therefore fathoms of net had come in empty between fish, but today it came up freighted with trout! Young Tom could see an endless shaft of silver coming from the green depths. Over the drum and around the lifter came a thumping, flopping green and white welt—fish!

"Four ton, she'll do!" cried Jerry, when the gang was half in.

"Four, hell!" scoffed Bert exultantly when the lifter stopped to loose another box of twine. "She'll better five!"

And the lift did even more than that, for the *Blue Boy* wallowed home with over six tons of fresh fish, and the market going up!

Fifteen hundred dollars' worth of fish for hungry cities, and when the returns came back Young Tom wiped out another note and reduced the mortgage on the rickety *Blue Boy*.

A big run was on. What a gusher is to an oil town, what a bonanza strike is to a mining camp, so the run was to Tawadin. Owners of rigs who had made scant wages for weeks and thought themselves lucky, reckoned their daily profits by the hundreds; if the run held a week they would mount into thousands. If it held a fortnight— They glowed with excitement as their stoves glowed to drive back the chill of increasingly severe weather. For three days a blizzard held the fleet in; nets were tangled by currents, many fish spoiled, some twine lost, but after two nights the new gangs came up again soggy with fish!

The possibilities of the circumstance might mean incredible prosperity for the fleet, but there was a more definite turn to be considered, something to stir the imaginations of men as thoroughly as the prospects of small fortunes: what it might mean to Young Tom Harris and Dick Denoier.

That situation focused Tawadin's attention after the fourth big lift. Tom was square with the bank; he was trying to get an option on his father's lost home, beneath the maples and behind the lilac hedge. His rig was suffering from the rigors of the fishing, but if this held he would be established, he would be a man among them, with a solid beginning and a future assured by the law of averages. He would no longer be the

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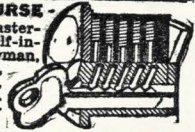
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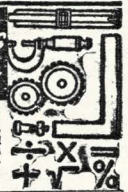
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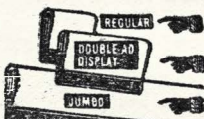
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fleet poor man, a pauper with his future mortgaged. He could afford a home and a wife and kids; and he had made his boast, or threat, or promise—however one chose to interpret it.

Men watched Denoier, and Tom listened to their women for news of the girl. These three knew that the eyes of the town were on them and the surveillance brought only deeper silence and another shade of grimness to Quiet Dick; it set Young Tom's face with determination and fired with hope the heart of the girl who watched from her window the come and go of the fleet. If the run held, if Young Tom came through the winter free from his handicap of poverty—then there'd be something to watch, for sure!

Harris did an unprecedented thing on the upper lakes; commenced sharing profits with his crew.

"She's rotten," he told old Jerry, gesturing toward the *Blue Boy*. "It's too big a risk to take for wages. If we lay up for repairs we'll miss the run. I don't feel right, takin' you out there just for wages."

Jerry and Bert told this, and people said that Young Tom was white clear through and Quiet Dick's eyes grew harder when men spoke with favor of Old Tom Harris' boy—who had braved his scorn to ask, and who had said that he would come again and take, without asking.

ROTTEN; rotten in her vitals was Tom's boat. None knew it better than the men in her, but they played for high stakes and did not consider danger. They were clawing at the fish almost frantically that last day, silent, intent, because the gang was again laden, and Young Tom leaned outside with eyes bright. This lift and another like it, and he would be free, and his father's house his own; a third and he would be able to ride through to summer without debt, able to start the spring fishing with better equipment, with a recognized place among men.

He was glad. Love and triumph and high hope warmed his heart and blinded him to other things: the falling barometer, the increasing cold; to the thickening in the south over the ice pack that stretched into the murk; to that other field which blocked

their way to the northward and the possible shelter there.

The wind came briskly across the water as he was resetting his first gang; a sharp little sea made and snow had blotted out the most distant of the fleet when the second gang started aboard. Old Jerry peered out and looked questioningly at Tom, and Bert eyed Jerry when the first heavy blast wailed about the housing. They had three boxes aboard when the *Tern*, a steam tug went past them, the master standing in the pilot-house doorway and watching the roll of the *Blue Boy*. Young Tom frowned.

"They've quit, Jerry. How about it?"

The old fisherman looked out again. The snow was thicker, the sting of the wind more biting. He shrugged. "She's your rig, Tommy."

His rig, yes. His men, too. His fish, coming in; his fish and his future. Ten minutes passed; fifteen. He stopped the lifter.

"We'll run for it," he said brusquely. They let go and headed into the bitter blast directly toward the pack for the point where they might pick up the ferry. The wind increased, but the sea quieted, for the ice to windward kept that down. Other boats were making for home, Tom saw, as the storm lifted briefly. Three were heading out, trying to skirt the pack. He didn't dare do that; the sea would be tremendous out there and his old *Blue Boy*— The pack was safer. Far behind him he could see Denoier's *Aurora* coming home, the last of the boats to quit.

The snow shut down again. The seas dropped quickly. They grazed a drifting cake; they were in the pack. No movement there, no roll, no pitch, now, but the motor was checked down and they groped along an open lane, Young Tom watching the way and the compass, Bert at the other pilot-house window, Jerry at the motor.

"She's tight," growled Tom as he rang for a stop, backed and felt the grip of ice on his boat's hull. He found another opening and thrust ahead, nosing cakes out of his way, very careful of that port bow with its weak planking. When the wind abated, as it did for an infrequent moment, they could hear the uneasy grind of the floes about them, could see restless cakes nibbling

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at their companions, now and then trying to mount and slide over another.

They stopped again while Bert, out on the bow, now, drove a boat-hook into a cake to open the way. Old Jerry leaned over the compass and watched the card move slowly, steadily. He twisted his head.

"More ice than I'd figured on," said Tom.

"She's swingin', too, Tommy. Prob'ly she's grounded yonder," nodding toward shore, miles to the eastward. "That'll pack her. We can't stand too much squeeze."

Casual enough, that observation, but it sent a thrill of misgiving through Young Tom. He felt cold when they started on again, making fair way through a lane. He opened a window and leaned out, looking in the direction where he had last seen the fleet. Nothing there. He was suddenly lonely and apprehensive.

Their way was tortuous; they twisted and turned and backed; often they were headed directly away from their objective for minutes. Bert Goode was outside continually, now, snow-coated, beating his hands when not using the boat-hook, so the blood would keep warm in them. The weather spoke in spiteful hissings and long wails. The ice kept up its crunching monotone. The *Blue Boy* talked back, in creaks.

Tom looked out again and said a damn beneath his breath. He wished it would lift. He wished Jerry had not said what he did about the squeeze; he wished he could shake off that feeling of being alone.

Then a snap, dull and punky. It came from beneath the lifter and Tom, ringing for a stop, dropped to his knees to look. Ice had punctured plate and planking and water trickled in.

"Quilt or sack—that old coat!" he said, trying to show no excitement, and Jerry flung the garment at him. He stuffed it tightly into the hole and the trickle stopped.

Goode was inside, face a trifle pale, now. "Want me to whistle?" he asked, and reached for the cord.

"No use," said Tom. "Not in this wind and the ice. We're all right."

He tried to make himself appear confident, but he did not like to look at either of his men. If it had not been for that weak

spot in the planking— Still, he had warned them. They were safe enough if they took their time and even at the worst they could go ashore if the pack grounded. But the wind was from due south, and when this swinging movement—caused by the dove-tailing of the floes into openings as the shore side of the field grounded—ceased, they would move off on a part of the pack straight down the lake!

They went ahead slowly until another sound, a rending snap, vibrated the hull. The *Blue Boy's* bow lifted a bit with it and went down as quickly, settling too low. Water gushed in; her whole rotten side had given way!

They went outside and overboard with the agility of Zouaves; tools and quilts from the bunks and gill boxes were flung on the ice. Old Jerry frantically wielded an axe to clear ice from the wound in the boat's side, while Tom and Bert smashed up boxes to make boards for battens. The dull bite of the axe gave to a ring as it glanced; Jerry swore and dropped the tool, holding up one foot gingerly. Blood dropped from the gash in his boot.

"Bind it up—there, below the knee!" That was Young Tom, instructing Bert in the first aid. He had no time for sympathy or help. He was on his side, holding a quilt over the hole in the *Blue Boy*, nailing boards over it, one leg in the water, which splashed over his head and chest as he hammered savagely.

He tossed the hammer aboard and turned to Jerry, sitting on the ice, holding up his foot and rocking a bit from the pain.

"Tough, Jerry! We'll lift you aboard."

The old man shook his head. "Better here," he muttered and nodded. The *Blue Boy* was careening and a cake was tilting upward against the bow, trying to creep to the rail. "Grounded somewhere, and she'll squeeze." He stared about in the thickness and Young Tom knew he was looking for help.

They started the motor and pumped; no use. They set a hand pump working, and still the water gained. Tom attacked the ice with an axe, but he could not relieve the pressure which at once squeezed the life from his boat and kept her from her grave.

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The *Blue Boy* snapped and shuddered again and canted far to starboard. The pressure relaxed. She rocked back and dipped her nose deep; when the ice gripped again it lifted her stern up until the propeller was only awash.

Tom and Goode stood back on the big floe which was just then boring beneath the boat and steadied Jerry between them as he stood on his one well foot.

"You'll freeze, Tommy," the old fellow said, looking at the ice on the other.

The boy did not hear that; he heard Bert Goode, though, for Bert said, "And not a boat in sight!"

That was it! If they only were not alone on that pack, drifting the Lord knew where, with a blizzard smothering them! The floes were tightly jammed now, for evidently the eastern edge of the field had grounded; but in time they would swing past that point of leverage and the cakes would loosen again and drift on to the northward, drift for days unless the wind changed. There was, then, no hope of escape across the ice; there was, then, little hope of escape at all without help.

It seemed in that moment of intense loneliness that all the strength drained from Young Tom. He could suffer and stand it where he was concerned alone. When he had moved back from his *Blue Boy* he knew that the thing for which he had worked and which seemed so close had slipped from his grasp; he was a pauper again and without tools for his bare hands, but that did not take his courage. He would keep on, given the chance; this failure could not break his heart. But the fact that shook him, that made him weak and sick, was that he had his men there with him; two lives which he had brought into this danger; two lives which, once lost, he could not give back! Two lives that—

And then Bert Goode's hoarse cry startled him.

"Look! Yonder. God, Tom, you see it, don't you?" He strained forward, gulping as he stared into the thinning snow, and that anxiety, loosed by hope, was the first manifestation of the panic all three had repressed.

Young Tom looked and saw, and his

heart leaped with relief. He tried to hold his voice steady as he said, "All right, Bert. You're right. It's Denoier."

From his pilot-house Quiet Dick saw two men, half-carrying a third between them, come toward him, staggering across the floes which had commenced to loosen. He sounded his whistle and slowed the *Aurora* as he altered her course and put the sturdy, steel-clad bows toward the three.

The snow lifted and he looked beyond to that crazy ruin of a boat, stern in the air, listed far to starboard, settling lower now that the squeeze was past. He rubbed his chin whiskers briskly, an unusual gesture. So the lake had played into his hands! Its ice had done what other handicaps could not do; had balked the kid! He was a bum again, a pauper, ashore. Out of debt? Yes, but a kid, with empty hands, and nobody in Tawadin would dare help him to start again! These were his swift reflections and, more, were the first admissions, even to himself, that he had feared Young Tom, that he had been apprehensive and doubtful and dismayed by the boy's showing.

His relief was great, and he rubbed his chin again and permitted himself a gloating smile as he reached for the engine-room signal bell again.

"Now he'll beg! On his knees!"

The *Aurora* stopped. The trio on the pack were cut off from closer approach for the moment by open water, but men dropped over the tug's rail to the ice, threw planks across the open place and carried old Jerry aboard, Young Tom helping. Bert Goode scrambled over the rail as though he feared some fate might snatch him back to the hopelessness of that pack unless he made haste. The tug's crew followed. Tom Harris stood on the ice alone, watching Jerry hobble toward the warmth of the fire hole.

"Well?" That was Denoier, questioning Young Tom.

"That's all."

They looked at one another then for the first time, the one easily, for he felt triumphant and his gray eyes were fired by an unkind joy; the other stared doggedly, a fine resolve mingling with the beaten look.

"Come on, then," said Denoier sharply, as though delay annoyed him.

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Young Tom did a strange thing. He shook his head and said, "I'll stay here, by my boat."

The crew was standing by, watching, listening, for they knew what this day's disaster meant to the two men. When Tom said that the *Aurora's* engineer croaked, "Your boat!" and Denoier's face reflected the same amazement.

"She's all I've got," he said in reply.

Then Dick spoke. "Don't be a bigger fool, kid. She's gone. If you try to stay here, with this pack movin' it's sure the end."

"The end?" Tom's laugh, with the question, was startling, so sharp and hard. "Perhaps, Dick Denoier. And perhaps I'll pull through. You picked up my men and that's only your duty, but for me—I've been through with askin' for a long time, now, and I'll not begin today. There's a chance I'll make it to shore somehow, and if I do I'll begin again. I'll keep after what I want until I get it and nobody can say that I asked a thing of any man—not even the chance of gettin' ground under my feet to make another start!"

He turned away abruptly and started off toward his *Blue Boy*, on an even keel now, but with water to her rail.

"Get him!" Denoier's order was sharp and unusually insistent for him, but even so his men hesitated. "Get him, you dummies! That boat won't stay afloat an hour."

They understood then, and they went to get him. He tried to spurn them and when they put hands on him he tried to fight them off in his frenzy of determined pride; tried to run, kept trying to resist until they lifted him over the tug's rail.

"He's been wet," Dick said. "Get him warm." He turned back to the pilothouse.

Three hours later the *Aurora* fell in behind the ferry with the rest of the fleet, all except the lost *Blue Boy*. Denoier gave the wheel to another and went rather slowly to look down into the fire hole. A white, drawn face turned upward and then was lowered, listlessly.

The older man said, "Come up," and crooked his finger.

Young Tom hesitated, sullen and reluctant; yet he was on another man's boat and he obeyed.

"Well, I'm here," after he had climbed the ladder.

"This way."

He followed to the pilot-house; the man who had the wheel went out; the door closed and they were alone. Denoier change his course minutely and with great pains. He carefully wiped the mist from the window glass. He compared his watch to the battered alarm clock. Then, leaning on the wheel and staring ahead, he spoke.

"Any man's apt to be wrong. I've never been, very much. I ain't liked you and I don't know as I like you yet in some ways, but I've noticed in the last forty-fifty years that there's just two kinds of men: the askers and the takers."

HE HAD spoken as though this were the preface only, but he stopped quite suddenly and with a certain finality. He moved his head to catch the first glimpse of the piers ahead.

"You're all right now?" he asked. "Warm and—you didn't get hurt?"

"I'm all right."

"Able to take her in?" He turned, withdrawing one hand from the wheel and looked at Young Tom.

"Take her in?" not understanding. "Why—what's—?"

Quiet Dick spit and grunted and looked out the window again.

"A long time ago I said that the man who took my girl for wife would—"

Something besides his voice broke. He bent forward for a moment, like a weak and beaten old man. Then he took Tom's hand in his and placed it on the smooth, worn wheel. He left his there, covering it just a moment, while he looked close into the boy's eyes and Tom thought afterward that the hard fingers squeezed his wrist and trembled a bit.

"Dick! I—"

"Don't," the old man said quietly and went outside and closed the door on the new master of the *Aurora*. He stood at the rail, squinting at the big ferry ahead and the string of small craft behind, making their safe harbor, bearing their welcome burdens.

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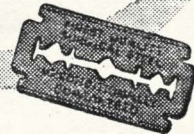
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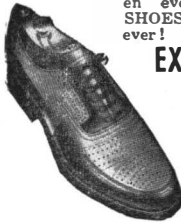


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