

STREET & SMITH'S

# Top Notch

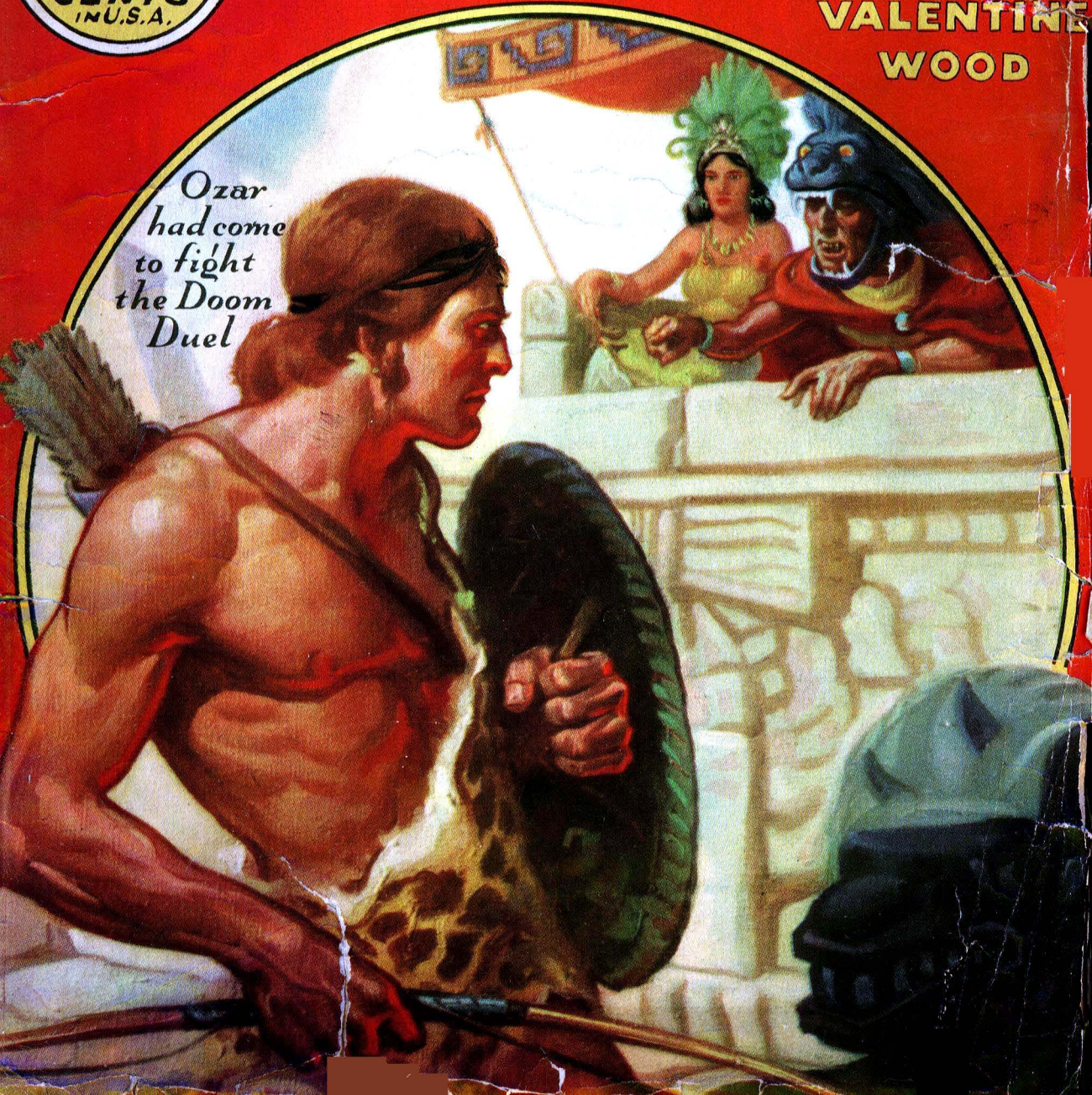
**10**  
CENTS  
IN U.S.A.

JAN. 1933

**OZAR *the* AZTEC**

BY  
**VALENTINE  
WOOD**

Ozar  
had come  
to fight  
the Doom  
Duel



On sale the third Friday of each month

STREET & SMITH'S

# Top-Notch

MONTHLY

YEARLY SUBSCRIPTION, \$1.00

SINGLE COPIES, 10 CENTS

The entire contents of this magazine are protected by copyright, and must not be reprinted without the publishers' permission.

Volume XCII

Number 1

## CONTENTS FOR JANUARY, 1933

Cover Picture—Scene from "Ozar The Aztec" . . . . . *Don Hewitt*

### Complete Novel

Ozar The Aztec . . . . . *Valentine Wood* . . . . . 1  
Adventure in a lost city.

### Novelette

The Stampede . . . . . *George C. Henderson* . . . . . 42  
Riding the Western trails.

### Short Stories

The Hawk Dopes It Out . . . . . *John Paul Seabrooke* . . . . . 32  
Duke Pierson tackles the Big Shot.  
The Last Man On Guard . . . . . *William M. Stuart* . . . . . 68  
Men enlist to fight.  
Sky-topping With Death . . . . . *Vance Richardson* . . . . . 78  
Foul play in the woods.

### Serial

Fandango Island (Part II) . . . . . *Fred MacIsaac* . . . . . 88  
Big thrills in the tropics.

### Short Short Stories

A Matter Of Importance . . . . . *Hal Field Leslie* . . . . . 119  
Christmas—in two homes.  
Coffin Nails . . . . . *Alan Grey Mayne* . . . . . 122  
Racketeers at bay.  
The Shill . . . . . *George J. Brenn* . . . . . 124  
Easy money won't stick.

### Poetry

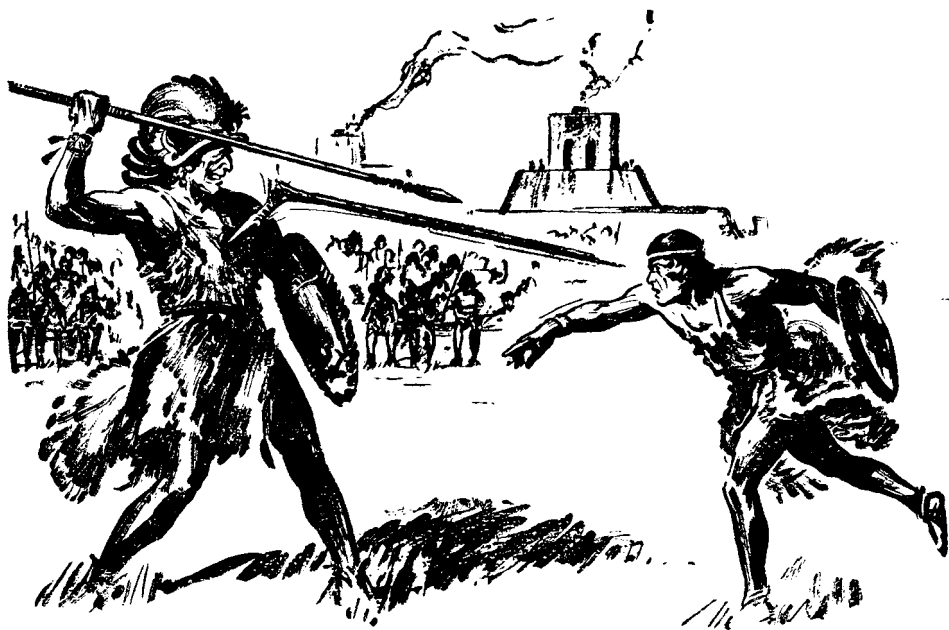
Bar Circle Christmas . . . . . *Edgar Daniel Kramer* . . . . . 41  
Up Anchor . . . . . *Cristel Hastings* . . . . . 67  
At The Top-Notch Mike . . . . . 126  
Station WTN on the air.

Monthly publication issued by Street & Smith Publications, Inc., 79-89 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y. Ormond G. Smith, President; George C. Smith, Vice President and Treasurer; George C. Smith, Jr., Vice President; Ormond V. Guild, Secretary. Copyright, 1932, by Street & Smith Publications, Inc., New York. Copyright, 1932, by Street & Smith Publications, Inc., Great Britain. Entered as Second-class Matter, January 8, 1915, at the Post Office at New York, N. Y., under Act of Congress of March 3, 1879. Subscriptions to Cuba, Dom. Republic, Haiti, Spain, Central and South American Countries except The Guianas and British Honduras, \$1.70 per year. To all other Foreign Countries, including The Guianas and British Honduras, \$1.25 per year.

We do not accept responsibility for the return of unsolicited manuscripts.

To facilitate handling, the author should inclose a self-addressed envelope with the requisite postage attached.

STREET & SMITH PUBLICATIONS, INC., 79 7th AVE., NEW YORK, N. Y.



**Larry Starling found himself pitted against age-old savagery and primitive strength when he became**

# Ozar The Aztec

By Valentine Wood

Author of the "Kroom" stories, etc.

## CHAPTER I.

### THE CAPTURE.

**A** HIGH-PITCHED scream of terror rang out in the narrow canyon, and startled echoes of the cry rocketed upward to resound in the ears of the red-robed Aztec priest who squatted on the brushy rim rock.

Tarx, high priest of the Aztecs, peered at the death battle which was going on in the rocky depths below,

and chuckled to himself. It was a soul-chilling laugh, that sound which grated harshly from Tarx's scrawny throat. A guttural noise, like the throaty rasp of a wild animal as it wolfs down the meat of its freshly slain kill.

"People with white skins! A babe with cheeks like the lily! At last the fury of the rain god shall be appeased!" the Aztec murmured to himself, pulling the rich mantle of humming-bird skins about his shoulders with long, bony fingers. "*Huva!* The great King Monte-

zirka shall rejoice when he sees the sacrifices Tarx and his warriors have captured!"

With skinny knees balanced on the brink of the chasm, hands clutching at the tangled jungle of the thorny brush for support, the high priest of the sun god peered deeper into the abyss, where the scalding rays of the Mexican sun were shut off by the sheer walls of volcanic rock.

**A** PARTY of white people were making a last desperate stand for their lives, down there in the pit of the nameless gorge.

Ten minutes before, they had been plodding beside their little train of pack burros. Now, they were waging a hopeless fight against triple odds.

It was a sight to freeze the veins of the cruelest man ever created, the slaughter which was occurring under Tarx's gaze. But to the evil high priest, the groans of the dying were music. The savage heart pumped faster beneath his jade-incrusted chest ornaments—badges which marked him as chief magician and holy man of Karnux, that unknown Aztec city which lies in the extinct crater of a cone in the Navajada Range.

There had been five men in the white party, when the Aztec scouts had first discovered them from atop a rocky pinnacle which formed one shoulder of the canyon—five men and one woman; they recognized the sixth adult as a woman, for she held a babe in her arms.

It was the infant that Tarx wanted to capture alive, above all else. For were not children the especial sacrifice to Yaxob the Rain God?

From his hiding place on the rocky parapet overlooking the twisted canyon, Tarx had seen the whole horrible drama unfold. He had watched his band of warriors as they slunk into the canyon, an hour in advance of the plodding white party. He had watched them

melt into the brushy tangle, seeing the last sparks of dying sunlight shed off obsidian spearheads as the shadows of the mountain ridges fell across the canyon.

The whites had marched on into their trap, unaware of the coppery-skinned Aztecs who lay like waiting cougars in the thick bramble which choked the pit of the canyon. And then Tarx, squatting in the security of his lofty lookout, had lifted a yellow-stained whistle to his lips.

One piercing blast. That high-pitched, fearful wail from the white-skinned baby, pressed close to the heart of the woman who rode the plodding animal in the center of the little procession. And then the angry *suzzzz* of a score of arrows, as the Aztecs launched their unexpected attack.

**T**WO of the white men had toppled from their mounts. The other three, momentarily paralyzed by the suddenness of the assault, had jerked rifles from saddle boots and backed swiftly into a maze of heavy boulders, their bodies making a wedge which protected the wide-eyed young mother and her little one.

The Aztec priest had seen one bearded individual in a pith helmet drop writhing to the rocks, as the other men split the air with the crashes of their firearms. The Indian warriors cringed back in terror before this unexpected sound, comparable in their primitive ears only to the thunder of the rain god.

Tarx saw the woman take advantage of the moment's lull in the attack, to tenderly extract a quivering arrow from the shoulder of the fallen man.

They were the first whites Tarx had ever seen. In fact, they were the only one of this strange, ivory-skinned race who had ever ventured even remotely near the rocky backbone of the unmapped Navajada Mountains.

And now, as Tarx watched his warriors regain their courage and creep ever closer to the boulders which hid their prey, the high priest was thankful that his victims were clothed in skins like the lily petal. They would be more pleasing to the outraged feelings of Yaxob the Rain God, in whose name Tarx and his warriors had been banished from the city of Karnux, until they should have found a suitable sacrifice for the powerful deity.

For months, a drought had blighted the Valley of the Navajadas. Maize fields had browned and withered under the burning sunrays. The Crystal Lake which had made a silver pool about the glittering city of Karnux was beginning to dry up. No longer did the market-places teem with offerings of ground *chocolatl*, copal, loaves of salt, pots and jars of pulque and maize and chili. Starvation and death stalked arm in arm through the land.

It was Montezirka, the aged king of Karnux, who had finally protested the appalling number of human sacrifices which Tarx and his devilish priests had offered to the rain god at their slaughter blocks, the sacred altars.

"Thy sacrifices have proven useless, O Tarx!" the monarch had charged his chief priest. "Go from the city! Return not, unless thou and thy Blue-feathered Warriors can return with a suitable prize with which to appease the wrath of Yaxob!"

Thus for twelve days, Tarx had roved the malpais on the outside of the peak-studded Navajadas. With him were his band of warriors, clothed in their resplendent fighting costumes of quilted armor and blue-crested helmets, carrying their shields and spears and arrows in search of a sacrifice where no living thing seemed to exist save the zopilote hawk and the whiptail lizard and the rattlesnake.

To Tarx, therefore, these mysterious white people meant the price of his re-

turn to the power and affluence he had known as chief magician and high priest of the sun god, in Karnux.

*Crash! Crash!* The ear-shattering blasts of gunfire bounded angrily from wall to wall of the canyon, swallowing the wails of the infant and the groans of the dying men. Impelled by a false courage which the sight of prey had instilled in their barbaric hearts, the warriors of Tarx pressed closer and closer to the hiding-place of the white men. And then Tarx saw the shafts of his helmeted archers pierce the throats and bodies of two of the men, leaving only the woman, bending over the body of her mate, the babe clasped in her arms.

Like jaguars springing upon their victims, the Aztecs rushed forward. Tarx glimpsed the wounded man attempting to lift himself, fall back, then draw a shiny weapon from a leather holster at his side.

*Bramm!* The weapon exploded in a crash of flame and smoke, and the foremost of the warriors spun about under the mysterious impact of an invisible missile, threw up his arms, and crumpled in a motionless heap.

The woman seized the smoking weapon from the fainting man's fingers, but the oaken knob of a war club descended on her skull and she wilted, her head falling over the bundle which enveloped her child.

With horrible cries of triumph and fiendish joy, the Aztecs swarmed over the bodies of their victims, voices rising in a soul-curdling chant to the sun god who had directed these strange, ivory-skinned people into their clutches.

**W**ILLIAM STARLING pulled his reeling senses back to consciousness a few seconds after he had triggered a .45 slug into the body of a warrior who loomed up dimly in his whirling vision.

He felt weak and sick, but not entirely from the effects of the razor-

sharp barb which had been shot into his lung. Far greater than physical torture was the mental anguish which surged through the American's sturdy frame, as he saw the leering face of an Aztec savage bending over the unconscious form of his wife—the mate who had braved the rigors of three years in the wilds of Mexico with him, in search of geological discoveries in an uncharted region where white men had never explored.

His frantic gaze dropped to the form of Larry, the tiny son who had been born eighteen months before, a sturdy babe of the wilds.

Starling groped out a hand to recover his automatic, and then merciful unconsciousness descended quickly upon the wounded America, as cruel fingers picked up the panting infant.

When next the geologist opened his eyes, it was to find that the mysterious savages had evidently carried them out of the canyon. He was atop a mountain ridge that was bathed in crimson, from the sun which was plunging into a bed of flaming clouds on the Mexican horizon. He judged that he had been insensible for nearly an hour.

It had seemed like a horrible nightmare, too wild and terrible to be a reality. But now, his brain refreshed by the cold wind which fanned the mountain slope, he realized that the situation was far more desperate than the worse nightmare he could possibly have dreamed.

Tall, dusky-skinned Aztecs, of a type not seen for nearly five hundred years, stood about the bodies of their prisoners—his wife and baby son. Through blurring vision, Starling took in the fantastic details of feathered girdles, blue-tinted shoulder cloaks, and small circular shields strapped to copy arms.

Each warrior carried a javelin tipped with obsidian. Stone knives with handles incrusting with turquoise mo-

saic were thrust in girdles. Clusters of feathered arrows protruded from basket-woven quivers. Ornaments of beaten gold hung from ear lobes and encircled wrists and arms.

**H**IS heart pounding his ribs, the wounded American attempted to struggle to his knees, though the effort cost him intense pain as he struggled to crawl to his wife and their little one.

"What do you—want? What—have we done—to you?" screamed the geologist crazily, his voice sounding hoarse and strained in the tense silence of dusk. "Let me—go—let me—"

The man's words died in his throat. He shrank back, veins slamming his eardrums, tongue cleaving to his mouth.

Standing before him, skinny arms parting the brush in which he had been hiding, stood the hideous form of Tarx, high priest of the Aztecs!

The American's horrified gaze photographed the appalling sight of a face from which a single eye gleamed, like the bright orb of a rattlesnake. The other eye was white and opaque, as a frosted marble. The high priest's evil face with its lipless gash of a mouth exposing filed, jade-inlaid teeth, was framed in an Aztec helmet fashioned like the head of a wild animal, with fang-studded jaws open and snarling.

With glaring red of the high priest's feathered robes reflecting in his jutting eyeballs, the white man fainted cold away, a moan of despair on his lips.

The priest laughed—the cruel, harsh laugh of a wild animal about to wolf down the meat of its kill. Slavering over the notched teeth was a cloven tongue, split like an adder's—the insignia of a priestly order supposed extinct for half a thousand vanished years.

"Let us be gone to Karnux!" the Aztec snarled. "Back to the fair city of the sun god—to offer up these white sacrifices on the altar of Yaxob!"

## CHAPTER II.

## THE LOST CITY.

**D**URING a long night of horror, the Aztecs carried their helpless trio of prisoners over the crest of the volcano's rim, in whose sheltering crater an undreamed-of civilization had waxed for full five centuries since the time of Cortes, in his mighty conquest of Mexico, had destroyed the power of Montezuma and the Aztec empire.

There were countless legends among Tarx and his people, of how the ancestors of the great king Montezirka, a cousin of the Montezumas, had been one of the original bands of wandering Aztecs who left the mystic Seven Caves, so little known to men of modern science, to seek a location for a new city.

Most of the Indians, back in the dim days before recorded history, wandered far south to the Valley of Mexico. There, the civilization they developed under the rule of the Montezumas had been crushed by the Spanish conquest.

But one fragment of the Aztec tribe had wandered into the rock-walled pit called the Valley of the Navajadas. The land was rich and fertile, different from the sun-scorched malpais of most of northern Mexico. There was abundant water for their crops, ample supplies of metals and rocks with which to fashion cities and weapons and pottery.

Thus the Aztecs under the Montezirkas had lived and thrived for long ages since their less fortunate brethren had seen their leaders slain, their cities and temples leveled, their treasures seized by Hernando Cortes in the name of Spain.

But these things William Starling was destined never to learn. He had ventured into the Napajada Mountains only because he was taking a short-cut northward on his way to the United States. He was returning with an

infant son, and several pack animals laden with geological specimens for which a prominent California university and museum had outfitted his expedition, three years before.

His comrades—the four sturdy-framed Americans who had braved the wilderness of Mexico's ragged mountain ranges for over thirty months—had fallen before the onslaught of the Indians, of whose existence Starling never so much as dreamed.

A tardy moon thrust its yellowish disk over the opposite rim of the vast crater, sometime during the night. By its feeble light, Starling could see that his captors were treading a narrow, steep-slanted trail—apparently a ledge, leading down into the great basin. Cholla cactus and spiny catclaw tore at his clothing, alkali dust bit into his open wound.

But more bitter than the agony of his hurt was the mental torture which seethed in the geologist's mind. Where were they going? What horrid fate awaited them? Who were these savages?

He tried to cry out, but his weak moans were drowned in the din of chants as the warriors followed their red-robed priest down the twisting ledge. A single misstep would mean a plunge into depths so far below that the moonbeams failed to penetrate the abyss.

Had it not been for his desire to remain with his wife and child to share their fate, the wounded man would have attempted to throw off balance the sturdy warrior who was carrying him, so that both might plunge to their deaths.

**C**OUNTLESS, horror-filled hours passed to the steady rise and fall of the warrior's shoulders. Starling could hear his wife sobbing faintly, above the scrape of sandals on shale. The baby was asleep, in the

arms of the warrior who carried it with clumsy gentleness.

And then the American got his first glimpse of the great lost city of the Aztecs—Karnux, founded a thousand years before, and, until now, unseen by white man's eyes.

He could see the winking lights of sacred fires, glowing redly out in the jet-black gulf of the valley. Atop towering pyramids of stuccoed masonry, the temple fires shed a ruby witch-glow on the milk-white sides of flat-roofed buildings, shimmered off the black waters of a lake, stained low-hanging clouds with pink.

They traveled for hours, until dawn began to streak the eastern horizon, without the fires of Karnux appearing any closer.

And then, as the reddish ball of the sun started its daily climb over the brassy heavens, the holy fires on the temples and palaces of Karnux faded, and the hidden city burst into view under the slanting rays of dawn as if suddenly exposed by a spotlight.

It was a sight to thrill the heart of even the most unlearned man. In spite of the weight of despair which bogged at his heart, the American forgot his arrow wound and mental anguish for a moment, in the burst of admiration which the dazzling beauty of the city brought.

Karnux lay in the center of a vast checkerboard of brown and gold fields, dappled with olive-green timberland. In the rarefied air of the mountain crater, the snowy pyramids of the Aztec temples shown with a luster that blinded the vision. A lake of crystal clearness, not yet dried up by the drought, pooled about one side of the city, in which were reflected the reddish tones of stone palaces and masonry walls.

The city was laid out like a wheel, with red-paved streets radiating from a common center. For a hub, there rose a terraced pyramid of tremendous

height, piercing its way skyward like a pile of ivory. Surmounting the temple were sacred towers of glittering alabaster, from which the thin smoke of Unquenchable Fires wafted to heaven.

But an air of deadness, of famine and despair overhung the city and the surrounding valley like a shroud. The sloping mountain walls were bleak and desolate. Fields that would once have been clothed in a brilliant green were withered and brown and sere. It was a depressing picture of drought and starvation, over which moist white clouds floated mockingly.

Ironic clouds which refused to give up their store of rain! Such was the reason Tarx and his warriors had gone outside the Valley of the Navajadas, in search of a sacrifice with which to appease the rain god.

Fever caused by the arrow wound was beginning to stifle the American's brain, and he lapsed into another coma. The grim party of blue-crested warriors resumed their ceaseless march into the valley, chanting barbaric rituals.

Every step was bringing the helpless Americans and their infant son closer to the slaughter blocks of sacrifice atop the central pyramid—the Golden Temple of the Sun God.

### CHAPTER III.

#### SACRIFICED.

**S**OMETHING like the distant hum of a swarm of bees in the recesses of their hive arose over the city of Karnux as Tarx and his blue-feathered warriors filed wearily through the red-paved portals of the Aztec metropolis.

From behind the richly frescoed walls and tapestry-hung palaces of the nobility, the hum of voices joined the buzz of sound from the lowly slaves and underlings who began to push outward from their thatched hovels of mud and straw, on the outskirts of the city.



Out into the streets, gray now in the gathering shadows of evening, came young and old, rich and poor, to greet the return of the high priest of the sun god.

Exhausted by the rigors of the long, sweltering day of travel, William Starling slumped like a sack of copal on the shoulders of the brawny Indian who carried him.

The back of the white man's khaki shirt was incrustated with a clotted black fluid, from which oozed crimson drops when the Aztec would shift his burden. Flies followed the wounded man in a dark cloud.

The woman, her long, wavy tresses tumbling as her head bobbed with the stride of her Aztec carrier, was unconscious, as she had been most of the time since she had been clubbed during the cruel attack in the canyon.

Still pressed to the heart of the stalwart barbarian who paced behind Tarx was the tiny white babe. It had been hours since the child's sobs of hunger and pain had dwindled away into a profound sleep of exhaustion and terror.

Boy babies were the especial sacrifice to Yaxob the Rain God. Tarx gloated in particular over the infant victim which his warriors had captured. But Tarx was to see the day when he would regret not having plunged an *itzli* spear into the breast of the child who now sagged, more dead than alive, in the arms of his chief lieutenant.

THE buzz of voices which greeted their arrival swelled to husky shouts, as the word spread from mouth to mouth over the city that Tarx, the high priest of the Aztecs, had returned after twelve days of search with sacrifices for the rain god—strange captives, with fair skins and blond hair, like the crown feathers of the eagle!

Straight to the base of the Temple of Gold, the hideous-faced priest made his way. With his one good eye glit-

tering like a serpent's, the priest looked over the sea of faces which pressed about him.

Tortured, haggard faces, they were—the hollow eyes and sunken cheeks of men and women and children who have tasted the bitter cup of famine, living on scanty rations from the public granaries and private storehouses of Montezirka, the king.

A hush fell over the throng of Aztecs as Tarx lifted his gold-and-jade braced arms for silence.

"Summon all the people of Karnux, to witness the sacrifice which will bring the blessed showers of heaven upon us once more!" the high priest called, his voice carrying the peculiar sibilant character caused by his forked tongue, symbol of Aztec priesthood. "Not a moment shall we waste in appeasing the ire of the rain god! *Otske!* Even now Montezirka, the king, and Esta, his granddaughter, future queen of Karnux, are awaiting the return of Tarx, on top of the Golden Temple."

A bass rumble of throaty applause drowned out the high priest's words. Tarx relaxed, his one-eyed gaze lowering over the drooped forms of his exhausted warriors, still holding the three bodies of their white victims.

Another silence enshrouded the teeming throng assembled about the base of the pyramid, as the high priest again raised his bejeweled arms. The blue feathers of his plumed helmet floated about him as he swept his serpentlike gaze over the mob.

"Ere the shades of night soften the outlines of our sacred temples, and the Unquenchable Fires of our gods cast their glow over the city, we shall have made our sacrifice to the rain god!" screeched the high priest, turning abruptly and signaling his foot-weary warriors to follow him up the great stairway leading to the sanctuaries atop the pyramid.

With the din of a grateful populace

in his ears, Tarx gathered his mantle of humming-bird skins about his bony form and marched up the stone steps with measured pace. Past the writhing stone statues of the sacred Plumed Serpents to the first terrace walked Tarx, where he paused for breath.

Behind the procession of warriors, upon whose quilted corslets and feather-hung shields the alkaline dust of the trail hung thickly, streamed the citizens of Karnux. The nobles and their families preceded the rabble of lower classes and slaves, each dark face glowing with a feverish excitement.

With sweat dripping like hot wax from his copperish brow and coasting under the fanged jaws which made the chin-strap of his animal-head helmet, Tarx toiled his way to the summit of the temple.

The panting mob of Aztecs paused as they saw their high priest reach the level top of the pyramid. Spread out beneath them, the radial streets of Karnux extended as far as the eye could penetrate the evening shadows. The high priest stood like a scarlet ghost, his feathered robes glowing in the flickering blaze of the Unquenchable Fires.

The holy man stood for several moments, looking into the open door of the alabaster tower which reared its three stories of wood and masonry toward the heavens—the cap piece of the Temple of Gold, highest pyramid in Karnux.

As the priest's one eye became accustomed to the blot of shadow cast by the huge sacred fire which burned in its stone furnace, he made out the form of a resplendent closed chair in the semidarkness, borne on the shoulders of twelve nobles.

Of one accord, Tarx and the warriors sank to one knee, those who carried the white captives lowering their victims to the stone floor of the temple top. They were in the presence of King Montezirka, ruler of the Valley of the Navajadas!

THE king was lying on a mat of feathers dyed with the royal hue, a brilliant green. He wore the girdle and square cloak, or *tilmati*, of his nation. The embroidered ends were gathered in a knot about his neck. His feet were shod with golden-soled slippers, while the leathern thongs which bound them to his bony ankles were incrustated with yellow gold and precious stones.

At his side, beneath a canopy of gaudy feathers which glistened with jewels and silverwork, was a babe as tiny as the white infant who lay whimpering on the hot stones before him—Esta, granddaughter and only heir of the king, who was to be the future queen of Karnux, and ruler of her people!

As the high priest rose to his feet, the aged king spoke.

His voice was weak and quavering, for Montezirka was slowly dying of old age, having ruled one hundred and eight years in Karnux.

"My aged eyes see strange white sacrifices. O Tarx," the king said, as the high priest bowed low. "Thou hast done thy work well. Proceed with the ceremonies of sacrifice without delay—the sight of my beloved people, many of whom are too exhausted to climb the steps of the temple, grieves my aged soul. Offer up these strange white persons on the sacred altar of the rain god, O Tarx—that water may quench the thirst of thy people and thy nation!"

Moving with stiff, mechanical slowness, Tarx walked across the stone floor to the point where a block of jasper marked the sacrificial altar.

With a glance upward, to where scudding clouds hung low over the city, Tarx motioned his warriors to bring forward the gasping form of William Starling.

"First shall we sacrifice the parents of this babe, O Yaxob!" the priest chanted to the blackening sky. "Then

shalt the babe die—die in thy name, O Yaxob!”

*Bonnnng!* The deep note of a *teponaztli*, or wooden gong, boomed forth. At the signal for the beginning of the rites, out of the black interior of the sanctuary in which Montezirka rested, came the dread Chalmeca—five priests, clad in the black robes of their order, moving like sable-coated ghosts to the side of Tarx.

A moan of anguish wrenched from the American's lips as the five priests of the Chalmeca lifted his body by the arms and ankles, and placed it on the concave surface of the sacrificial altar. For a moment, the doomed man's eyes met the murderous glare of the crimson-cloaked priest. Then, with the name of his wife and child on his lips, the white man winced under the blow of the sacrificial knife in Tarx's fingers.

With a single swift stroke, the high priest laid open the chest of his victim and performed the age-old ceremony of the Aztecs—the offering of the heart to the rain god. Thus died one of America's most noted geologists, unknown and unhonored, plunged to eternity on a pagan slaughter block!

A crashing note from the *teponaztli* gong drowned the thud of the falling body as the Chalmeca priests hurled aside the limp form of the white man.

King Montezirka lifted his gaze to the heavens. Even as he glanced upward past the glare of the sacred fires, a sliver of lightning coursed through the thick, low-flying clouds.

The scream of the white woman directed his attention to the altar. He caught a glimpse of the mother clinging to the arms of her little son, who was crawling toward her as the Chalmeca jerked her away, to place her beneath the sacrificial knife.

Roused from her torpor for a fraction of a minute before death should come, the white woman's piteous scream was choked as Tarx stabbed hilt-deep

the knife which had slain untold hundreds of victims in the past.

As he did so, an ear-blasting roll of thunder rocked the zenith. And as the priests removed the body of the young mother and turned to pick up the baby boy, the heavens opened and warm rain gushed down, washing the crimson stains from the sacrificial block.

Yaxob the Rain God had spoken!

## CHAPTER IV.

### A BABE IS BANISHED.

**T**HE piteful moans of the starving Aztecs were hushed in the first drenching downpour of rain from the low-scudding clouds.

Rolling thunder crashed over the crater valley, as piling clouds were blasted asunder by the lightning bolts which rippled from rag to crag and spanned the great Valley of the Navajadas in the space of a heart's beat.

It was Yaxob the Rain God unleashing his mighty fireworks! Making a sieve of the mocking clouds which had for so many moons floated over the black, parched fields beneath!

And then, growing out of the din of reverberating thunder and the hissing of the sacred fires of the pyramid under the slashing rain, came a new sound—a swelling babble of joyful voices as a great populace dropped to their knees in reverence before Tarx, the red-robed priest of the city.

Even King Montezirka, feeble and infirm under the burden of more than a century of active living, propped himself up on one elbow in the cushioned depths of his royal palanquin, and turned his wrinkled visage to the sky, that the blessed rain might beat once more upon his throbbing eyeballs.

The blue-feathered warriors of Tarx, always aloof and haughty before the common multitude, were on their knees, parched tongues lapping up the water from the stones which were even now

stained pink from the mutilated bodies of the rain god's latest victims.

Tarx stood before the altar, his wicked face upturned to the plashing tempest, bony arms outstretched as the driving water pelted the folds of his humming-bird robes.

To Tarx, the triumph of his white sacrifice was complete. Deep in his savage heart, the diabolical priest knew full well that his offering to Yaxob had been timed to the second with the thunderstorm which had been brewing over the valley. But to the primitive Indians, his power was supernatural, a miracle.

The great king sank back on his embroidered pillows, and his aged eyes, bright with feverish excitement, darted about the scene. He saw Tarx, standing reverently beside the altar from which he had sacrificed the two white people. He saw the captive babe, squirming and cooing with glee as the cool rain bathed its chafed skin and refreshed its parched mouth.

His gaze left the cluster of Indian priests and warriors about the altar block, to roam down the staircase to where his people, the common citizens and nobility of Karnux, were kneeling dimly in the downpour, licking up the life-giving rain with their tongues.

**I**T meant peace and prosperity and happiness once more for Karnux, the kingdom which he and his forbears had ruled for over five hundred years since the world outside had supposed the Aztec empire crushed forever. The rain brought peace to Montezirka's failing heart, for Montezirka was dying slowly under the weight of his years.

A sudden cry startled the old king's ears—the squeal of an infant, barely distinguishable above the swish of rain against the walls of the sanctuary and the rumble of the thunder over the city.

The monarch twisted about in his palanquin to gaze at the form of Esta,

his granddaughter, thinking it was she whose cry had reached his eardrums. But Esta, orphaned daughter of the king's only son, who had met death from a rattlesnake's bite long months before, was sleeping.

Tears misted the eyes of the king as he regarded the olive-skinned little babe who slumbered in her cushioned cradle beside him. Some day, she would live to reign in his stead over the Aztecs of the valley. The king's jade-plugged lips moved in a silent prayer for her happiness, for he knew he was not long for this world.

He was interrupted by a repeated cry of fear and pain. Instantly, Montezirka realized that the sound came from the white babe—the captive child whom Tarx and his blue-feathered warriors had brought to Karnux as a sacrifice.

Through the driving rain which beat against the summit of the lofty pyramid, Montezirka saw the black-robed Chalmecca priests lifting the white babe and placing its squirming body on the block which was stained with the blood of its parents.

Even as he gazed at the scene, the king was knocked flat on his pillows by a tremendous blast of thunder which seemed to shiver the very stones of the Golden Temple. Even Tarx, the high priest, was thrown off balance in the very act of stabbing home the sacrificial knife in the breast of the babe. The blade glanced harmlessly off the jasper altar.

"'Tis the voice of Yaxob!" croaked the aged king, tottering to a sitting position and swinging his golden-soled sandals upon the stones—the first time he had attempted to walk since old age had placed its paralyzing fingers upon his sturdy frame.

The nobles who bore the royal palanquin cried out in alarm as they saw their feeble ruler reeling forward in the direction of the sacrificial block.

"O Master! O great Montezirka!

Thou must not tempt the sun god by disobeying the orders of the most learned doctors of Karnux by walking, master!" pleaded a trembling court attendant in the old sovereign's ear. "Pray, come back to thy bed, O g——"

But Montezirka shook him off, and lurched on.

A fiendish light kindled in Tarx's single eye as he raised the dripping knife of polished *itsli* once more.

But as the blade started downward in its arc, the priest felt trembling fingers pluck his sacred robes. Turning, he found himself looking into the rain-drenched face of Montezirka.

"Stay thine hand, O Tarx!" came the king's voice, thin as the note of an oboe with a broken reed. "The rain is an omen of good from Yaxob the Rain God. The deity is appeased, O Tarx, and has indicated that the boy's life be spared. Didst hear his voice, just now?"

**T**ARX stared at the king for a space, and then opened his mouth to speak. But the king, feeling his strength fast ebbing from his frame, spoke on:

"It is written on the walls of the Golden Temple, in the holy room of Mexlitl, the Sun God," said Montezirka, his voice a husky whisper against Tarx's ear, "that a ruler shall come to Karnux—a fair god, with skin like furbished silver, named Ozar the Aztec. Who knows but that this babe is Ozar? Spare him, O Tarx. He shall not be killed, until twenty summers have passed—for then, if he be indeed Ozar the Aztec, he can prove his divinity by meeting the best warrior in Karnux in the fabled Doom Ducl. If he wins that, stripling though he be, this ivory skinned babe is indeed Ozar, sky king of the Aztecs!"

The king paused, his lungs wheezing. And for a moment, he drew back in alarm from the towering form of the

high priest, as if he sensed the flame of insane rage which swept into Tarx's being like the breath of a furnace.

And then the mantle of rage dropped from Tarx's horrid visage, to be pushed aside by a veil of terror as he glanced down upon the form of the babe.

Well did Tarx know the legend of Ozar, the fair god—a god who some day should assume the power which Tarx now held, as mightiest man in Karnux. But as Tarx stared at the infant below him, a sudden peace filled his evil heart, and he smiled evilly.

After all, the king was old; the grip of Tarx's crafty personality was upon the ruler like the overwhelming, crushing embrace of a snake upon its prey.

"Thy words hold wisdom, O King," the priest admitted, his voice sibilant as the breath of a viper. "But to spare this babe would be rankest treason to Yaxob, who has so generously spoken, O King. We must sacrifice him, *lest the blessed rainfall cease!* We must now——"

With a choking gasp, the great king swayed back. His knees buckled and he fell, then his hips bent, plunging him to his hands—each section of his body falling, as if each part was clinging to life. Then, with a convulsive shudder, the king's chest sank to the pooling stones at the priest's feet, and he lay still.

The spirit of Montezirka had fled to join his ancestors in the sky-temple of the Aztec sun god!

Dazedly, as if in a dream, the wicked high priest saw the royal attendants rush forward to bear the slight body of their dead ruler to his palanquin. Dimly he could hear the babble of grief-stricken voices as his blue-feathered warriors surged about him. Then the scream of the infant, as the black-robed priests of the Chalmecca picked the child up from the altar, where the dying words of a great king had cheated Yaxob of a fresh victim!

For even the power of Tarx, the high priest of Mexlitl, could not countermand the order of a king who is dead.

LONG after the mourning priests had borne the body of their beloved ruler through the stunned ranks of the Aztecs, who a moment before had been steeped in boundless joy, Tarx stood atop his pyramid, wrapped in thought, heedless of the downpour.

Could this white child be Ozar the Aztec—the fair god whose coming had been prophesied for countless centuries? Could this white babe, so helpless a moment before under his knife, be the one to unseat Tarx at the height of his pomp and glory as holy man and mightiest magician of Karnux?

Suddenly a plan took seed in Tarx's fertile brain. And as the idea rooted, the high priest rubbed his scrawny palms with satisfaction, and entered the shelter of the sanctuary.

"The babe shall be banished for twenty summers," the leering priest told the graven image of Yaxob, on the wall before him. "Banished to the mountain fastness of Claxitl, the lame arrow maker of the Navajadas. Only an old hermit to care for him!"

The priest's smile broadened, as the possibilities of the plan impressed themselves upon his fiendish mind.

"The lily-skinned whelp will die, even as the snows pinch the roses," he chuckled, passing his cloven tongue over thin lips. The babe will not live out his twenty summers—nay, twenty suns. Ozar, if such he is, will die—and Tarx will rule over the people of Karnux until Esta, the queen, ascends her throne!"

## CHAPTER V.

### TWENTY SUMMERS.

CLAXITL the Arrow Maker lived in a cave overlooking a narrow valley which was little more than a grassy ledge in the great walls of the Navajada crater. Only oc-

asionally did the old lame hermit, who some said had once been a mighty warrior for Montezirka, come down into the fertile valley and visit the city of Karnux. When he did, he brought baskets woven of the fibers of the maguey, loaded with obsidian weapon heads.

Claxitl was the greatest flint worker the Aztecs knew; his spear points and thin obsidian blades which were used to put a cutting edge in the *macquauitl*, or Aztec wooden sword, were keener by far than the best creations of the city artisans.

To-day, the crippled hermit squatted on the mat-covered floor of his mountain cave, and was again packing food in his travel pouch.

Balls of maize paste, which when mixed with water would quench thirst and provide nourishment to a travel-weary Aztec. Luscious sweet potatoes, grown in the fertile niche in the cliff-wall which Claxitl called his home. A gourd bottle filled with *chocolatl* that had been flavored with wild honey and vanilla.

"*Huva!* This should keep the strength in Ozar's legs and arms until he reaches the city!" chuckled the hatchet-faced old Indian, teetering on the balls of his feet as he bound the traveling pouch tightly with a tough thong of maguey fiber.

Claxitl gulped down a swallow of fiery *octli* liquor from a cup near by, and wiped his lips free of the pulque-brewed drink. Then he rose and stretched his naked body, still wiry and supple despite his age. Disregarding the piles of chipped rock on the floor of the low-ceilinged grotto, the hermit limped out into the blistering sunshine.

The old man's eyes puckered as he rolled a leaf of russet *tabac* into a tortoise-shell holder, and fumbled with bare fingers through the ashes of the breakfast fire to find a coal with which to light the primitive cigar.

Before the mouth of the cave was a stretch of lush greensward. At the far end was a block-shaped boulder, which glared whitely in the Mexican sunlight. Drawn on the milky boulder with charcoal was a black dot, surrounded by two concentric circles—a rude adaption of the modern bull's-eye target.

AT the foot of the rubble-strewn slope before the old Aztec's abode stood a tall young man, about whose head was whirling a sling shot made of pliable leather. *Whizz!* Like the drone of a hornet, the pellet of rock in the sling shot forth as the youth released the thongs.

*Spang!* The sharp report of stone against stone rang out, and Claxitl's faded eyes glowed like chipped agate as he saw the pellet vanish in a burst of powder, leaving a white pimple of stone against the black dot on the target, fifty yards distant.

"Twenty times without a miss, Ozar, my son!" called the Aztec, puffing his roll of *tabac* and settling back in his habitual squat, as he saw the youth turn, as he twined the sling deftly about his forehead, and started for the cave.

For twenty summers now, Claxitl's existence had not been a solitary one. Rage had rankled in his heart the day when representatives of Tarx, the powerful high priest of Karnux, had brought a whimpering, white-skinned child to him, with orders to keep the babe for twenty summers.

But maintaining the spark of life in the child had been a diversion for Claxitl. As the years went by, the babe—whom the priest's men had called "Ozar," with a hushed voice of fear as they pronounced the sacred name—had thrived. His little stomach had drawn strength and vigor from the rough diet of raw meats and maize and *anonas* which had been the hermit's menu.

Living with but a fur girdle about his

lithe waist, Ozar had developed a skin that was brown as agate from the summer suns, and tough as the barbs of the maguey from long contact with winter snows and biting, sand-laden gales.

When the white-skinned Ozar was scarce six years old, he could handle a sling with unerring accuracy. No less adept was he, as he grew older, with the heavy javelin and the buckler.

He learned to swim in the near-by mountain pool with the dexterity of a trout. For was he not Ozar, son of Yaxob, the Rain God?

So Claxitl, the hermit who had been forced to retire as a warrior after a war ax had sliced the tendons of his ankle and crippled him for life, had learned to love, in his rough, barbaric way, this child of cultured American parents.

He had taken Ozar in hand; taught him the secrets of the bow and arrow, the spear-throwing *atlatl*, and the heavy wooden sword of his people. Ozar learned the rare art of weapon-making, under Claxitl's expert tutelage; the secrets of woodcraft were his, and cliff-scaling and wrestling were his daily fare of knowledge.

NOT once, during the twenty summers that had passed since Tarx had banished the white baby from Karnux, had Ozar been to the floor of the valley which stretched like a map before the cave, crystal-clear in the rare mountain air. Karnux lay, a cluster of ivory shavings, far to the north; rivers were shimmering wires laid in green carpets that were dappled with bright fields of maize; forests were mossy clumps at the base of the sloping mountain walls.

But twenty summers had come and gone, according to the gashes Claxitl had carved on the porous walls of his grotto; and the day had come at last when Ozar, the white boy he had learned to love with the fond passion of

a father, was to go to Karnux to fight the fabled Doom Duel.

A kindly glow shown from the eagle-faced old hermit's eyes as Larry Starling flung his shapely body into the shade before him.

Everything about the boy proclaimed his alien blood. Brown hair, fine as silk and with a slight wave, so different from the coarse, black locks of the Aztecs; a finely chiseled face, with eyes that shown like blue ice—not the beady, ebony orbs of the hatchet-faced Indians.

Muscular as a panther, graceful as an ocelot; like a beaver in the water, fleet as a deer on land; possessed of a mountain goat's sure-footedness when climbing steep crags, gifted with the keen vision of the eagle! It seemed that Ozar, the American boy, had absorbed the better qualities of the wild life he had known since babyhood, and still had retained the brilliant mind with which his ancestry of finest old American stock had endowed him.

Such was Ozar, the adopted Aztec, as he faced his foster-father that morning, wonderment in his clear blue eyes.

"What is it thou hast to tell me, O Claxitl? And why dost thou pack the traveling kit so early in the summer? Dost thou plan a trip to Karnux before thy supply of arrowheads is ready?"

The old Aztec's face wrinkled in a queer smile as he regarded the smiling youth before him through eddying clouds of pungent tobacco smoke. When he spoke, it was with the reverent intonation of a holy man pronouncing a blessing and a benediction.

With slow, well-chosen words, the old hermit unfolded for the first time, the amazing story of Ozar's being—the reason for the ivory tint under his skin, for his presence at the cave of Claxitl, the Arrow-maker.

"And so to-day, my son," the old warrior wound up, "thou shalt leave the cave of thy youth, for Karnux, the city of thy destiny. For twenty long years,

my son, the Aztecs of that great city have lived as slaves under the cruel hand of Tarx, high priest of Mexlitl, the Sun God.

"No peace have they known since the day Montezirka, the good king, left for the sun-temple in the sky. There is a queen, Ozar—a queen who is young and kind and tender, but she is under the sway of Tarx, and does not know the suffering of her people.

"To-day, thou shalt leave for Karnux, to fight the Doom Duel with its mightiest warrior, and thereby fulfill the command of Mexlitl, the Sun God and proclaim thyself, in truth, as Ozar, the Aztec."

The hermit placed a gnarled hand on Ozar's supple shoulder.

"Thy task is great, and fraught with danger," Claxitl whispered. "Death will be thy constant companion, until thou hast won the Doom Duel, as foretold by Montezirka even with his dying breath. But thou art well equipped, my son, for the fight which shall prove thee Ozar, the Aztec."

Two hours later, Claxitl watched from a rocky pinnacle as his foster son, clad only in an ocelot's skin and equipped with bow and arrows and the trusty sling wrapped about his brow, set off down the steep trail for the tinted floor of the valley.

"May Mexlitl sustain thee, my son," the old arrow maker choked, as a drop of moisture seeped down his leathery cheeks.

He saw the fair-skinned youth turn and wave in mute farewell. Then Ozar was gone, to meet his destiny.

## CHAPTER VI.

### THE RETURN OF OZAR.

ESTA, Queen of Karnux, awoke on this particular morning with a foreboding of strange events about to occur—a restless uneasiness within her that she could not dispel.



She pondered the peculiar feeling while bare-footed underlings came to her royal apartments with her breakfast of *atolli* gruel and honey.

The strange disquietude persisted after her plunge in the bath pool in the center of her spacious gardens. And now, as she leaned against the waist-high wall of the arcade which crossed the front of the palace, the premonition was even stronger upon her.

Queen Esta was unquestionably the flower of the Aztec girls of her generation; even had she been born a lowly slave, the matchless beauty of her smooth-skinned face and statuesque, shapely figure would have set her in a class apart.

Her hair was raven-dark and lustrous, clustering in a perfect frame about her heart-shaped face. Baubles of goldwork set with heavy emeralds swung from the just-visible lobes of her ears. A priceless corona of gold, powdered with jewels and from which floated a cluster of royal green plumage, surmounted her head.

Her skin had the sheen of burnished copper; and from shoulder to waist, her form was clothed in a costly bodice of thinly beaten gold scales, as perfect as the sides of the goldfish in the pools below. A skirt of rich featherwork—the most treasured fabric the Aztecs knew—completed her costume, flowing in graceful folds to the tips of her gilt-soled sandals.

To-day was the celebration in honor of Arsika the Goodness of Time. Every twenty years, a richly carved stone pillar, or *stela*, was erected around the base of the Golden Temple. Each stone bore the record of the principal events of the past twenty years—the history of the nation perpetuated in carved rock.

Esta had seen the pillar which Tarx, the high priest and actual ruler of the land, was to dedicate to Arsika in a very few minutes. Even now, she could hear the roar of the multitude as they

assembled to witness the pompous ceremonies, and the monotonous mutter of ceremonial drums and wooden blocks.

There had been symbols on that pillar which bothered Esta. Those symbols, meaningless to all but the educated priesthood and the royalty, portrayed events which she was unable to remember—events of her babyhood.

The death of her grandfather, King Montezirka, whose bones rested in a resplendent tomb near the palace, was pictured on the monolith; as was also the coming of a white babe, whose presence, it seemed, had brought rain when the entire Valley of the Navajadas was threatened with starvation and death. Ozar the Aztec, according to the painted and carven symbols, had been banished.

Where was he now? And why had he been banished? The record on the *stela* did not reveal that. That question, she felt, was in some unexplainable manner connected with the burning unrest she felt in her heart this morning, as she awaited the arrival of Tarx, who was to escort her to the ceremonies.

NEVER before had she heard of Ozar, the Aztec—the babe whose cries had been in her ears that storm-lashed evening so long ago. That secret had been carefully kept from her regal ears by Tarx. His black-robed priests of the Chalmeca, many of them now dead and replaced by younger priests, had had their lips sealed by Tarx on pain of death. But the stone pillar, with its irrevocable history, had given her a hint into the past.

A footstep on the red-and-gray-checked corridor roused her. She turned, and stifled a repulsive shudder as she saw the great Tarx standing in the darkened doorway behind her.

Two decades had not changed the high priest, except to make his seamed face even more hideous. She feared

the one-eyed priest with a deathly fear, yet she hated him. He had long since become a symbol of repugnance and distaste to her, with his forked tongue and slavering lips, and the blind eye that gleamed in its socket like a frosted marble.

He looked doubly repellent to-day, with his crimson cloak of humming-bird skins and the great chunks of jade in his ear lobes. Tarx's face was painted with yellow ochre and black, making it a nightmarish cartoon surmounted by coarse hair, black as tarred string.

"The sacred rites of Arsika, Goddess of Time, are about to begin, my Queen," announced the priest, with a stiff bow. His bony fingers, as always, played with the whistle about his neck. The young queen shuddered at the gleam in his snakish eye.

"I have been listening to the drums," she replied. "This is the first ceremony of the raising of a *stela* I have ever seen."

Tarx chuckled—the soul-chilling laugh of a hyena as it gorges down the meat of its kill. "May your reign see the dedication of many more of them, great Queen," he whispered glibly.

Together, they marched the length of the palace corridor, and thence by an underground passage to the base of the Temple of Gold, overlooking the great, shimmering floor of the Crystal Lake which lay about the city like a platinum crescent.

A shout went up, a roar of hundreds of throats as the queen made her appearance dramatically on an elevated platform covered with a gorgeous green canopy.

Queen Esta smiled into the upturned faces, but her carmine lips belied the trouble she saw there. Pinched faces—the faces of men and women and young children who are crushed beneath a burden of slavery and oppression—pawns in the clutches of a high

priest who held her, as them, powerless under his satanic will.

"May the great Sun God Mexlitl send forth a deliverer for these people," the young queen whispered, as she raised her lovely, jewel-studded hands in greeting to her subjects.

In the background, the savage Tarx leered from the shadows, his gaze taking in the vista of stuccoed buildings, the wide market places teeming with riches, here and there a towering pyramid, temples to the many Aztec gods. All were his—under the weight of his crushing, dominating power.

"This day we meet to pledge ourselves in honor of Arsika the Goddess of Time," came the silvery voice of the queen, beloved of her people.

She was repeating the sacred words which marked the dedication of the other pillars in that long row of *stelae* which picketed the base of the sky-piercing pyramid.

"As ruler of the mightiest city of the Aztecs, and in the name of Arsika the Goddess of Time, I am——"

The queen's words were interrupted by an ear-blasting torrent of sound, from across the rippling waters of the Crystal Lake. It was the blast of the conch-shell trumpet carried by the captain of the royal guards, who protected the city portal!

A hush stamped out even the excited breathing of the mob, and for a moment the throbbing drums hesitated in their monotonous beat. Of one accord the barbarians turned, eyes glued on the spot across the lake where the captain of the warriors stood, conch trumpet in hand.

"My premonition is being fulfilled!" flashed the thought through Queen Esta's mind, as she waited.

Across the intervening space came a mighty voice, shouted through a conical megaphone of maguey paper—a voice which was to change the fate of the Navajada Nation!

"There comes to the city walls a white-skinned youth, who calls himself 'Ozar, the Aztec,'" the guard proclaimed. "He seeks entrance to the city of Karnux, O Queen, that he may fight the fabled Doom Duel!"

## CHAPTER VII.

### THE QUEEN'S COMMAND.

**L**IKE a voice of doom resounding from the recesses of a dark thundercloud, the captain's words rang again and again in the ears of his listeners.

Ozar the Aztec! Come to redeem his people! A deliverer from the torture and slavehood of nearly twenty bitter years!

The queen felt the hot breath of the high priest upon her neck, and she cringed aside as she turned to face him. The look she saw on Tarx's face made her want to scream.

Well might Tarx feel the terror which was revealed by his single eye, and stamped across his ugly, ochre-daubed features. Could it be possible that the lily-skinned whelp he had banished on the night of Montezirka's death could have survived the rigors of existence in the mountain grotto of old Claxitl?

Not once during the years that had elapsed had Tarx bothered his head about the babe he had supposed long since dead. If the snows and suns which scoured the Navajadas had not killed him, then surely gruff old Claxitl, the surly hermit, had dashed out his brains against a rock in a fit of disgust.

Thus had Tarx figured; and so devoted his diabolical mind to furthering the pomp and prestige which was his upon the death of Montezirka, and during the years Queen Esta was growing up under the watchful care of the court nurses—the only maternal influence she had known, for her own mother had died at her birth.

But now, after twenty summers—

A cold sweat burst out over the priest's body as he remembered the fatal import of those words—*twenty summers!* And now a white-skinned youth who called himself Ozar had come to fight the Doom Duel!

"Thou shouldst reprove the captain of the warriors for interrupting the sacred rites of Arsika the Goddess of Time!" hissed the priest in the queen's ear. "*Otske!* The gods will be angry! Let us be on with the ceremony, O Queen, lest the very earth rock under the rage of the gods!"

**F**OR the first time in her life, the young woman who was wearing the crown of the Aztecs returned Tarx's serpentine gaze without flinching. Her jet-black eyes blazed under quivering lashes, and within her body there seemed to rise the spirit of authority befitting the queen of a mighty people.

"The day is yet young, O Tarx!" snapped the Aztecan queen, clipping her words. "Let the rites cease, until the queen has looked upon the young man who dares call himself Ozar the Aztec!"

For a moment, the high priest loomed above her, his filed, pointed teeth bared in an angry snarl. Then, bending to the will of the girl empress, Tarx moved back, brows furrowed with angry knots above his hawkish nose. He lifted the signal whistle to his lips, and blew one sharp, ringing squirt of sound.

Instantly, the monotonous drumming and the *clok-clok-clok* of the wooden gongs ceased.

Esta turned once more to face the multitude, the green plumage of her royal headdress swirling about her squared-back shoulders as she did so.

Her eyes never lowering, the queen snapped an order to the brawny slave who hovered near by.

"Inform the captain of the guarding warriors to admit the youth who claims

to be Ozar the Aztec," commanded the queen imperially. "Let him have a path to the foot of the temple stairs, that the Queen of Karnux may look upon him."

In a voice scarcely less strident than that of the distant guard, the powerful-lunged slave repeated the queen's command.

As the assembled jam of Aztecs released their breath in a pent-up hum of sound, Tarx once more slipped to the side of the queen, his clenched fists trembling.

"Thou darest to fly in the face of the goddess with such rank treason?" he demanded, his voice shrilled with killing hate. "This white-skinned youth is but an impostor! Countermand thine order, O Queen—let this bold stripling be slain on the altar of the goddess Arsika, that this insult may be righted! I——"

Esta withered the frantic priest with a blazing stare.

"Thou art Tarx, high priest of Mexilitl!" she reminded him, evenly. "Thy robes are red, like thine altar after a sacrifice. My raiment is green, the color of the rulers of Karnux. Thy task is to be magician and holy man of the city: *mine* to say when and where ceremonies shall begin or end. Be-gone!"

Livid hate and rage sprang in Tarx's face at this unheard-of defiance from the young queen. His bony fingers opened and closed convulsively on the turquoise-studded hilt of his great *macquauitl* which hung belted from his cotton *maxtlatl*.

Then the rage in the priest's face was blotted by terror, as he perceived the form of a tall young white man being rowed across the Crystal Lake in a royal canoe.

Obedying the queen's orders, an aisle formed through the throng of Aztecs who jammed the great open space about the base of the towering Temple of Gold. As the prow of the long canoe

prodded against the mossy banks of the lake, trembling slaves laid coverlets of richly-dyed featherwork upon the bank for the white stranger to tread upon.

OZAR'S eyes were steady as he set foot upon the city of Karnux. But under the bronzed skin of his mighty chest, his heart was pounding violently. It was the first time he had ever stood in the presence of his fellowmen!

His glance swept upward, to where the chalk-white Temple of Gold soared in terraced heights into the blue, cloudless sky. The alabastered sanctuaries atop the great pyramid were hazy in the smoke of the sacred fires, whose lights he had followed the night before in his trek across the valley from the cave of his foster father, Claxitl the Arrow Maker.

And then the young American who claimed the title of Ozar the Aztec, stepped forward between the panting rabble of dusky-skinned Indians, his eyes fastened on the resplendent canopied platform where stood the first beautiful girl he had ever seen.

A glow of return admiration lighted in Queen Esta's coal-black eyes as she watched the young warrior step forward. Every muscle in his superbly built body rippled beneath the tough, fair skin like the sinews of a jaguar. He carried on one arm a small, round shield.

It was decorated with the blue-and-white mosaic symbol of Yaxob, his patron god.

A bundle of reed arrows projected from the basket-woven quiver over one brawny shoulder. Sword or knife had he none; but under the girdle of ocelot's fur, a pouch of sling stones rested, and wound about his high brow was the pliable thongs of his sling, binding back the flowing brown hair.

"Who art thou? And whence dost thou come, stranger?" asked the queen

softly, as the white youth dropped on one knee on the carpeted stairs below.

"I am Ozar the Aztec, mighty Queen," responded the white man, his ice-blue eyes never wavering before Esta's regal gaze. "I come from the mountain cavern of the hermit Claxitl, lame arrow maker of the Navajadas."

The golden scales on the queen's shimmering bodice pulsed, betraying the rapid beat of the girlish heart which lay beneath. A warm flush suffused her face, and she seemed unable to take her glance away from the pair of eyes that seemed like chips of heaven set in whitest ivory.

"I come to fight the Doom Duel of our legends, O Queen--against the mightiest warrior in all Karnux. If I be not victorious, let the hairless dogs of the streets lick my broken body. If I win, thou shalt know me to be Ozar the Aztec, redeemer of his people."

With a scream as coarse and inhuman as the snarl of a panther, the high priest Tarx shot past Esta in a flutter of red robes.

He shook a knotted fist over the brink of the platform toward the American youth below.

"Begone, thou filthy impostor!" screeched the barbaric priest in a burst of volcanic fury. "We are in the midst of a holy celebration! *Otske!* We have no time for vile worms who call themselves Ozar, the white god! Begone, ere I fling thee upon the altar block!"

Ozar made no reply, but his jaw squared, making a lipless welt of the firm mouth. He rose to his feet, one hand lifting toward the sling about his forehead.

A light like blue fire glowed in the depths of Ozar's steely eyes, a blaze which sent an indescribably strange thrill through Esta's being as his glance bent to meet hers.

"Heed not the holy man, stranger," said the queen majestically, her voice

soft and unruffled as the placid waters of the lake.

Tarx wheeled, then backed into the darkness of the cavern leading into the Temple of Gold. His face was a frightful mask of rage and hate, the cloven tongue a red lance in his tooth-studded mouth.

"Tarx," said the queen, and her voice rang clear as a peal of a conch trumpet over the hushed multitude, "thou shalt select from thy blue-feathered warriors, the mightiest fighter of them all. Ere the sun has cast this side of the Temple of Gold in shadow, this multitude shall witness the spectacle of the ages--the fabled Doom Duel!"

## CHAPTER VIII.

### THE TERRIBLE GIANT.

**M**OUTHING foul curses under his breath, the high priest Tarx backed through the embroidered curtains which shielded the queen's platform, and pushed into the underground passage that tunneled the pyramid.

Alone in the cool depths of the passage, the evil magician of Karnux snatched the *macquauit* from his girdle and in a fit of mad fury, splintered the weapon against the masonry walls, venting his temper against the stones.

Not until the turquoise-incrusted hilt of the wooden sword was a broken mass in his fist did Tarx relax, bathed with sweat and panting heavily.

The queen's words had been more than a challenge. They marked a meaning far deeper than a mere announcement that the white youth should be given his chance of winning the Doom Duel. For Queen Esta, in full view of her subjects, had defied him, hurled back his words, quelled him with a glance.

As suddenly as he had burst into his insane demonstration of fury, the high priest composed himself. Already, his

devilish brain was working out a solution to his difficulty.

"The white warrior shall never win the Doom Duel!" snarled the priest, tossing aside the remnant of his sword and stalking grimly down the faintly lighted tunnel. "His opponent in the Doom Duel shall be Uxchakitl the Terrible, mightiest of my warriors. Ere the sun sinks in its flaming bed beyond the Navajadas, the dogs of Karnux will be tearing the meat from Ozar's bones. *Ya-ah!*"

A roar of many voices, coming from outside, rumbled through the passage behind him as Tarx hurried down a steep flight of stairs. The Aztecs were acclaiming this strange white man! Ozar was receiving the thunderous plaudits of the multitude of slavery-ridden Indians! Even if he were an impostor, the Aztecs were greeting him as a possible deliverer from their bondage!

Tarx ducked into the black recesses of an underground tube which led to the vaulted, subterranean lairs where he and his Blue-feathered Warriors made their den.

Continuing down the pitch-dark passage he knew by memory, Tarx ran his fingers along the rough volcanic stones until he came to a sharp bend in the tunnel. Then, counting twelve paces into the jet darkness, the priest touched a secret lever with his sandaled heel, and a breath of cool air fanned his robes as the sound of an opening door came out of the murk.

Going through a revolving entrance, Tarx felt the hidden door seal shut behind him. Fumbling for the bone whistle which dangled from a thong about his neck, Tarx blew a shrill blast.

**I**NSTANTLY, a heavy curtain lifted, revealing a large chamber hewn out of the bedrock, lighted by many oil lamps.

It was the den of the blue-feathered

warriors, and the existence of the lair was known only to Tarx and his followers. The slaves who had tunneled through the virgin stone had been executed and burned, without the knowledge of the Aztec world on the ground overhead.

A score or more of warriors, naked for the most part, were lounging on the heavy fiber mats on the smooth-hewn floor. At the entrance of their master, all of the Indians leaped to their feet, standing at rigid attention. The heavy curtain lowered noiselessly as the priest padded across the floor.

A wave of his bony wrist, and the warriors resumed their idle postures on the floor. Strong men, they were—men with muscles like the fibers of the maguey, and hatchet faces more stern and terrible than a devil's mask.

The blue-feathered warriors were, and had been for time eternal, the pick of the Aztecan soldiery. They were the special bodyguard of the priesthood, controlled by Tarx, who ruled with a hard hand over this group of harder men.

For a moment, Tarx stood in the center of the chamber, his snakelike gaze sweeping into the remotest corners, picking out every detail as his single eye adjusted itself to the yellow glare of the lamps.

"Ah—Uxchakitl!" exclaimed the high priest, pointing a hooked finger toward a huge dark shape back in the shadows.

Tarx's eye gleamed as a warrior stepped forward, to stand obediently before him. Seven feet of bone and muscle, was Uxchakitl—Uxchakitl, meaning in the Nahuatl tongue of the Aztecs "the terrible giant."

The Indian's shoulders were slabbed with muscles and sinew, twice the width of the ordinary warrior's. His arms were long and knotted with wiry muscles, ending in great hands that had been known to crush rocks the size of a man's head into fragments.

Once Uxchakitl had carried a boulder weighing nearly a ton, with nothing to indicate the effort save the bunching of the powerful muscles on back and thighs.

A fit opponent for a man who claimed to be Ozar, the Aztec! Even the cruel Tarx could not suppress a shudder as he sensed the sheer power hidden in the giant's mighty limbs.

"What is thy will, O Tarx?" inquired the warrior, his voice a deep and throaty rumble, like the thunder of Yaxob.

"I have chosen thee to fight the fabled Doom Duel with an ivory-skinned stripling who claims to be Ozar, the Aztec," announced the high priest, his painted face working. "Gird on thy *moxtlail* and come to the Scarlet Arena at once, Uxchakitl."

The red light of a killer rose in the giant's black eyes as he heard the priest's astonishing command. The Doom Duel! He had been blessed by the gods to fight in the spectacle of the ages!

The room was in an uproar of confusion as the grim order dropped from Tarx's lips. Countless generations had awaited the fighting of the Doom Duel, only to die in disappointment because the fair god did not choose their lifetimes in which to fulfill the prophecy of the ancients.

And now Uxchakitl, the mightiest warriors the Aztecs had ever known, was about to enter the Doom Duel! Small wonder that the terrible giant was aquiver with eagerness!

Aztec legend had it that to emerge victorious in the battle with Ozar would mean a perpetual kingship after death, in the realm of Mexlitl the Sun God. If defeated, the warrior's soul would roast throughout eternity in the kitchen of the gods.

It was a sacred privilege, a stimulus to make a superwarrior out of even a mediocre fighter. As for a giant such as Uxchakitl—it converted the colossal

Aztec into a brute, thrice as dangerous as a mad panther.

**L**EAVING the barbarians swarming about the giant, Tarx left the room by a hidden exit, and hastened down another corridor to the armory, where were stored the weapons to be used in the impending duel.

Tarx was not satisfied with having chosen his most formidable warrior to be Ozar's foe. He could not shake off the chilly fear that had been born in his heart when he had looked into the death light which glowed from the American's eyes, out there at the base of the Temple of Gold, when Ozar had looked up under his shaking fist.

Tarx had other precautions to make, and he set about doing them at once.

Entering the weapon storehouse, the high priest drew from a stone chest two mantles feathered with blue and white. One of the jackets would be worn by Ozar, the challenger; the other by the mighty Uxchakitl, defender in the Doom Duel.

As the priest lifted Uxchakitl's mantle and spread it out, an evil smile split his features. For the giant's blue and white feathered *tilmali* or mantle was armored with thousands of tiny chips of flint, capable of withstanding the sharpest blade or hardest thrust of an arrow! An invisible armor, sewn by the fingers of Tarx himself, under the camouflage of downy feathers!

According to the ancient rules governing the Doom Duel, both contestants should wear the feather mantle; but Tarx had long since taken the precaution of providing his own man with a secret armor.

Tarx paused long enough to remove from its rack on the armory wall the Sacred Spear—a long javelin with an obsidian head, to be used by Ozar in the Scarlet Arena. According to Aztec mythology, the spear had been fashioned out of a sunbeam by Mexlitl.

Leaving the arsenal, the priest hastened down another flight of stairs, leading deeper into the bowels of the earth. He now came to a well-lighted passage, which sloped upward to end at the level of the red-paved streets of Karnux.

Again Tarx pressed a hidden spring, and one of the huge stones in the wall beside him turned on a pivot, revealing a slitlike entrance to a secret room. Like a shadow, the priest vanished within, the door closing silently behind him.

He found himself in a tiny chamber, with stone tables cluttered with pottery dishes and jars and cylinders showing up in sharp relief under the lemon-yellow glare of lamps set in wall niches. The room was Tarx's laboratory.

Here, many hours of the day, the evil priest bent over his crucibles and glazed retorts, mixing concoctions and potions unfamiliar to any brain save his own. In keeping with his vicious character, the majority of the chemicals compounded by Tarx were designed to poison or blind or burn. It was here he developed the "miracles" he performed as a magician, to mystify the primitive Aztecs who were his subjects.

Chuckling horribly, like an animal about to wolf down the meat of its kill, the high priest laid down the Sacred Spear and the two fighting *tilmatlis*. In the depths of his cunning brain were plans by which Ozar the Aztec, would surely be at a fatal disadvantage in the coming Doom Duel.

It seemed preposterous that a mere stripling, tall and muscular though Ozar was, could defeat a mammoth warrior like Uxchakitl in fair fight; but still Tarx's evil heart was gripped by a cold dread. There was too much at stake. Tarx would take no chances.

He stooped, and drew a small stone jar from under a table. Opening the lid, he reached long-nailed fingers into the container, and drew forth a peculiar fuzzlike powder, of the color of yellow ochre.

THE powder was another of Tarx's fiendish inventions—ocelot's hair, chopped into microscopic bits. When rubbed on the skin, the tiny fragments of hair would work into the pores, producing an itching sensation as violent as a naked flame lashing the sensitive tissues!

Still chuckling brutally, the red-robed priest squatted on the floor of his laboratory, and dusted the powdered hair over one of the feathered mantles—the cloak to be worn in the dread Doom Duel by Ozar!

A small thing, perhaps—but Tarx had learned the small details can often lead to serious consequences. A man cannot afford to be annoyed by a skin that itches like pepper on a raw wound—not when he needs every grain of energy, every ounce of attention to ward off a streaking arrow, avoid a chopping blow, or parry a lightning-swift thrust.

When Tarx had finished, Ozar would enter the arena with a mantle thickly saturated with invisible stinging powder, while his opponent would be garbed in barb-shedding armor, apparently the same as the mantle worn by Ozar!

But Tarx was not finished. Taking the Sacred Spear to a near-by workbench, the high priest busied himself with a crude copper file. A few minutes later, the obsidian head of the dread weapon was attached to the gilded shaft by fibers which had been cut nearly through from the underside—a weakness which would pass undetected by the sharpest eye, but which would count in the heat of battle!

As he left the laboratory and proceeded down the corridor toward the Arena, a patter of sandaled feet arrested Tarx's attention. Wagging shadows were cast on the wall by a person walking down a side passage.

An instant later, the form of a servant girl bearing a steaming tray of food came into view.



Tarx drooped a lid over his sightless left eye, and held out a blue-veined hand as the underling passed. The girl paused, unmasked fear revealed in her wide, dark eyes.

"Whence goest thou with food at this hour?" questioned the priest, looking at the dishes of squash, beans, papaya, maize, and steaming *chocolatl*, which the girl carried.

"The great Queen Esta ordered it from the royal kitchens, O Tarx," the servant girl replied fearfully. "It is to nourish him who calls himself Ozar the Aztec."

Tarx's glittering eyes narrowed. He glanced at the steaming tray once more. A new idea kindled in his brain—a climax to the vengeance he was preparing against the white youth.

"Give me the tray, girl," ordered the priest. "Thou shalt be delayed but a moment. Remain here, and await my return."

Taking the salver, Tarx retraced his steps to the secret door, and reentered the laboratory chamber. He set the tray carefully on a table.

Holding a lamp to a tier of shelves, Tarx carefully inspected a row of pottery containers. Out of the collection, he chose the most powerful drug of his lot, a potent poison all the more deadly because it was as odorless and tasteless as water.

Into the frothy bowl of steaming *chocolatl*, the high priest poured a heavy portion of the colorless brew. The guttering lamps threw deep shadows over the priest's sinister visage, stamping him with the ugly lines of a witch as he wiped off the lip of the poison cup.

Why should he take the slightest possible chance of Ozar vanquishing the Terrible Giant, when it was in his means to prevent it?

A moment later the red-robed magician was handing the golden tray to the waiting servant girl, who padded away toward the spot where Ozar was

awaiting the meal, weary after his long journey from the grotto of Claxitl.

The high priest's grin of evil satisfaction deepened as he turned back down the corridor. Well he knew the effects the dread poison would have upon any one so luckless as to let a drop of it pass his lips.

At first there would be no effect at all; and then, as the drug began to be absorbed, violent nausea would give way to dizziness and then pain—pain as if the veins and arteries were being filled with molten fire. After that, the effects of the poison would pass off as quickly as they had come.

But Uxchakitl would need only a second to plunge a spear through Ozar's unprotected breast.

## CHAPTER IX.

### THE DOOM DUEL.

OZAR drained the last sliding pad of foam from the pot of luscious *chocolatl*, and wiped his lips. He was resting under a cotton *tolto*, or tent, on the edge of the Scarlet Arena.

Nearly four hundred years before, the Scarlet Arena had been erected; so-called because of the red-tinted volcanic stone used in its construction.

It consisted of a raised platform, in the center of which was an oval pool of crystal-clear water. About this central platform, east, west, north, and south, had been built four terraced pyramids, adorned with sculptured images of the Plumed Serpent of the Aztecs, and providing seating space, as in a stadium, for thousands of spectators.

At the base of the northern pyramid, which was reserved for the nobility, a canopy protected Queen Esta and Tarx from the slanting rays of the afternoon sun. The other pyramids were packed with teeming throngs of the common citizenry and bondsmen, clad in their somber garb of coarse *nequen* cloth.

Shortly after the contestants had eaten their meals—unlike modern athletics—the Doom Duel would commence. As might be expected for the historic event, every Aztec, young and old, in the entire city of Karnux was on hand to see this blue-eyed young stranger do battle with Uxchakitl the Terrible Giant.

Queen Esta sat breathlessly upon her mat, her raven ringlets swaying under the fans wielded by slaves, who were having difficulty in keeping their emotions from breaking the studied stolidity of their features.

The queen shuddered every time her eyes strayed from Ozar's *toldo* to the diagonal corner of the arena.

In that corner the Terrible Giant squatted, grinning like a wolf, under his tent.

Tarx leaned back against his cushioned backrest and fingered the bone whistle about his neck, his jade-inlaid teeth bared in a satisfied smirk of triumph. He had been tense and uneasy, until he had seen Ozar drain the contents of the poisoned drink; then he had flashed a look full of deep meaning toward the leering Uxchakitl, and leaned back.

The throngs which covered the four pyramids from base to summit were growing restive, eager for the fray. Squinting at the sun, which was beginning to creep long blots of shadow over the floor of the arena, Tarx leaned forward toward the queen.

"Let the Doom Duel begin, O Tarx!" Esta commanded, answering Tarx's unspoken inquiry.

Again the peculiar whistle of Tarx's signal knifed the air. A few paces away, a dusky-skinned slave picked up a heavy beater, and struck the carved-wood gong at his elbow.

*Bon-n-n-ng!*

To the waiting multitude, the resounding, hollow note of the big gong was the signal for a burst of vocal ap-

plause which rocked the air over the arena with ear-splitting intensity.

To Queen Esta, her eyes glued on the young white man who was lolling easily under his *toldo*, the wooden note of the gong struck a cold chord of fear in her heart. How could a stripling like Ozar hope to defeat a hairy giant like Uxchakitl? Yet Esta found herself praying heart and soul for victory for the young white warrior.

Hardly had the echoes of the gong escaped the hopper-shaped stadium than the two fighters leaped from their tents. Waiting slaves aided them as they shrugged into the blue-and-white mantles which were the official costume of the antagonists.

Beneath the feathered *tilmatti* of Ozar, the assembled throng could see his girdle of ocelot's fur, and the simple leathern sandals held by thongs about his legs. Over one shoulder he slung his pouch of arrows; on his left arm the small circular shield, in his right hand the sturdy bow. A stone knife, provided him by Queen Esta herself, was thrust in his girdle.

Only one detail of the white-skinned warrior's costume puzzled the Aztecs; it was the leathern bandeau which held in place the youth's flowing brown hair. It was entirely plain, with not so much as a paper or greenstone ornament breaking the simplicity of the leather. But they were to learn its grim significance.

Across the arena, crouched in front of his *toldo* like some gigantic gorilla, towered the seven-foot figure of Uxchakitl, his beady eyes glittering with murder lust. His weapons were similar to Ozar's; his blue-and-white mantle apparently the same, for Uxchakitl bore the added weight of the secret armor as easily as if it had been eider down.

*Bon-n-n-ng!* Again the crash of the gong, and the Doom Duel was on—a fight which would end only in death for one or both of the contestants!

**A**N explosion of sound welled heavenward from the audience as the two warriors fitted arrows to bow strings. In Aztec duels, an exchange of arrows is the preliminary gesture, a sort of skirmish, to test the mettle of the opponent, to warm the arteries before engaging in hand-to-hand conflict.

Queen Esta leaned forward, her head darting as her eyes sought to follow the crisscrossing hail of arrows which sped like droning wasps diagonally across the arena.

Until the second crash of the gong, Ozar had been smiling easily at the waiting, expectant crowd, ignoring his towering opponent. But now, with the sweet snarl of deadly arrows whining about his ears, his face became grim and tight with the thrill of battle, eyes slitted bits of ice, mouth stern and merciless.

Arrows, broken-shafted and with blunted heads, bounced off the white youth's darting shield like hail from a roof. Moving with the lithe grace of a panther, the stranger from the cave of Claxitl slipped barb-tipped shafts from his quiver, fitted them expertly to the arrow, let them fly at the great bulk of Uxchakitl, across the rim of the crystal pool in the center of the arena.

The giant was shooting recklessly, his hard chiseled face lighted with a wicked smile. Arrows from Ozar's bow struck repeatedly about the Aztec's huge chest and abdomen, but fell harmlessly from the blue-and-white mantle.

Tarx leered evilly as he saw the results of his foresightedness. He knew that Ozar was aiming each shaft deliberately, his ultimate purpose with each one being to find a vital point and end the contest. It was evident that the white youth was a vastly superior archer to the big warrior; he fitted his arrows with polished skill, aimed coolly, loosed the string with practised precision, always hit the mark. It was the differ-

ence between master marksman and lumbering beginner.

Uxchakitl had been unable to land a single shaft. Only too often, the arrows pierced only empty space where the nimble-footed Ozar had been; his shafts furrowed through the dust of the arena, or stuck quivering in the roof of Ozar's *toldo*.

Ozar was quick to realize that something was protecting Uxchakitl from his well-aimed barbs; but he did not cry out in protest to the queen, or demand an examination of his opponent's feathered mantle. Fused in Ozar's heart was an innate American sportsmanship.

**A**LMOST as soon as it had begun, the archery was over. With their stock of arrows used up, the fighters tossed aside their bows and quivers, and caught up the spears held by waiting seconds.

A gasp of breathless anticipation went up from the spectators as the two duelists stepped across the arena, circling warily about the oval pool, fingers rolling the spears about in dusty palms to secure the best grip. Their eyes roved in search of an opening to thrust the first javelin.

At the same instant, the two hurled their spears. Ozar rolled his shoulder to one side as the Indian's great lance bored the air an inch from his neck, to bury itself in the dust behind him. His own weapon, the Sacred Spear, glanced off Uxchakitl's shield with a sharp crack of sound, and then the two were dashing to reclaim their weapons.

Again the duelists faced each other, this time bunching their shoulders for a close-up attack. Bellowing deep in his throat like an angry bull, Uxchakitl charged his smaller opponent, spear drilling out before him, leveled at Ozar's midriff. Side-stepping deftly, Ozar caught the running giant off balance, and only an instinctive upthrust of his buckler saved Uxchakitl from being

lanced through and through at the outset of the battle.

The Indian whirled, his eyes red-shot with hate, bitter snarls breaking from his twisted mouth. Ozar danced away, his skin swimming with perspiration.

Suddenly a wave of fire, as if a flood of scalding fluid had been hurled upon his jacket, coarsed over Ozar's sweating back. The charge he had planned at the glowering Indian was checked, as he squirmed his shoulders in bewilderment.

The ocelot hairs were beginning to drill into his pores, like the needles of ten thousand ants! But pain and fatigue and everything else was stamped from Ozar's mind the next instant, as he shot up his buckler to ward off a smashing thrust of the Terrible Giant's spear.

Carried off his feet and rolled in the dust by the impact of the Aztec's lance against his shield, the white youth heard the audience roar as the towering giant leaped forward over his foe, bent on delivering the death stroke.

Springing sideways like a jaguar, Ozar avoided the Aztec's mad rush and wriggled aside, jerking the Sacred Spear from the snatching grip of the other warrior.

Queen Esta relaxed in her cushions, her heart a pounding lump in her throat. She found herself dashing tears from her long lashes, her whole body quivering with fear and anxiety as she saw Ozar dance away from the giant's jabbing spear.

The two met with short thrusts of their weapons, striving desperately for an opening, for a chance to gouge the *itzi* heads of their weapons through ribs or stomach or neck. They were fighting faster, and once the rush carried the duelists beneath the royal platform where Esta and Tarx sat.

As the fighters weaved away with a rattling of spear shafts against bucklers and the grunt of panting breaths, only Tarx was able to understand the taut

look of pain on Ozar's face, which the queen mistook for fatigue.

The ocelot hairs were turning Ozar's naked, sweating back into a veritable skin of fire!

**R**AISING back one long arm, Uxchakitl hurled his spear at the white man in a moment when Ozar's defensive arm was whirling behind him to maintain his balance on the dusty arena.

It seemed that nothing could save the fair-skinned youth from being pierced by the flashing spear, but he rolled backward under the very whistling point of the spearhead and bounded to his feet to come out of a whirling somersault that left him facing an opponent without a javelin.

Reeling under the momentum of his spear thrust, the Terrible Giant cried out in terror as he saw Ozar charging him. The Sacred Spear leveled at his heart.

*Whizz!* Fast as a bullet, the heavy javelin shot through the air before the Indian could bat his staring eyes. With a hollow thud, the lance struck Uxchakitl square on the breastbone.

And then the spear-shaft fell aside, the obsidian head clinging to the feathered mantle about Uxchakitl's body! The Sacred Spear had broken!

A thunder of sound from hundreds of savage throats blasted the eardrums of the fighters as they squared off, hands jerking for the obsidian-bladed knives in their girdles as the Doom Duel raced into a breathless climax. The spear fighting was over—now it was a gory battle at arm's length!

A moment of sick despair surged through Ozar as he realized the treachery which lay behind the failure of the Sacred Spear—costing him triumph when it seemed that Uxchakitl's heart was about to be split open by his thrust!

And then the two met toe to toe, the sun flashing on their clanking knife

blades as they lunged and parried, drew back and grappled, their bodies a blurred spectacle in the arena as they struggled madly, furiously, blindly.

Suddenly, for a single paralyzing instant, Ozar felt a wave of nausea assault his stomach. He was vaguely aware of Uxchakitl charging against him, pushing him back, back, back until his feet tottered on the brink of the crystal pool.

An instant of stark, mad pain, as he parried the fierce strokes of Uxchakitl's darting blade; and then, as the poison laid its fiery clutches on his vitals, Ozar felt his consciousness fading.

## CHAPTER X.

### THE SUN GOD'S DECREE.

**D**IVING backward with the instinct of a beaver, Ozar felt the cool waters of the oval pool plunge over him, even as consciousness faded and black oblivion closed about him.

For what seemed long, tortured minutes, his body rolled in the icy depths of the pool; and then, as the cold water began to counteract the effects of the drug on his system, he pulled off his buckler and kicked out feebly for the surface.

His head broke water in a smother of foam caused by his dive from under Uxchakitl's slicing knife blade. His eyes opened for a second, jutting from the pain which racked every fiber in his body; and he sucked in a gasp of air as he saw the Terrible Giant leap to the edge of the pool, knife raised.

The obsidian-bladed weapon whistled like an arrow as the big Aztec hurled it unerringly toward the white body in the water before him. But the water deflected the hard-thrown blade, and the point slashed a crimson furrow the length of Ozar's shoulder as he dived once more below the surface.

The white man's senses were return-

ing rapidly as he allowed his body to sink to the stony bottom of the pool. Gold fishes darted away, stirring the crimson strings which oozed upward from the wound on Ozar's shoulder. Somewhere below, his own knife lay with Uxchakitl's sunken weapon.

He lay on the bottom until his lungs seemed to burst, the soothing water clearing his pores of the stinging ocelot hairs the while it drew away the effects of the poison on his system.

But he had to come up for air, and he realized that the Terrible Giant would be waiting for him at the brink of the pool.

Opening his eyes, he peered upward as he neared the surface, to see Uxchakitl's fierce countenance wavering down through the troubled water.

The giant was clutching the spear he had recovered, poisoning the weapon as he leaned with one knee on the edge of the pool.

In a dash of bubbles the white stranger parted the water, and even as he thrust the spear Uxchakitl felt Ozar's iron grip upon the shaft. The giant reared back, and as he did so the ivory-skinned body of Ozar, clinging to the spear, emerged from the water after him. The pandemonium of the crowd was lost in the pounding ears of the duelists.

Dropping the spear and jerking off the sodden feather mantle, Ozar's body described an arc as he dived upon Uxchakitl's retreating figure. One clenched fist lashed out to crack a skin-smashing blow alongside the Indian's jaw.

With a grunt of pain the giant staggered backward to measure his length on the ground.

**O**ZAR swayed on his feet, the effects of the poison drink seeming to paralyze his legs. He braced himself as he saw the great Indian pick himself up and charge again, with fists clenched like granite blocks.

*Bam! Wok!* Above the din of the crowd came the thudding smacks of fists against flesh, the snapping of ribs as Ozar's pommeling knuckles beat a vicious tattoo on Uxchakitl's sides before the big Aztec could break away from the clinch.

The Indian retreated under a bewildering storm of uppercuts and hard-flung punches to the midriff. He had hoped to seize Ozar's tawny body in his giant embrace, and squeeze the white youth until the life was crushed from his body. But as the Terrible Giant shook the crimson which flowed into his eyes from an oozing welt over his brow, he realized he had met his match physically in what he had termed a stripling.

Ozar was standing beside the pool, his chest heaving, head lowered, clenched fists sparring before him. Crimson flowed from a dozen bruises and cuts on his wet body; his legs were trembling, as if the strength had been sapped from them. But in the ice-blue eyes was a threat which spelled death if the towering Aztec ventured close to those smashing fists again.

Suddenly an idea took root in Uxchakitl's reeling brain. He realized that Ozar was unable to lead the attack—that he was on the defensive, at least until the effects of the poison had worn off.

The giant turned, and rushed across the arena to where his sword lay, beside his tent. As he picked up the weapon a deafening thunder of savage cries blasted his ears. Through the corner of his eye, Uxchakitl saw the queen standing on her platform, seeking to make her voice heard above the din.

He knew what the queen was saying. The rules forbade the use of any weapons other than those furnished him—the arrows, a spear, and knife. But only one idea remained in Uxchakitl's brutal mind—to butcher the panting youth who was taking advantage of the moment's rest, over by the crystal pool.

A grin of triumph split the dusty, crimson-smearred features of the giant Aztec as he strode across the arena, the sword swinging in one hamlike fist.

At the same instant, Ozar realized the meaning of the Terrible Giant's apparent retreat from the dueling field. He was caught without weapons—about to be slain like an animal in the slaughter pen!

Frantically, the white-skinned fighter looked about him. His knife lay in the bottom of the pool; to dive after it would invite getting his head cut off as he came out again. Uxchakitl's spear was too far off to retrieve; his own javelin, the Sacred Spear, was broken.

The sight of the advancing warrior brought a surge of power to Ozar's drug-deadened muscles. His darting glance took in the form of Esta, the Queen of Karnux, her eyes filled with speechless pleading and horror as she saw Ozar's doom marching down upon him, an unarmed youth.

Uxchakitl's stride was lengthening, the heavy *macquauitl* raised over his head for a chopping slash that would cleave Ozar from skull to heels.

The roaring crowd of murder-thirsty Indians, at nature the cruelest of mankind known to history, did not anticipate the amazing spectacle which next happened.

They saw Ozar, cool, unafraid, step away from the pool. They saw his firm-muscled, shapely arm lift upward, to unwrap the mysterious thongs of leather which encircled his head. And as he shook the sling out with deft fingers, they saw him reach into his ocelot-fur girdle and draw a small pellet from the pouch therein.

Too late, the giant Uxchakitl charged his smaller foe. There sounded the sharp whine of a whirling sling as it whizzed in an invisible circle over Ozar's dripping head. And then the hornetlike buzz of the stone, ending in a sharp *crack*.

Uxchakitl's rush stopped, as if blocked by a masonry wall. His bullish roar caught in his cavernous throat, ended in a choking gasp which turned into a peculiar rattle.

Then, like a hewn tree, the great giant's body swayed. The sword dropped from lifeless fingers. With a groan that sounded like a knell in the deathly silence that had gripped the people, Uxchakitl fell earthward with a heavy thud, writhed a moment, and was still.

Between his outflung arms, Queen Esta could see a small blue hole drilled in the center of the Aztec's mighty forehead.

Then the queen's enraptured cry, as she climbed from her platform to rush to the side of the panting white youth, was drowned in a new burst of noise—a tumultuous, pagan roar of acclaim to Larry Starling, the youth who had won, on a gory field of a long-propheesied Doom Duel, the right to be called "Ozar, the Aztec."

**T**HE classic fight seemed as dim and distant as the red rim of the Navajadas, as Ozar strolled the length of the royal arcade that evening, with Queen Esta by his side.

From within the polished salon of the palace, the sweet, muted tones of Esta's Aztecan choir wafted softly to the ears of the young couple. From delicately enameled stone censurs, the fragrant odor of white acacia curled upward on the wings of incense smoke.

For a moment the two stood looking out over the royal gardens, cool and dark in the argent moonlight; then beyond the palace walls, over the flat-roofed *azoteas* and market squares to the banks of the Crystal Lake, with its flower-laden rafts of *chinampas*.

In odd contrast were the two—the white man, with a sling thonged about his forehead, and his only clothing an ocelot girdle and humble leathern san-

dals; the girl, resplendent in her gorgeous raiment of green and gold.

Together, they walked beyond the Palace of the Montezirkas, to where the Temple of Gold reared its pyramidal pile toward the soft white disk of the moon.

"All is so well—so quiet, so peaceful in Karnux to-night, my lord," breathed the queen, as they entered a corridor of the mighty temple. "It seems impossible that there could be danger in the world—when we are so happy—and carefree——"

Ozar suddenly stopped, his body tensing, like an animal that scents danger. They were alone in a dimly lighted corridor of the Temple of Gold, and beside them, the tapestried hangings of the richly frescoed walls were stirring, ever so slightly.

"Perhaps not—so impossible, my Queen," murmured Ozar.

**T**HE curtains parted, and standing beside them was the leering form of Tarx, the moonlight reflecting off the corridor floors and gleaming dully from the eye which resembled a frosted marble.

"Thou richly deserve thy triumph of this afternoon, Lord Ozar," the high priest said, in his raspy sibilant voice. "But as Ozar the Aztec, thy work is hardly begun. *Otske!* Thy contest in the Scarlet Arena this afternoon was but child's play compared to the tasks that await thee, Lord Ozar."

Ozar felt the queen tense, as she laid an arm against his. An electric thrill seemed to sweep the American's being at the touch.

"What do you mean?" she asked, her voice a tense whisper.

A malicious gleam darted from Tarx's eye. He bowed slightly, defiantly, and motioned them into a room revealed by the parted curtains.

"Follow me—into the Holy Room of Mexlitl the Sun God," the high

priest invited. "The sun god has certain tasks for Ozar to perform, which the white god should best see for himself."

Looking at each other in speechless wonderment, Ozar and the beautiful young Queen of Karnux followed the shuffling priest into a room which housed a gigantic image of Mexliltl, the Sun God of the Aztecs.

The immense statue dwarfed the trio of human beings before it—a statue of a horrible-faced deity, in whose hands were clutched the thunderbolts of heaven, and on whose colossal breast was a golden disk thirty feet in diameter—the holy symbol of the sun.

"On the walls of the Holy Room are the Five Commands of Mexliltl, Lord Ozar," the priest saying. "The gracious Queen will read them for thee if thou canst not decipher their meaning."

With his forked tongue slavering over his thin lips, the vile priest backed away, a low chuckle like that of a wild animal's issuing from his throat.

The color deepened in the faces of Ozar and the queen as they read the commands written in Aztec hieroglyphics on the walls of the temple—commands of the sun god which "must be fulfilled by him who calls himself Ozar."

And as Ozar read the Five Commands, each pitting him against seemingly unsurmountable dangers, he realized what Tarx had meant when he said that the Doom Duel was but the beginning of the terrific test which befell the destiny of the person bearing the name of Ozar the Aztec.

Leaving the two standing in mute awe before the towering idol, the red-robed priest slithered into the darkness. As he disappeared, Ozar lowered his eyes from his reading of the sacred script and smiled into the face of his queen.

"I do not fear for thee, Ozar, my lord," the beautiful Aztec whispered, moving closer to him. "Thou canst fulfill the Five Commands of Mexliltl, the Sun God—and redeem the people from the clutches of the devilish high priest of Karnux."

Can Larry Starling—now Ozar the Aztec—fulfill the Five Commands of Mexliltl the Sun God, and redeem an afflicted people from the sinister influence of Tarx, the pagan high priest?

Here is high adventure—breathless, throbbing—with that different touch which makes for unusual interest.

Another thrilling episode in the adventures of Ozar the Aztec will appear in the next issue of Street & Smith's Top-Notch.

THE IDEAL CHRISTMAS GIFT!

Street & Smith's

**TOP-NOTCH**

*Best Stories of Adventure*

You give it *once*—but the recipient gets it twelve times!

YEARLY SUBSCRIPTION—ONLY ONE DOLLAR!

WHERE CAN YOU BEAT A GIFT LIKE THIS?





# The Hawk Dopes It Out

By John Paul Seabrooke

—Author of "The Brand Of Terror," etc.

***The Big Shot was king of the narcotic ring—but Duke set out to topple the crown from his head***

**S**INKS, the janitor of the Rosemere Apartments, his face ashen and haggard, stumbled along the corridor and pressed the button of No. 408. His lips were working, he was muttering to himself, shaking his head. In his hands was a newspaper at which he stared with the eyes of a person who seems to see a ghost.

From somewhere behind the paneling came the mournful, wavering notes of a tenor saxophone. The music stopped as the janitor's finger touched the bell

button a second time. The door opened, and a small man with flattish features and unkempt, mouse-colored hair thrust his head out inquiringly.

The janitor spoke, his voice a hoarse croak.

"I've got to see Mr. Pierson. Something terrible has happened."

Clutching his saxophone under one arm, the small man nodded slowly and held the door wider. His eyes were round and bright with curiosity as he stared at the janitor's contorted face.

Then he jerked his thumb over his shoulder.

"Mr. Pierson is 'ere. Go right into the front room, Sinks." There was the tang of the English cockney accent in his words.

The janitor hurried forward, and passed into a chamber where a young man with a thin, hawkish face lounged in a chair. Smoke spiraled from a cigarette held loosely in his fingers. There was a magazine in his other hand.

He raised his head, darting a glance at the janitor out of eyes that were as penetrating and as vividly blue as the surface of polished steel. Then he smiled.

"Have a chair, Sinks. What's on your mind?"

The janitor cleared his throat, and held the newspaper out tremblingly. He spoke in a broken voice.

"They've pinched Charlie," he said. "They think he's a dope peddler. Look—it's here in the paper. They've locked him up."

Duke Pierson took the newspaper and stared at the headlines, his face expressionless.

#### YOUTHFUL DRUG PEDDLER CAUGHT

He read the story beneath them, and his mouth became a straight, hard line. A picture flashed to his mind; a picture of Charlie Sinks, the janitor's son—eighteen, clean-cut, honest. Not the type who would knowingly get mixed up in the vicious activities of a drug ring. There was something wrong here, some terrible miscarriage of justice.

Duke Pierson knew what such a thing meant. He himself had been the victim of injustice. Suave crooks, executors of the estate left by his father, had robbed him of his fortune. The law had given him no redress; so, on occasions in the past, he had taken the law

into his own hands, and had preyed upon the men who had cheated him. But he preyed upon no one else.

As the sinister and mysterious "Hawk," his name held terror in the underworld. It was a riddle to the officers of the law. In the fantastic Hawk costume, black and somber as death, he had worked to balance the scales of justice; and many knew of him as a benefactor.

The janitor did not know he was the Hawk. Only his trusted servant, "Liney" Lewin, knew that, though a few others had guessed it. But Sinks, with whom he had been friendly, had turned to him in an hour of need as though by instinct.

Duke spoke gently. "What was your son doing? How did this happen?"

"It was that new job of his, Mr. Pierson. He got it last week. He sold patent medicines. The people he worked for gave him a list of customers. They paid him twenty a week. It was the first job he'd had for over a year."

"I see," said Duke, and the gleaming brightness of his eyes seemed suddenly to intensify. His voice was low. "Selling patent medicines, eh? Somebody was fooling him, Sinks. You can see that. They made him the go-between; made him take the rap. Those medicines were narcotic drugs, of course—though he didn't know it."

"Who could have done it?" said Sinks huskily. "What did they want to do that to my boy for?"

Duke got up, jabbed another cigarette between hard lips, and snapped a match into flame. He took a few quick turns around the room. Then he raised his head.

"There is only one man I can think of, Sinks. That man is Mace Leonti, the dope king. Maybe you've heard of him, and maybe you haven't. He controls the drug traffic in this city. He has enslaved thousands. The police have suspected him, but have never

caught him. Others always take the rap. Leconti takes the profits."

"Can't they make him tell the truth?" croaked the janitor:

"As well try to make a tiger in the jungle tell the truth," said Duke. "He's a calculating devil, Sinks. If your son has been mixed up with him, it's going to be tough—unless——"

Duke stopped speaking, and stood in deep thought, blowing smoke slowly through his nostrils. He and Limey Lewin had been involved in many strange adventures. They had frequented sinister joints where criminals held rendezvous. Through the grapevine telegraphs of the underworld they had heard whispers of its characters and its secret doings. But, as a rule, they did not interfere. That was the job of the police. It was not their business.

Yet once in a while Duke had seen fit to play the rôle of avenger and bring some wrongdoer to justice. And now his interest was aroused. An innocent young man had been caught in a spider web of crime.

Dope peddling, the enslavement of men's minds and bodies, was, he thought, one of the most vicious crimes in existence. It was more brutal than murder, for it spelled a living death. It was more ruthless than theft in the misery it left behind it.

Duke straightened his shoulders suddenly, and flipped his cigarette into the open coal grate. His voice was harsh and low.

"We'll see what we can do, Sinks. Don't worry. Don't try to talk to the cops. It won't do any good. They did their duty as they saw it. Leave it to me. I'll speak to Leconti. I may be able to help Charlie."

THE dope king, Mace Leconti, sat in a chair at a desk in the privacy of his own luxurious home. Dressed quietly, a pen in his hand, and the shaded lamp spraying light on his

head, he looked almost like a business man or banker.

Yet there was an arrogant, coldly inhuman quality in the lines around his mouth and eyes that gave him away. It was as though his face were a cleverly fashioned mask which nearly, but not quite, concealed the true character of the man beneath.

His manner was assured. He felt secure in his own sinister power and in the cunning with which he kept his tracks covered. Unsolved murders had been laid at his door—but they always remained unsolved.

The underworld held him in fear. And, like most master criminals, he had gathered around him a group of men who were made willing slaves by the lure of wealth without work, and who kept faith with him because they knew that death would follow betrayal.

To-night, as always, he was certain of himself. Danger was far from his thoughts. Who would dare molest Mace Leconti in his own home? He had long since wiped out rivalry in his own field, and he had taught the police the futility of disturbing him. Whenever there was trouble, he saw to it that some one else took the rap.

The first inkling he had that anything was wrong was when a faint chill touched the back of his neck. Something seemed suddenly to be in the room with him. He turned in his chair, turned away from the cluttered desk, and his pale, cruel face froze into immobility. Veins stood out on his forehead. He saw a tall figure in a black cloak and a mask fashioned after the head of a hawk. It was a figure familiar to the underworld, which had reason to fear it.

"The Hawk!" Leconti gasped, and the words were wrenched from his throat as though by the grip of steely fingers.

Another voice sounded then—low and harsh, muffled beyond recognition, but

coldly sinister as the voice of a being from some other world.

"Yes, the Hawk, Leconti. I see that you recognize me. Keep your hands away from the gun in your desk drawer. Don't move. I want to have a talk with you."

A black-nosed automatic projected from an edge of the Hawk's dark cloak. It was pointed straight at Leconti's head. Few people knew that the Hawk did not carry a deadly weapon, that this gun was of a special type which used gas shells capable of knocking a man unconscious within a radius of twelve feet, but not capable of killing.

Leconti did not know it. He stared at the muzzle of the black gun as he might have stared at a deadly snake.

Slowly the cloaked figure moved around the table directly in front of Leconti. Slowly the Hawk pulled up a chair and sat down. Leconti found his voice.

"What is it you want?" he said.

The Hawk spoke a second time, accenting each word.

"The son of a friend of mine, an innocent young man," he said, "has been arrested as a drug peddler. Members of the Narcotic Division caught him with dope in his possession. You know what that means, Leconti—a long prison sentence. He thought he was selling harmless patent medicines. It was the first job he'd had for months. He needed money. I know, and others know, that you are the head of the narcotic traffic in this city. I want you to see that that young man is cleared. You know his name as well as I."

Leconti smiled now. The cards were on the table. He had faced such charges before. His assurance began to come back, even in the face of those determined eyes that gazed at him from behind the black mask.

"You are very picturesque, Hawk—very dramatic; but I don't know what you're talking about. I have nothing

to do with any traffic in drugs. I don't know what young man you mean."

The air of the room seemed suddenly to grow tense. The Hawk leaned forward, half crouching. The black gun moved like a snake's head.

"You lie!" the Hawk hissed.

Leconti's face, malevolent as a devil's, grew paler; but the sneer did not leave his lips.

"You can't prove it," he said. "I've never even been arrested. Be careful what you say, Hawk. Remember that you're a hunted criminal."

The black gun in the Hawk's hand jabbed forward, pressing against Leconti's chest. The drug king's breath came through clenched teeth. Then the Hawk spoke again.

"You're going to clear that young man, Leconti. You're going to sign a paper, squaring him with the police, telling them that he was innocent."

"I won't," grated Leconti. "You can't make me."

Swiftly, without speaking, the Hawk brought a coil of strong, light rope from an inner pocket of his cloak. Expertly, making every movement count, he tied Leconti's wrists and feet, and trussed him to his chair.

"Now," he said, "you'll do as I tell you, or I'll let the law take its course. I'm going to search the place for evidence."

Leconti's voice was malicious.

"You won't find anything," he said.

The Hawk stepped forward, then stopped a minute and listened. From the street outside, a faint strain of music floated upward. A saxophone in the hands of some wandering street musician, apparently, was playing a plaintive, peaceful lullaby.

**T**HE Hawk smiled behind his mask. He began to search the place now, while the eyes of Mace Leconti followed his every movement with the watchfulness of a cat.

There were a thousand places where drugs might be hidden.

The Hawk knew something about the ways of smugglers. Dope was the coin they dealt in. A man like Leconti, it seemed, would not want his drug supply too far away from him. He would hide it in some secret place; but where?

The Hawk searched methodically. He tapped chairs, struck the walls for secret panels, prodded the stuffing of the furniture. Always there was the fear in the back of his mind that Leconti might have a storehouse somewhere else. His coming here had largely been a bluff. He knew he was playing a dangerous game. Leconti never forgave or forgot.

Once again the Hawk listened and heard the saxophone still playing in the street outside, and he smiled as before. Limey Lewin was shadowing the house, reporting to his master that all was well, in a code that no one would suspect.

But the search for the hidden drugs was not bringing results. The Hawk went into other rooms. His fingers probed everywhere. He wanted to get something on Leconti. The man was a monster, a menace to society.

Suddenly the sharp ringing of the telephone sounded from the room where Leconti was tied. The Hawk turned and retraced his steps quickly.

Leconti was straining at his bonds, trying vainly to reach the instruments. His face was contorted with fear and rage. The Hawk put out his hand for the telephone.

"Don't touch it!" snarled Leconti.

But the Hawk's fingers were already on the instrument. He picked it up, put it to his ear. Suddenly his body seemed to stiffen.

The voice that came from behind the Hawk's mask made Mace Leconti jump and turn paler still. He recognized it as his own voice, exactly simulated, copied in every pitch and inflection.

"Leconti speaking," said the Hawk.

"You have? Bring it over. Yes, now, bring it here, I say. Something's up—we've had trouble. I'll explain later."

He snapped up the receiver and turned to face Leconti, who screamed an oath at him. There was triumph in the Hawk's eyes now. Leconti's were smoldering pools of hate, agate hard, murderous and terrible. The Hawk spoke calmly.

"That was one of your own men, Leconti. You heard what I said—told him to come here and bring what he had. You and I can guess what it is. If it's what I think, the police will be interested in seeing it."

"I'll kill you!" choked Leconti. "You'll never get away with this, Hawk."

MINUTES passed, and neither man spoke. Then the saxophone in the street outside began playing again. The melody it struck up was "All Alone."

The Hawk tensed. He walked noiselessly out into the hallway toward the front door.

A ghostly tapping sounded presently; three knocks together, a space, then two more. The Hawk did not know what code of knocks the drug ring used. He answered it in his own way by flinging the door open suddenly, and pulling in the man who stood there. The Hawk's gun was out. His fingers clutched the man's arm in a viselike grip.

The stranger was thin and rat-faced. In his hand was a shabby brown suitcase.

"Come in here," said the Hawk harshly. "Your boss will be glad to see you."

He shoved the dazed man forward into the room where Leconti was sitting tied in his chair. The stranger's eyes rolled wildly. His face turned pale.

"Fool!" yelled Leconti. "Why did you bring that here?"

"But you said over the telephone——"

"I said nothing. You allowed this man to trick you."

The stranger turned to stare at the Hawk. Duke smiled harshly behind his mask. He made the man back into a corner, and then bound him hand and foot with curtain cords. He picked up the brown suitcase and placed it on the table before Leconti. With a key which he had taken from the rat-faced man's pocket he opened the suitcase. Then he drew in his breath at what he saw.

Under a layer of paper, wedged into neat rows, were packages and bottles. The bottles contained thin, dark-brown liquid. He uncorked one, smelled it, and identified it for what it was—tincture of opium. He unwrapped one of the packages, and needed no one to tell him that the white powder it contained was "snow," or heroin, a powder derived from opium.

Here was the largest quantity of dope he had ever seen; a suitcase full, representing a small fortune.

He looked at Leconti and saw that the man's face had gone deathly white. The murderous light in those dark eyes gleamed like a devil's fire.

"I know you've got more hidden around," said Duke. "I'm going to search for it. Are you ready to sign that paper, clearing young Sinks? Or do you want me to call the cops?"

"That's a bluff!" screamed Leconti. "You don't dare call the police. They'd jail you first."

The Hawk closed the suitcase with a snap, and took it with him. He could call the Narcotic Squad now, show them the dope that Leconti's agent had brought, and have the two men arrested. But Leconti was right—it would mean revealing his own identity, and facing possible arrest. It would mean appearing in court, having his record raked over the coals, and being discredited as a witness. It would probably mean Leconti's escape.

So he knew he must find some other

means. He must trap Leconti, yet keep out of the mix-up himself. There must be a way. The Hawk's cunning and boldness were proverbial in the underworld.

He searched the house again, looking about, thinking hard. He entered the kitchen and searched all around it, staying in it for twenty minutes or more. Once he opened the suitcase of dope.

Then, suddenly, he raised his head and listened. The saxophone in the street outside had struck up a tune again. It was playing louder and wilder now, with a frenzied, excited note.

"Hail, Hail, the Gang's All Here!"

That was the tune it was playing, and the face of the Hawk hardened behind his mask. He went back into the front room with the suitcase under his arm. He heard the sound of a motor car drawing up. Leconti heard it, too, and smiled twistedly, knowingly.

"I'm going to take this with me, Leconti," said Duke, patting the suitcase. "I'm going to convict you with it."

Leconti's thin lips spat out a vicious oath. He strained at the ropes that held him. Some one inserted a key in the lock outside in the hallway. Low voices sounded.

The Hawk whirled and made for the other corridor with the window at its end, through which he had come. He ran to it and slipped out into the darkness with the voice of Leconti screaming orders behind him. Duke knew that in a few moments a band of merciless killers would be on his trail.

**I**N the street outside he met Limey, and they both ran for the car.

"Take this," Duke said, handing Limey the suitcase. "Get the engine running. I've got to make a phone call. I expect them out after us in a minute."

The car was parked at the corner. There was a drug store on the opposite side from it. Pulling off his hawk costume, and thrusting it under his coat,

Duke ran into the store. He found a telephone booth, and swiftly dialed a number. For a full minute he spoke in sharp, crackling sentences.

Limey had a strained, tense look when Duke came out and reached the car again. The little cockney was staring back down the street.

"They're coming?" he said hoarsely. "There was only three of them when they went in. Now there's five."

Duke nodded. "Leconti is with them—untied," he said. "And the other fellow. They want to get us, Limey."

He slipped the hawk mask on once more. For an instant he showed himself in the roadster's headlights, and heard the hoarse cries down the street. An auto engine roared into life. Gears clattered viciously.

Duke leaped into the roadster and took the wheel. He put the car into gear. It slid forward. As it did so, a fusillade of shots rang out, echoing along the quiet street. Bullets whined a death song overhead.

"Keep down, Limey," said Duke. "They mean business."

"They're after that dope in the suitcase," said Limey. "You shouldn't 'ave brought it with you. It's goin' to mean a lot of grief. What if we're caught with it?"

Duke didn't answer. He swung the car around corner, heading into an open avenue that led toward the suburbs. He began working with the choke and hand throttle. The engine seemed to be missing. It coughed, back-fired, and the car's speed slowed.

Limey spoke hoarsely.

"What's the matter, sir? She was 'tittin' all right a while ago. Do you want me to try her?"

Duke shook his head. "I can handle her," he said quietly.

But the motor continued to miss and back fire. Behind them, too close for comfort, sounded the roar of a powerful engine and the spiteful crack of auto-

matics. Headlights gleaming like the eyes of some fabulous monster swung around the corner after them. A bullet splattered against their rear fender. The pursuing car was catching up.

Sweat began to stream down Limey Lewin's face. Speed had pulled them out of many tough places. But now their car seemed to be going back on them.

"If they don't catch us, the cops will," he said. "What's the matter with our motor?"

Duke was working the choke and hand throttle as though in a trance. His lips behind the hawk's mask were grim; his eyes focused on the street ahead. The engine missed; fired, missed again. The car jerked forward, slowed down, then the motor picked up and purred smoothly for a few seconds. Limey was on pins and needles.

"It must be water in the gas," he said. "It's out now."

**H**OUSES and trees flashed by. The headlights of the car back of them fell a little behind. Then their own engine back-fired again like the crackle of a machine gun. Limey groaned and almost wrung his hands as he felt the car lurch and shudder.

"If I could only get out and fix her, sir! It's the carburetor—something's wrong."

There was a hard smile on Duke's face now. Once again his hands were moving over the instrument board. He ignored the car behind them until a bullet ripped across their hood. Then he suddenly swung left, pressed down on the accelerator, and sent the roadster roaring ahead. A minute passed before he saw the lights of the car behind in his windshield mirror.

They were neither gaining or losing now. The roadster roared on, but its usual speed seemed diminished.

"Step on her! Step on her!" cried Limey. "If the cops catch us with that

dope, we're goners. If those mugs behind get us, we'll swallow a lot of lead."

Duke appeared to be doing his best against the odds of a faulty engine. He turned and twisted through side streets, then shot into another straightaway, until the roaring car behind drew dangerously close.

He doubled back, heading toward the city again on a parallel avenue. He flashed across an intersection. A cop's whistle shrilled madly. Brakes screeched as vehicles to right and left halted. He drove on.

"Stay out of the bright lights, sir," howled Limey, unable to understand what had come over Duke. "We'll run into a motor-cycle cop."

Hardly had he spoken when the sputtering roar of a two-cylinder engine sounded somewhere far behind them. Duke settled down to speed now. They were on a long avenue. He seemed to nurse the motor along.

The needle on the speedometer moved past fifty, past sixty, and hovered at seventy. The engine was no longer missing. It roared beneath its hood like a thing gone mad.

But the car behind was still drawing closer. Death was in the air to-night. Far ahead a blinker light showed, with cross streets on either side. Duke bent over the wheel, staring ahead, his face behind the mask as expressionless as though it were carved out of stone. He pressed the horn button, blowing a long, wailing blast that echoed through the night. The headlights of the roadster made a tunnel of light along the concrete.

But the blinker light was coming nearer, seeming to dance and whirl toward them with appalling speed. There were cars on the intersecting streets at both sides of it; long, low, blue-bodied cars filled with grim-faced men. The roadster flashed past the blinker light marking the intersection at a seventy-mile-an-hour speed. And, not more

than a block behind, Leconti and his gang followed, bent on murder.

Then a sudden tremendous clatter of gunfire broke out in the darkness behind Duke and Limey—a clatter that made the little cockney whirl in his seat, his eyes wide. He had not noticed the blue cars waiting at the cross streets.

"Good 'eavens, sir! There's a fight going on back there. Some one's firing on that dope gang."

Duke nodded. He took his foot off the accelerator. He lifted the hawk mask from his head, and his face began to relax. He drew a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped drops of glistening perspiration from his forehead.

"It was tough going, Limey, but a lot of fun while it lasted. These are cops back there—Leconti is getting what he deserves."

"But the dope, sir—we'd better not let any cops catch us. We'd better step on it and get 'ome."

Duke nodded again. He was silent as they cut across town toward their apartment. When they drew up, he lifted the suitcase from the roadster and hurried inside with it.

Limey spoke again when they had reached their own rooms.

"Ow did you do it, sir? What made those cops come? Why didn't they stop us?"

"I telephoned them from the drug store, Limey. I arranged it. I wanted them to get Leconti."

He flung the suitcase on the table and opened it. Limey stared at the rows of bottles filled with brown liquid, and at the packages of white powder.

"Lord, sir, there's enough dope 'ere to knock out an army. Better get rid of it."

Duke walked to the telephone. He dialed a number and spoke in a low, disguised voice. A man at police headquarters answered.

"So, you found the stuff?" said Duke.



"Yes, and you got them? I thought you would, inspector. Leconti was killed in the fight, you say—and one of his men has turned State's evidence? Ask him about young Sinks, chief. See if the boy wasn't an innocent victim, framed."

There was a period of silence. Then the voice of the inspector in charge of the Narcotic Squad came again. A slow, satisfied smile spread over Duke Pierson's face.

"I thought so, chief," he said. "He's willing to tell all he knows. That clears Sinks then. It was what I wanted—why I mixed up in the case. I couldn't stand by and see the boy take the rap like that. No, I can't tell you who I am. I don't want to appear in court. Just call me the Hawk—and good-by."

Duke put the instrument down and turned to Limey.

"Bring me a couple of glasses," he said. "I need a bracer, Limey. That was a tough drive. I had to work hard to make the engine miss and back fire like that!"

"You made it!"

"Sure—I didn't want them to get too far behind."

Duke was grinning now.

Limey brought the two glasses, then stopped short.

"What shall I put in them, sir?"

"Never mind—I've got it right here."

Duke reached into the suitcase and pulled out a couple of brown bottles. He uncorked them, emptying their contents into the glasses. Then he opened a package of the white powder, and sprinkled it into the liquid. He handed one glass to Limey.

"Have a drink," he said. "I'm going to."

Limey recoiled in horror. His face paled.

"Don't sir. A dose like that will kill you. Why, sir, a hophead couldn't take it."

With a smile on his face, Duke raised the glass to his lips and drained it to the last drop.

"It would taste better warm," he said, "but it's not half bad this way."

Limey stared at Duke as though he thought his master had gone mad. He sniffed suspiciously at the drink in his hand, sniffed again—and his eyes widened. Then he tasted it cautiously with the tip of his tongue, and sudden amazement showed on his face.

"It's only coffee, sir, with sugar in it. I thought it was dope."

"It was," said Duke, "until I changed it in Leconti's kitchen. I planted the real dope where the men of the Narcotic Squad would find it. Then I filled the bottles and packages up with coffee and powdered sugar to fool Leconti in case he and his gang overtook us. The joke was on Leconti, Limey. He didn't know he'd left a hundred grand in dope behind him for the police to find. He did not know he was chasing a suitcase full of coffee and sugar all over town. Let's have another drink to a successful night; then we'll call the janitor up and tell him that his boy is coming back."

Further adventures of Duke Pierson and his pal "Limey" Lewin will be found in a new Hawk story to be published in an early issue of Street & Smith's Top-Notch.





## Bar Circle Christmas

By EDGAR DANIEL KRAMER

WHEN December walks across the withered grass,  
An' the icy winds are howlin' as they pass,  
Are we grumblin', though we buck the driftin' snow?  
Nothin' doin'! We all tie a can to woe.

Cookie grins above his flapjacks an' his stews;  
"Mustang" Roberts gives the ha-ha to his blues;  
"Whitey" Olsen, "Smokey" Wood, an' all that crowd  
Make it plain that bellyachin' ain't allowed.

For, with Christmas in the offin', we can see  
Candles gleamin' on the decorated tree  
In the ranch house, while the Little Lady stands  
By the Old Man with our presents in her hands.

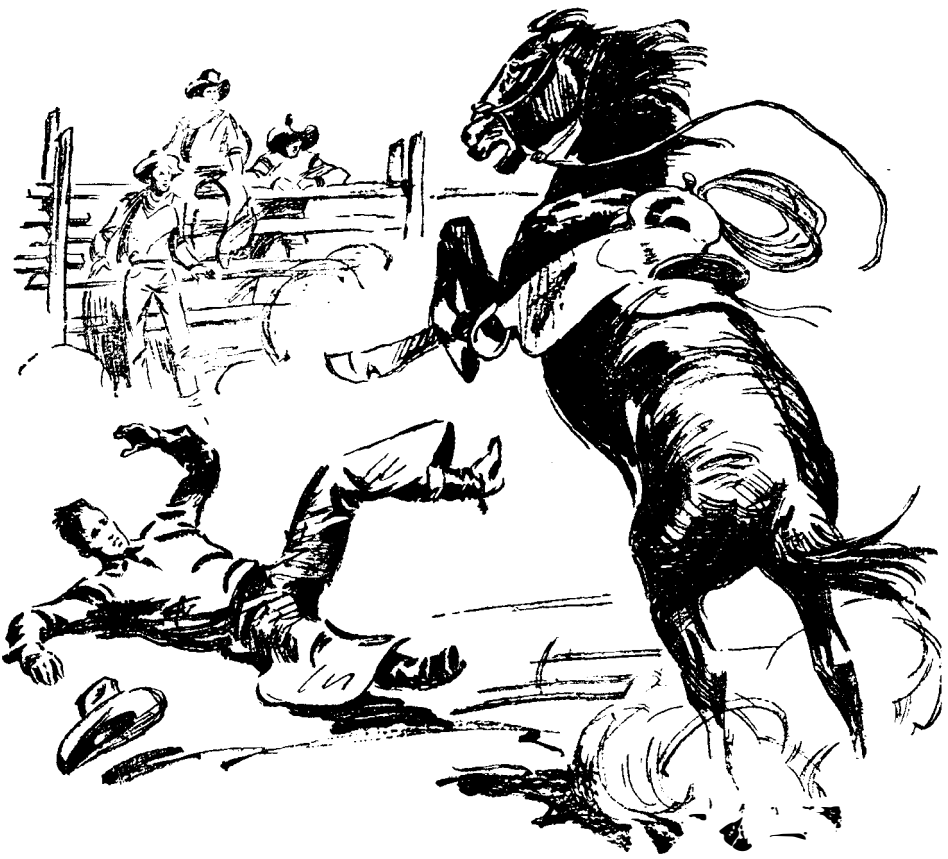
Then the outfit pushes Mustang to the front  
For to do his stumblin' speechifyin' stunt  
An' to give the Little Lady an' Old Man  
What we've bought them by the get-together plan.

Then the clock is strikin' midnight, an' we shout  
"Merry Christmas!" till the welkin turns about,  
An' the Little Lady, startin' in to play,  
Says, "The King of all the world was born this day!"

As the music of the organ sweetly rolls  
Through the shadows, "Holy Night" lifts from our souls,  
An' our voices mingle with the angels' mirth,  
As they sing, "Good will to men an' peace on earth!"

When December walks across the ghostly snow,  
We are chucklin', as we see the candles glow  
In the ranch house, where like little children we  
Yield our hearts up to the Christmas mystery.





# The Stampede

By George C. Henderson

***Dalton Clark thought he was in luck when he got taken on as an extra hand. But honest men can be mistaken***

## CHAPTER I.

### RAWHIDING RANNIES.

**H**E lay flat on his back in the round pen, startled eyes widening on the upraised hoofs that menaced him as the black mustang reared on its hind legs.

He was powerless to move. His stunned and shaken body did not re-

spond to the frantic impulses sent out by his brain. The devil horse, Midnight, had brushed against the fence, causing him to jerk his left leg from the stirrup.

The instant it felt the pressure of those long legs relaxed from its wet, coal-black barrel, the bronc had exploded in a fit of sunfishing that hurled Dalton Clark from the saddle before his booted

toe could locate the flying ox-bow stirrup again.

The yells and laughter of the Four-spoke Wheel punchers were still ringing in Dalton's ears. As Midnight reared above the prostrate puncher, the shouts suddenly died. In the silence, "Bronc" Bradley's gleeful, bellowing guffaw burst out like a coarse, brutal snarl of triumph.

Dalton's mind was as clear as a crystal. His burning eyes photographed the steel-shod hoofs, the flaring nostrils, and bared teeth of the Midnight horse as the ebony-coated beast hung above him as if suspended in air.

Beyond that contorted body, outlined against the pale-blue Arizona sky, he got a clear-cut picture of faces—a row of faces that seemed to float unsupported in the shimmering, sizzling, overheated atmosphere.

"Snooty" Saunder's gaunt, buck-toothed features were blank with open-mouthed alarm. "Hunky" Spangaard's flat face was ludicrous with surprise. The coal-black eyes of the swarthy vaqueros bulged like round diorite marbles.

Bronc Bradley alone exhibited glee. His big mouth gaped like a cavern. From behind the stiff bristle of his blue-black beard, his teeth gleamed like wolf fangs. Bronc's jet eyes glittered with excitement, and from his throat issued a jeering, exultant laugh that grew shriller as Midnight's hoofs struck downward at the stunned, helpless young cowboy.

All this Dalton Clark saw and understood in the tiny space of soul-torturing time that he awaited death. He wanted to roll over quickly out of the way, but his shaken body did not react to the wish.

A man's brain either works like lightning or it does not work at all in a crisis. Dalton's mind was afire with impulses. Straight at his head Midnight drove the shining steel shoes on its fore-

feet. The white-lathered muzzle, the quivering nostrils and bared teeth seemed about to strike at the prone puncher as the mustang tucked its head between its knees.

In that instant, Dalton felt the muscles of his body gathering in response to mental danger signals, and he could have tried to hurl himself free, but he did not. The inspiration that often came to him at critical moments flared strong, and he did not move a finger. It flashed on him that a horse would not step on any live thing if it could avoid it unless it were a killer, and Midnight was no man slayer.

Shank, pastern, coronet, fetlock, and hoof buried themselves in the gypsum sand, with a thud that sent dirt spurting into Dalton's face and eyes. The fine chest, shapely barrel, the hindquarters and another pair of lashing hoofs whisked over him, and Dalton, untouched, rolled over and over like a tumbleweed until his clawing hands reached the fence and drew him to safety as the snorting, bawling, bucking creature dashed past him again.

Brain reeling, gasping for breath, Dalton pawed his way to the top of the fence and hung there several minutes, like a saddle blanket draped out to dry, before he found strength to sit up and look around. Not one cheer greeted his magic rescue. The square-headed Hunky was glaring at him with undisguised hostility. The vaqueros exhibited no emotion whatever.

Bronc Bradley's cavernous mouth snapped shut, wiping the smile from his face as he dropped from the fence into the corral to help Snooty Saunders with the terrified fuzz tail. Snooty had Midnight backed into a corner and was hanging onto the bronc's head. Bronc slipped in, jerked at a latigo thong that loosened the web cinch, and dodged back again. As the cinch loosened, the jerking, quivering black range pony quieted down.

DALTON saw both Snooty and Bronc crowd close to the ebony horse as if to conceal something, and then he knew why Midnight, so ferocious a moment before, had calmed down so abruptly.

Bronc Bradley heaved on the latigo to tighten the girth again and instantly swung his broad, wide-shouldered body into the saddle. Midnight gave a few crow hops, dashed once about the round pen and then became docile, head drooping and flanks heaving.

Bronc's white teeth flashed again in a sneering smile as he turned to Dalton Clark.

"Who told you that you could top a buckin' hoss?" he jeered. "If you ain't any better with a lass rope than you are at ridin', I can't make a hand of you with the Four-spoke Wheel outfit."

It was on the tip of Dalton's tongue to accuse the Four-spoke Wheel foreman of putting a bur under Midnight's cinch.

But he decided not to speak the words. After all, Bronc was his boss, and Dalton certainly needed this job. He was broke.

He had considered himself in luck when he met old "Eagle-eye" John Gibbons in town and learned that the crippled owner of the Four-spoke Wheel was taking on a few extra hands for a cattle drive across the Tamarack Range through Alto Pass. Dalton had convinced Eagle-eye that he was a top hand, despite his youthful appearance, and Gibbons had brought him out with two Mexicans.

Bronc Bradley, the foreman, Snooty Saunders, segundo, and the rest of the crew had accepted the Mexicans willingly enough, but had shown hostility to Dalton Clark. Dalton could not understand it. He stood the usual horseplay good-naturedly, but now he realized that the razzing he had been handed was not in fun. Bronc acted as if he hated Dal-

ton, though young Clark had never seen him or any of his men before.

Frowning, puzzled, Dalton dropped to the ground inside the corral, went over to Midnight, from which Bronc had dismounted, and began to strip his rig from the fiery black. One glance at the fresh brown stains on the web cincha told him that his guess had been correct. A flesh-gnawing bur had been introduced under the girth by Snooty when the *segundo* had helped him saddle up.

As he stalked out of the corral gate, he came face to face with the little group of Four-spoke Wheel cowboys, and from the expectant look they gave him, he knew something was up.

Bronc Bradley stepped forward with Hunky Spangaard at his side. Hunky's big, broad Polak face wore a wide grin. Hunky was cook at the Four-spoke Wheel.

"Put down your saddle, Dalton," ordered Bronc. "I want you to shake hands with your new boss."

Dalton forced a resolute grin to his face as he lowered his saddle to the ground. It had been his experience in many camps that a stranger must take his rawhiding with a smile. If a new cowboy got angry at the usual hot reception, the hootin', tootin' rannies never let up on him.

"Yeah?" he countered. "It's O. K. with me. But I thought you were my boss, Mr. Bradley."

Bronc Bradley's lip curled. "I don't bother with the roustabouts and chore boys," he said. "Hunky bosses them. Hunky, shake hands with the new flunky."

HUNKY lumbered forward, hand extended. The big bohunk of a cook overtowered even Dalton Clark, who was six feet tall. His hand was as big as a pie plate. His very large, flat, tow-covered head seemed anchored directly to his body at the

point where his two powerful, sloping shoulders rose to a neckless apex.

Dalton ignored the outstretched hand. "Reckon yo're jokin', ain't yuh, Mr. Bradley?" he asked, addressing the Four-spoke Wheel foreman. "I hired out as a regular hand. I've punched cows all my life and busted broncs——"

"You mean broncs has busted you," gibed Bradley. The foreman grinned at his men, who broke into a laugh at the boss's joke. "I'm makin' you roust-about. You can take it or leave it. Hazin' these yere desert critters across the Tamaracks is going to be a tough enough job, without me havin' to ride close herd on no horizontal cowboys. Shake hands with yore new boss, young feller. You two oughter be pals."

Dalton's body stiffened. He had an impulse to throw the job in Bronc Bradley's face, despite his need of money. Yet something held him back. A suspicion was growing in his mind. For some reason, these men wanted to get rid of him. They were up to something.

Opposition had the effect of putting steel into Dalton Clark's temper. He could be coaxed but not driven. It galled him to think of quitting under fire, and on top of that, he could not forget crippled old Eagle-eye Gibbons, who had been mighty nice to him in his gruff way. Dalton had liked Eagle-eye at once, and he had liked Mother Gibbons even more. If he stayed, he might be of service to them.

Abruptly he reached a decision. His hand went out to grip that of Hunky, but his fingers never closed over those of the bohunk. With a loud grunt of satisfaction, Hunky closed his pie-plate paw over Dalton's fingers in a paralyzing grip. One twist brought Dalton to his knees with a gasp of pain.

"Holler!" commanded Hunky. "Beller like a good un, or I'll bust yore arm!"

The yells and laughter of the Four-spoke Wheel cowboys rang in Dalton's

ears. The bone-cracking, twisting pressure on his finger joints, arm, and wrist sickened him. Through this nausea flared a savage anger of hurt pride and humiliation. He could not rise against that pressure, but he could drop lower. The thought was mother to the deed.

Letting his legs shoot out from under him, he kicked savagely at Hunky's shins. The cook released his hold, jerked back with a howl of rage and began to hop around on one leg, holding the injured limb.

Spinning to his feet, Dalton leaped at the unprepared bohunk, set himself and threw an uppercut from his ankles at Hunky's chin. Unbalanced, still on one leg, Hunky was hurled to the ground by the force of the blow, where he sat looking up stupidly at the slighter man.

Dalton Clark was at least thirty pounds lighter than the Polack giant and four inches shorter. But his build and appearance made him a still less likely opponent to the bull-like cook. Hunky's heavy chin was naturally tucked down against his breastbone, by virtue of the extreme shortness of a thick, barrel neck.

Dalton had no such brute advantage. He was just a tall, slender, blond, mustang-muscled American cowboy with a normal neck, a prominent Roman nose, regular features, wide-spaced gray eyes, and a firm but badly exposed chin, very vulnerable if clouted hard on the button.

Silence greeted Hunky's sudden, unexpected downfall. It was Snooty Saunders who first found his voice.

"Get up and go after him, Hunky!" yelled Snooty, in a hoarse nasal tone. His broken nose made him talk that way and had earned him his moniker of "Snooty." "That was a fluke! He didn't knock you down. You stumbled and fell."

"Yeah," came Bronc Bradley's bel-low. "Kick his pants buttons clean through the roof of his mouth! Go to it, Hunky!"

**A**N angry rumble issued from Hunky's bulging chest. With surprising speed, he jumped to his feet and leaped at Dalton, who stood waiting for him. Like a charging steer, Hunky hurled himself at Dalton, arms outstretched to grab him.

The cowboy made no move until the bohunk was right on top of him. Then he suddenly ducked under the flailing paws, side-stepped and thrust out his left boot.

Tripped up, Hunky lurched forward and fell to his knees. He was just rising as Dalton whirled around and, with a single continuous movement of arm and body, landed another jarring blow to the jaw.

Hunky was unprotected. He was in the act of rising. Yet the blow that would have knocked out an ordinary man only shoved him off balance.

Stumbling backward, Hunky raised his arms only to take a rain of punches to the body that brought an angry roar of rage from him. Bent on keeping the cook from setting himself, Dalton tore into him, fists working like pistons, ripping through his guard to connect with his chin, smashing jabs into the flat face, looping torturing hooks to the ribs and midriff.

Dalton had won fights from bigger men than himself by just such spurts of perfectly timed surprise attacks. His tiger-cat ferocity had always brought him victory until now. Hunky Spangaard was taking his hardest punches without weakening.

A sinking sensation came over Dalton as Hunky shook off a hard, knock-out wallop squarely on the button, with a grunt and a bellow. To an onlooker, it appeared that Dalton was winning, hands down. He had Hunky stumbling backward, grabbing at the empty air, clawing into vacancy, always off balance or turned the wrong way.

Bone-crushing uppercuts starting at his ankles swished through the air re-

peatedly to connect with Hunky's face and chin. The claret stained Hunky's cheeks with brownish streaks, and he spat red from bruised and battered lips.

The Four-spoke Wheel cowboys all were silent as their champion seemed on the verge of going down for the count. It seemed to them that no one could stand up under such sledge-hammer pummeling. They thought Hunky was beaten.

But Dalton Clark knew better. It was he who was being beaten. He had shot his wad in one ferocious, savage flurry. He could not keep up the pace for long, and when he slowed down, it would be Hunky's turn. Dalton's breath was coming in gasps. His face burned. His heart thumped painfully, and there was a salt taste in his mouth.

His feet slid forward, still skillfully but much slower. His left jab was short, and the looping right brushed Hunky's ear. He was missing now.

Suddenly he felt a viselike grip on his arm, and the power of a donkey engine jerked him from his feet and hurled him through the air. Rolling over, he caught a glimpse of Hunky's bared teeth, bulging eyes and clawing fingers as the cook came at him.

A little panic seized him as he just barely dodged free of the bohunk's back-breaking grip and began a crafty retreat. The tables were turned. It was Dalton who was on the run, shaken and bruised from the flinging fall, mouth wide open, gasping breath into his tortured lungs. A roar went up from the cowboys as Hunky charged at him, grinning and bellowing threats.

Dalton's eyes were fixed on the advancing cook, when something obscured his vision. He found himself gazing into Bronc Bradley's black-bearded face, and he was hearing Bronc's deep-toned voice rapping out a command.

"Stop it!" yipped Bronc. "Here comes the Old Man. No, you don't, Hunky. Stay back there." Bronc

thrust out a hand to ward off Hunky, who tried to dodge past the foreman to reach Dalton. "Get over there and get to packing the chuck wagon, cook. You can finish this fight later. Dalton Clark, you go with Hunky and do as he orders. If there's any trouble, I'll fire both of you."

**B**EFORE any one could move to obey, a stooped, gray-haired old man came into view on a white-stockinged chestnut. From beneath beetling iron-gray brows he bent keen, penetrating hazel eyes upon the scene.

Old Eagle-eye John Gibbons was so nicknamed because nothing escaped him. Large as his herd was, he knew practically every critter he owned by sight, without looking at the brand.

Instantly he scented trouble and took means to squelch it.

"What the heck you boys doing?" he flared angrily. "Shake the lead out of yuh, Bronc Bradley. Get them loafers to work shoeing them mustangs. Put two boys to packin' the wagons. Snooty, you git over there and finish toppin' off that rough string. It'll soon be noon, and I want to get this drive started."

Before Eagle-eye had finished speaking, the men were moving to obey. The Four-spoke Wheel owner was just hot-headed enough to fire the whole crew on the spot if they crossed him.

Dalton waited for Hunky Spangaard to precede him as both hurried toward the wagons. Coffeepot, kettles, tin plates, sacks of potatoes, sides of meat, slabs of bacon, and other provisions were piled around the chuck wagon, waiting to be loaded.

"Grab that sack of taters, kid, and hoist it inter the waggin," ordered Hunky, grinning evilly at Dalton. "Then pile the rest of that grub in as I tell yuh. *Andale!*" He made a move as if to kick the cowboy.

Dalton stared into Hunky's little, deep-set pig eyes contemptuously.

"I'm takin' yore orders," he said calmly, "but if you lay a hand on me until I'm ready to fight, I'll kill you!" Then, deliberately turning his back on the bohunk, he picked the hundred-pound sack of spuds from the ground and lifted them easily into the big cook wagon.

Hunky grunted insulting words, but he heeded the warning. Dalton set to work with a will, stacking the provisions in as Hunky directed. It was humiliating for a top-hand puncher to do chore-boy work. Under any other circumstances, Dalton would have quit.

But something told him trouble was brewing. Bronc Bradley's eagerness to force him out filled him with a grim determination to hang on, even if he had to cut wood, wash dishes, and sling slop for the bohunk cook for a time to do it.

Hunky snarled and swore at him. Dalton replied with oaths dipped in venom, eyes keenly alert, on his toes to repel a surprise attack. Bronc Bradley was over by the round pen, talking to Eagle-eye and looking in Dalton's direction. From the blacksmith shop sounded the ring of an anvil and the loud oaths of a cowboy who was trying to shoe a fractious mustang.

A Mexican vaquero came up, driving a four-horse team, and proceeded to hook them up to the hoodlum wagon, which was already packed. The snorting and bawling of an angry horse, the *thumpety-thump* of hoofs and the yelping of a bronc-buster come drifting up from the round pen as the last of the rough string had the pitch tanned out of it.

Bronc Bradley's lazy methods had left this work for the last moment, when the drive should have been on the road long ago. The prospects of a long drought had caused old Eagle-eye to round up all his steers to the last runty dogie and sell them up the river as feeders to the Mid-Northern Land & Cattle Co. The skinny desert critters would



quickly fatten up on mountain clover and wild oats and shape into beef stuff, once they were delivered on the northern range.

Eagle-eye had confided to Dalton that he was on his last legs financially. If he did not get his money for these cattle, and get it quickly, he and Mother Gibbons stood to lose the ranch, their only home. The Four-spoke Wheel owner had hired Bronc Bradley, Snooty, Hunky, Dalton, and a few breeds and Mexicans for the job.

Bronc, Snooty, and his men had been working for Eagle-eye only two months, staging the round-up that had gathered the big herd on the upper Wild-cat Creek meadow, which the cattleman had been saving for horse pasture.

**D**ALTON CLARK could see that the Four-spoke Wheel was operating short-handed, for lack of money, and it was this knowledge that made him all the more suspicious of Bronc's actions in trying to force him to quit. Dalton's brain was awl with speculation as he worked, lugging the boxes and lifting them into the wagon.

Bronc knew that Dalton was a first-class ranch hand. He needed such a hand badly. And yet he was trying his hardest to get rid of the cowboy whom Eagle-eye had hired. The loading finished, Dalton helped hitch up.

Dalton hooked the last tug onto the doubletrees and stepped back, as Hunky, on the driver's seat of the chuck wagon, gathered the reins of the four-string into his mighty paws.

Hunky leaned toward Dalton, twisting his face into a fearsome scowl.

"I'll get yuh when we make camp!" he threatened, and then burst into a loud guffaw. "I'm goin' to ketch yeh and break every bone in yore bean-pole body." Again he laughed. "You figured them punches hurt me. Hah-hah! I thought a canary was bitin' me."

He made a sudden motion with his bull whip, but Dalton had already stepped out of sight around behind the wagon.

Whips cracked. The skidders yelled and swore. Horses dug steel shoes into the gypsum sand and stirred up billowing dust as they yanked the wagons out of there. The drive had started.

The wagons would go on ahead and make camp. The herd would follow to the bedding grounds. Horsemen were riding everywhere, shouting commands, questions. The wrangler, with two helpers, hazed the horse cavvy out of a corral and got it started on the way.

Dalton was just taking up the cinch on his own bay gelding, when Bronc Bradley and Eagle-eye Gibbons rode up.

"You can unsaddle that hoss," said Bronc gruffly. "You ain't going on this drive."

Dalton turned to Eagle-eye. "What's the matter, Mr. Gibbons," he demanded. "You hired me to help ramrod them steers. Ain't you satisfied I c'n do the work?"

Eagle-eye shook his head slowly. "When I hired ye, young un, I never thought you was a trouble maker," he declared. "Bronc says you fought the cook over a little joke. He tells me Hunky will quit if you ride, and I cain't spare the cook. Nor I ain't got time to find another one now."

"Meanin' I'm fired?" Dalton rapped out.

"No, son," said the old man patiently. "I allus stick by my word. I hired you, and I'll keep you. I c'n use ye around the home ranch here for a month, mebber more."

"I quit," said Dalton flatly. "I'm a cowboy, not a camp flunky. Give me my time."

Eagle-eye turned away, with a wave of his hand in the direction of the ranch house.

"Go in and tell ma to give you half

a month's pay," he snorted. "I aim to do what's right."

## CHAPTER II.

### TIMBER CRITTERS.

**D**ALTON swung into his saddle and sat there by the blacksmith shop, watching the cowboys ride away toward Wild-cat Creek Meadow to start the steers rolling on their long trek. Old Eagle-eye was going out to see the herd well started. He was too stove up to accompany the drive. He had to trust everything to Bronc Bradley's honesty.

As Dalton gazed at the narrow, bent shoulders and pain-warped body of the gray-haired rancher, his anger slowly died within him. He was sorry he had quit. He felt that he had let Bronc trick him. Eagle-eye seemed so frail and helpless beside the burly Bronc Bradley. Dalton had an impulse to ride after the ranch owner and tell him he had changed his mind, but his judgment told him that Eagle-eye would not take him back.

Dejectedly he rode up to the rambling old ranch house. A buxom, smiling woman stood on the front porch with the Mexican cook and the chore boy, watching the cowboys and wagons vanish in clouds of dust. Her smile changed to a look of surprise as Dalton came up the walk, spur rowels dragging, chains tinkling with each step of his high-heeled boots.

"Well, young man," she said severely, "why aren't you riding with the others?"

Dalton lowered his eyes uneasily before the questioning in Mother Gibbons's troubled blue ones. He felt guilty, even though this was not his fault.

"I'm quitting," he grumbled. "Mr. Gibbons said you would give me my time—half a month's pay."

Mrs. Gibbons smoothed the silvery

hair back from her cheek. Slowly she turned, ordered the cook and chore boy to return to their work, and motioned for Dalton to follow her into the house.

"Come in," she requested. "You've worked here less than a day. Since you're quitting, you are not entitled to half a month's pay."

Dalton Clark followed the gray-haired woman through the living room into a cubby-hole office that reeked with the odor of tobacco and cowhides. In contrast to the spotlessly clean appearance of the rest of the house, this room was a picture of disorder. Old boots, a wooden saddle tree, branding irons, a bed roll already roped, rusty rifles of various calibers, an old musket, coyote pelts, and many other articles filled the dusty corners and littered the floor.

Bullhide chaps, coats, slickers, and other apparel hung from steer-horn racks on the wall. The wide-bottomed chair was wired together. Legal papers, account books, tobacco pipes, cigarette papers, cigar stubs, a hunting knife, an old .44 six-gun, and loose cartridges were strewn about the desk.

The office spoke louder than words of Mrs. Gibbons's understanding of old Eagle-eye Gibbons. It was but one step from the starchy, spick-and-span parlor to this cluttered imitation of a bunk-house room, yet Mother Gibbons treated the dirty place as a sanctuary.

She halted beside the desk and turned around. Dalton stood just inside the room. His unruly blond hair, damped with sweat, and his dirt-streaked face added to his boyish look. As Mother Gibbons faced him, she gave a gasp, and tears welled into her eyes.

Dalton was startled out of his sullen calm. "Why, what's the matter?" he blurted. "Ain't you feelin' well, Mrs. Gibbons?"

The old lady sank into the broad-bottomed chair and raised a wrinkled, work-worn hand to brush the gray hairs back from her brow.

"Don't pay any attention to me," she said. "I'm just a silly old woman. You gave me a start. You look so like my own son, standing there. He was about your age——"

Her voice broke. She began to cry. Between sobs, word by word, she told the story.

Grant Gibbons, their only son, had been killed in a cattle stampede, less than a month ago. Grant had been riding point in a narrow canyon, when the steers had stampeded down on him. It seemed that no one was quite sure just what happened, but his crushed body was found, dead.

"But what was wrong with his hoss?" asked Dalton, as Mrs. Gibbons finished the story and wiped the tears from her eyes. "Why didn't Grant ride it out?"

"I don't know," murmured the old lady. "Nobody knows."

Dalton looked rather puzzled. "That's funny," he said. "His bronc must have fell or throwed him——"

"That's just it," she burst out. "His white-stockinged chestnut was never found. Even the sheriff couldn't trace it. It was a brother to the one my husband rides. Oh, is it any wonder I hate Bronc Bradley?" —

**D**ALTON rubbed his palms on his pants. "What did Bronc have to do with it?" he asked gently.

The old lady's eyes blazed with sudden anger.

"He was in charge of the cattle," she cried. "Why didn't he do something? Why did he put Grant in such a dangerous place?"

"Even a foreman can't stop stock from stampedin'," suggested Dalton. "What I cain't understand is how a saddle hoss could vanish, complete and entire. Somebody must 'a' stole it."

A stubborn look came over Mrs. Gibbons's careworn face.

"You're just like all the men," she

retorted. "They all try to say that the chestnut run out on the road and was grabbed by a hoss thief. But I'm sayin' I don't believe it. I'll tell you what I think."

In her excitement, she rose and caught Dalton's arm. "My boy was murdered," she sobbed. "Somebody killed him. If you could find Grant's horse, you'd have the man that did it."

She began trembling and would have fallen but for Dalton's hand on her elbow.

Dalton eased her into a chair. Anger was welling up within him. His tanned, muscled hands balled into fists, yet he kept his tone low and collected when he said:

"I'd like to be the one to ketch that killer."

Mrs. Gibbons raised her head. Her eyes were shining through her tears.

"Oh, you will help me!" she cried hopefully. "If only you'll stay. I'm so frightened. I feel something terrible is going to happen. Ride after my husband. Go now! Don't let him out of your sight."

Dalton strode out of the house and stopped beside his tethered mustang. His thoughts were on fire.

"She is right!" he growled, as he tightened cinches and felt the reassuring hardness of his six-guns in the saddlebags. "Bronc Bradley and his crew are up to some dirty work. That's why they were so anxious to get shed of me. One of that gang killed Grant Gibbons, and before I'm through, I'll make him pay for it!"

Dalton pulled his Winchester from its scabbard, examined the shiny, well-oiled mechanism and replaced it.

Still fuming, he rode in the direction taken by Eagle-eye, Bronc Bradley, and the Four-spoke Wheel crew, spurring his mount into a dead run on the level stretches. Eagle-eye might be in danger right now. Not until Dalton came in sight of the old man did he take a

deep breath and pull his mustang down to a sauer pace.

In a few minutes, he joined Eagle-eye and Bronc, who were watching the point man and the leaders start the herd along the northern trail. Neither paid any heed to Dalton.

Snooty Saunders, the *segundo*, was riding point, his buckteeth gleaming, mouth wide open as he bawled a trail song. He was so close that Dalton could make out his deformed foot and the slits in his boot, through which protruded toes that were swollen from bunions and corns. All the other punchers, sweating, swearing, and hazing the critters at flank, swing, and drag, were half-breeds and Mexicans. Dust billowed and swirled around the mass of bellowing, horn-tossing red beasts.

A big red steer among the leaders stopped stock-still, tossed its horns, waved its head from side to side and abruptly darted toward the brush, tail sticking straight out. A vaquero on a fast little circle horse spurred in pursuit, yelling and waving his rope.

Instead of turning back, the steer whirled and kept going. The lariat sailed through the air. The loop dropped over the widespreading horns. The little cow pony planted all four feet squarely in the sand and sat back as the puncher took dallies around the saddle horn. There was a twang of tightened rope, a yell of triumph, and the loud thump of a heavy body as the critter hit the ground hard, where it lay for a moment, stunned and breathless.

"Look at that," burst out Eagle-eye, as the rider hazed the conquered animal back into the herd. "That ain't a Four-spoke Wheel critter. Where did he come from?"

Big as his cattle herd was, the keen-eyed old rancher knew all of them and spotted a stranger instantly.

"Shore, that's one of yourn," Bronc contradicted. "Cain't you see them ears? Cropped right and undercut left."

EAGLE-EYE spurred closer to the cattle, with Bronc and Dalton following.

"Dang it!" growled the old man. "Three more big strays. Them steers never got that large on shad scale and chamizo. They ain't mine, I tell yuh. They're Spade branded. How did they git mixed up with my stock, Bradley?"

Eagle-eye turned angry eyes on the unblinking foreman, and Bronc's jaw worked slowly on a chaw of plug cut. He spat a brown stream into an ant hill before replying.

"You done forgot about that little passeli I bought cheap offn the travelin' hoss outfit," the foreman explained. "Them's the fellers."

"But you never told me they were mossies," flared Eagle-eye. "The only steers that get that big around here are fattened on mountain clover and service berry. My critters is all skin and bones compared to them. Cut them out of the herd!"

"What for?" argued Bronc. "They been vent-branded to you, and we got a bill of sale."

"Never mind the argument," snapped Eagle-eye. "It'd be plumb crazy to try to take them mossies across the Tainarack sumnit. One whiff of incense cedar, and they'll start rollin' their tails. I know mountain stock. They're all a lot of brush skulkers. Them bunch quitters will break at the first mountain crick and stampede the whole herd. Give orders to cut them out!"

The old man's tone was brittle. Beneath thick gray brows, his hazel eyes glinted coldly. Bronc pretended to yield and promised to follow orders as soon as it could be done without interrupting the drive.

Eagle-eye gave final orders and then turned and started in the direction of the ranch, chin on chest, warped body bent, his old leathery face wrinkled in an anxious expression. He did not seem aware of Dalton Clark's presence

until he dismounted at the hitch rack and came face to face with him.

"Ain't you gone yet?" demanded Eagle-eye impatiently, and entered the house without waiting for a reply.

"I changed my mind," said Dalton, following him inside.

"Well, I ain't changed mine," grunted Eagle-eye. "Come in and get yore time."

Angrily the old man slammed across the room and into his office. Dalton, right behind him, saw the graybeard jerk a gun belt from a desk drawer and begin buckling it around his thin waist.

"Ma will write you out a check," pursued Eagle-eye. "I'll tell her before I leave. You quit in a huff, and you'll stay quit." He picked up the old .44 from the desk and began plugging cartridges into the cylinder.

A startled gasp at the door caused both men to turn. Mrs. Gibbons stood there, staring in alarm at the gun Eagle-eye was shoving into his holster.

"What are you doing?" she cried. "Where are you going with that gun?"

Eagle-eye avoided her gaze. "I'm ridin'," he grumbled. "Goin' to make sure Bronc gets shed of them mossies. Nothin' wrong. Just danged laziness. Goin' heeled on a chanct I mought get a shot at a coyote. Pay this young cub half a month's time and let him go."

Still without meeting Ma Gibbons's eyes, the old fellow threw the bed roll over his shoulder and limped through the doorway. Running after him, she caught his arm.

"John!" she burst out. "What are you doing? You're not able to ride. Remember what the doctor said. What is wrong, John?"

Glumly the old man pulled free and shoved past the screen door out onto the porch.

"Nothin's wrong," he flung over his shoulder. "I'm just gettin' tired bein' a danged weaklin'. You c'n git along

with the cook and chore boy. Don't fret. I'll be back inside a month."

Mrs. Gibbons followed close behind him, but she did not try to stop her husband. She knew him too well. But as the grizzled old man cinched his bed roll behind the saddle and prepared to mount, she turned to Dalton, with a panicky cry:

"Go with him!" she sobbed. "Help him! Please, please help me now!"

Dalton Clark put his arm around her bent shoulders. Eagle-eye had fired him, but he wouldn't let a little thing like that stop him now.

"I'm ridin', ma'am," he said.

### CHAPTER III.

#### OUT FOR THE COUNT.

A GREAT black patch spreading out over the gray sage marked the location of the main herd. It was dusk. Over among the cottonwoods at the edge of the sink, the flickering flame of a camp fire glinted on the waters of the big pool.

Mustangs and cattle came and went, drinking at the water hole. Near by, the night horses were huddled in a rope corral, muzzles buried in nose bags.

As Dalton and old Eagle-eye entered the Four-spoke Wheel trail camp, the night jingler was whooping the rest of the cavvy away across the white sand. The ring of an ax mingled with the wailing song of the cowboys riding guard.

Old Eagle-eye reined over until he clicked stirrups with Dalton Clark. During the ride, the two had come to an understanding.

"The first thing is to make sure Bronc got shed of them timber critters," growled Eagle-eye. "If he ain't, I'm firin' him and puttin' you in his place. That's the program, but don't you horn in. I'll do the talking."

A knot of men, including Bronc Bradley, Snooty Saunders, and Hunky,

the cook, were grouped around the tail board of the chuck wagon, drinking coffee. At sight of the arrivals, all came forward.

"What's up, boss?" sang out Bronc Bradley. "Anything happen?" He sent a quick, darting glance at Dalton, but did not betray his feelings.

Eagle-eye dismounted beside the hoodlum wagon and sat down wearily on the wagon tongue.

"Unsaddle my hoss and sling my bed in there," he growled. "I'm sleepin' in the waggin. Did you cut them messies out, like I told you, Bronc?"

Dalton Clark had dismounted. Leaving his reins atrail, he removed Eagle-eye's roll, tossed it into the hoodlum wagon and led the chestnut over under a tree out of the way to unsaddle the animal.

He turned to look at Bronc when the foreman, instead of answering, began to tell about the day's drive.

Eagle-eye waved his foreman aside impatiently.

"What t' heck do I care about all that," he snorted. "Snooty, ketch me up a fresh bronc. Saddle him for me. I'll see for myself."

Snooty and Bronc exchanged glances as the *segundo* moved toward the rope corral to get a fresh horse. Dalton removed Eagle-eye's saddle, draped the wet blankets over a bush and led the fagged animal down to the water to let it drink. He could hear Bronc Bradley explaining why he had not cut the timber critters out of the herd.

As Dalton came back from staking out the chestnut, he saw Snooty and Bronc both busy saddling up a fresh mustang for the old man. It was the black buckler, Midnight. The foreman and *segundo* were talking in low tones.

Filled with a sense of uneasiness, Dalton stood by the chuck wagon in the shadows, alert and watchful while he ate cold beef and beans and swigged down scalding black coffee. He pur-

posely had left his own mount standing saddled.

As Snooty led the black mustang over to Eagle-eye, Dalton dropped the tin cup of coffee and slid swiftly forward, fingers touching the butt of his .45 six-gun, concealed under his coat. A sharp feeling of danger prodded his nerves. He felt that something was about to happen, and yet he dared not make a move until he was sure.

Eagle-eye was in Midnight's saddle. Nothing happened. The spindly legs of the rancher did not quite reach the stirrups. Snooty bent over to shorten them.

"This cinch needs tightenin', too," he muttered.

At the words, Dalton Clark jerked his six-gun from his belt and gave a sharp cry of warning. They were jobbing the boss as they had done him. There was a bur under the girth!

"Don't touch that cinch, Snooty," he rapped out. "I got yuh covered——"

His words broke off in a gurgle as he felt a mighty hand close over his mouth, and a grip of steel, clamped around his wrist, jerked the gun from his fingers. Hunky's triumphant yell rang in his ears. Out of bulging eyes, he saw the black horse bog down its head, arch its spine and break into a fit of bucking.

**J**ABBING back his free elbow, Dalton twisted and kicked free of Hunky's hold. Just as he dodged back, he caught a glimpse of Eagle-eye hurtling through the air. The old man slammed the ground hard and lay still.

Hunky lurched forward, clawing at Dalton. The cowboy ducked under Hunky's right arm and slashed out with a terrific wallop to the stomach. It was a blow that would have stopped an ordinary man, but Hunky shook it off, with a grunt, and ripped a sleeve out of Dalton's coat as the puncher tried to jerk free.

Frantically Dalton started a stumbling retreat over the rocks and brush at the water's edge. His lips were torn and crushed from the pressure of the big paw. Crimson was running over his cheeks where the bohunk's finger nails had sunk in.

Filled with the despairing certainty that no blow of his could knock Hunky out, certain that Bronc would get him, even if he won, and knowing that Eagle-eye was badly hurt, perhaps dead, Dalton was inspired now only by the instinct of self-preservation. Hunky would maim him if he got a chance. He must keep free of those arms.

Dalton stumbled. Hunky leaped in. The cowboy suddenly ducked and made a flying tackle. His arms closed around Hunky's legs below the knees, and he clamped them together. With a loud ker-plunk, the cook toppled over into the sink.

Dalton heard the snorting of frightened cattle and the thud of their hoofs as he rolled free, inspired to sudden hope by the sight of Hunky down on his knees in the pond. Hunky gurgled oaths and spat out dirty water. His hair was plastered to his head, and his body and clothes were slick with slimy red mud.

The cowboy leaped at Hunky just as the cook was rising. He saw Hunky set himself—saw the fist coming at him as the giant struck. But he could not avoid the crushing blow. It caught him below the heart.

Dazed, blinded, he felt himself falling. Something cold slapped him in the face. Water! He came up gasping, slobbering water and moss, but was hurled under the surface the next instant, as Hunky's two hundred and fifteen pounds fell on him.

Frenzy endowed Dalton with maniac strength. His body thrashed around like a dying shark. Hunky's fingers were closing about his throat, pinning Dalton's head under the water.

Streaks like lightning flashed before his eyes. His throat was tortured. He knew he was drowning. In another minute, he would have to take a breath that would only suck more water into his lungs.

To make it more horrible, he knew there was no hope of rescue, no one who would lift a hand to stop this murder. Eagle-eye was injured. None of the vaqueros would dare oppose Bronc.

His right hand, groping madly over the bed of the water hole, settled over something sharp—a pointed rock. With one last crazy surge of strength, he gripped it and jabbed the point into Hunky's wrist, twisting it as he did so.

The bohunk jerked back, releasing his grip. With the strength of a drowning man, Dalton turned over and bulged above the surface, jerking his slippery body free, mouth wide open, gulping stinging air into his lungs.

Hunky's square head and flat, slimy face loomed before him, and he hurled the sharp rock squarely at it. Too late, Hunky threw up both hands and tried to dodge. It gave Dalton the moment he needed for escape.

Stumbling, falling, flailing the water with his hands, he fought his way out of the pond and onto the muddy bank. On hands and knees, he turned his head, to see Hunky coming on, a smear of red darkening the mud on his face. Hunky's thick legs plowed through the water with great force. He was swinging his arms and swearing as he charged in.

Dalton wobbled to his feet and tried to run. His legs would not move. His lungs ached with each painful breath. At the first step, he felt Hunky catch his boot heel, and he was down, thrown into the mud, rolling over and over.

**O**N his back, facing skyward, he struck out with both feet at Hunky's bulging chest and grinning face. One sharp heel struck Hunky in the ribs; the other ripped a

hole in his coat sleeve. The blow, added to his own weight, hurled the giant aside. He fell to one knee, grabbing at his lacerated arm.

Again hope gave Dalton new strength. Rising, he took one step toward the kneeling bohunk and swung hard, unexpectedly at his chin. His knuckles crashed into Hunky's mouth, causing the cook to slash out with both hands and toppling him over by his own force when he missed.

Carried past Hunky by the blow and his rush, Dalton kept retreating. Hunky got to his feet slower this time, but he came on. Dalton moved away from him cautiously, breathing deep, pleading for strength to return quicker. His legs were sagging. He stumbled and almost fell. To his surprise, he saw that Hunky was wabbling, too.

Behind him, he heard yells. All the Four-spoke Wheel cowboys were watching the fight. Bronc Bradley was grinning behind his blue-black beard, his jet eyes bleaming. Beside Bronc stood the bucktoothed, club-footed Snooty, and behind the foreman and *segundo*, the firelight glistened on greasy, swarthy faces and ebony eyes.

A mad, unreasoning anger swept over Dalton Clark. Suddenly halting, he met the advancing cook and began pumping blows to the body. His arms, heavy as lead, churned like pistons. His head was lowered, eyes almost closed, and his breath came in gasps. He felt Hunky's arms close around him, but the usual crushing force was lacking.

Dalton felt his legs buckle, and he was going down, slipping to the ground. Through a red haze, he could see Hunky's wide-open mouth, glazed eyes, and big hands grabbing at him blindly.

Abruptly Hunky vanished from in front of him. Dalton could see the sky and the stars above. Out of the corner of his eye he glimpsed Hunky, just sinking down, groaning, body heaving with exhaustion.

Dalton's last resistance gave way, and he, too, sank against the earth with a heart-rending gasp of relief.

The fight had ended in a draw, with both men too far gone to continue.

#### CHAPTER IV.

"YOU'RE FIRED!"

LOUD guffaws of laughter penetrated to Dalton Clark's befuddled sense. Painfully he sat up, shaking his head to stop the buzzing in his ears. Something warm and sticky was running down his cheek. Lifting a leaden arm, he dabbed at it with bruised and aching fingers.

The laughter grew louder. The film slowly lifted from his eyes, and the sight he saw caused him to roll over and pull himself to his feet, clutching at a swaying sapling. The yells came from a group of cowboys around the camp fire. They had a bed roll and were scattering the things all over the ground. It was his outfit!

Bronc Bradley was swinging a rifle up to smash it against a tree. Dalton caught sight of the silver star in the stock, and he croaked a hoarse protest: "Hey! Stop! That's my rifle!"

His words ended in a groan. Bronc swung the rifle against a cottonwood trunk. There was a crash. Splinters and parts flew in every direction. Main spring, trigger, leaf, sear, magazine spring, and follower showered to the ground.

The Four-spoke Wheel cow-punchers turned grinning faces to the staggering, crimson-stained Dalton Clark as the young puncher faced them. From a bed in the hoodlum wagon, Dalton could hear Eagle-eye's voice demanding to know what it was all about. The sound of that voice lent him new courage. At least, the old man was alive. Bronc Bradley did not intend to kill Eagle-eye, or he would have done so under cover of the accident. That realization



lifted one great weight off Dalton's mind.

Reeling dizzily, he groped about, picking up his scattered belongings, stifling groans as each movement sent stabbing pains through him. What could he do now, unarmed and outnumbered?

As he finished rolling his belongings into the tarp, he glanced up, to find Bronc Bradley standing over him. The grin was gone from the black-bearded face. Bronc's cruel black eyes gazed.

"Ain't you had enough?" he snarled.

"Nobody's licked me yet," retorted Dalton.

He knew the odds were against him. The next blow might maim him for life. But he could not desert old Eagle-eye so long as he could lift a hand.

"You're fired for fightin' the cook," snapped Bronc. "Get the heck out of this camp!"

"Eagle-eye hired me, and he'll have to fire me," said Dalton stubbornly.

"All right," rapped out Bronc, turning away toward the hoodlum wagon. "I'll see that he does."

Slumping down on his bedding, Dalton pawed in the pocket of his wet, sticky shirt for the "makin's," found the soaked tobacco and threw it away. He was shivering from the cold. His wet clothes stuck clammily to his skin, and the red mud clotted his hair, coated his hands with slime and sloshed in his boots as he walked.

All this, added to physical exhaustion and the ache of a dozen wounds and bruises, filled him with a sense of hopelessness and despair. He felt more like sinking down on his bed and falling to sleep than fighting, and yet he prodded himself to keep alert.

He could see the Four-spoke Wheel cowboys talking together and looking at him. What they planned to do next, he could not guess, but he did realize that he had no weapons to protect himself. His six-gun was gone, his rifle smashed to smithereens.

Eagle-eye's impatient voice sounded from the wagon, calling him over. Dalton limped to the hoodlum wagon and looked in. In the darkness, he could see Eagle's-eye gray-bearded features, faintly outlined by the glow of his cigarette.

"What the heck you been up to now?" demanded Eagle-eye harshly.

DALTON did not answer. He was startled at the change in attitude of the boss. The old man had been friendly when they rode into the trail camp. Now he seemed to be siding with Bronc Bradley.

"Light a match, Bronc," rasped Eagle-eye. "I want to look at this feller that cain't talk."

While waiting for Bronc to find a match and light it, Eagle-eye was fuming and swearing. He had suffered a broken leg in his fall. It was done up in splints now, and he wasn't going to let a busted peg send him home. It would heal in the hoodlum wagon just as well as anywhere.

A match flared, lighting up the interior of the wagon and revealing Bronc Bradley's white teeth gleaming in a sarcastic grin behind his blue-black beard. In the few seconds that the match blazed, Dalton saw two things that sent a thrill through him. Eagle-eye's right lid was lowered in a significant wink, while the other eye was cocked at the battered old .44 six-gun and belt that lay within easy reach.

"You're fired," blatted the old man. "Leave yore crow bait and take the black with the saddle on him. The difference between the two rigs'll pay for all you done and more. Get the heck out!"

Eagle-eye blew out the match. In the instant of blindness that followed, Dalton's fingers closed over the .44, jerked it, belt and all, toward him, and then he was leaping over the wagon tongue to reach the black mustang, Midnight.

A man loomed up before him. Dal-

ton's hands were busy buckling on the belt. Bronc's warning shout caused the fellow to turn around. It was Snooty Saunders. Snooty grabbed at Dalton just as the young cowboy leaped at him, hit him with his shoulder and sent him sprawling.

Beyond the chuck wagon, he saw the black mustang, saddled, with reins at rail, and darted toward it.

"Stop him!" yelled Bronc Bradley. "Grab Clark! Lasso him, but don't shoot. You'll start a stampede."

It was the danger of a stampede that saved Dalton from death as he swung aboard Midnight and swept away down the back trail in the direction of the Four-spoke Wheel home ranch. But for Bronc's command, he would have been cut down by a dozen bullets.

The yelling behind him died down. The black horse went like the wind. Pursuit was soon left far to the rear. After that, it was like a nightmare, holding his racked and battered body in the saddle while he circled around ahead of the herd until he found a commanding hill from which he could watch.

He had to drive himself to unsaddle the black, stake the animal out and then drag his protesting body down into a steep canyon where he could build a fire undetected and dry out his clothes.

His matches were all wet. He had to start a blaze by grinding a pointed stick rapidly in a little pile of dry moss, wood dust, and pitch. It seemed hours before a tiny haze of smoky vapor rose from the moss and then burst into flame.

Once ablaze, the pitch-pine slivers roared into a hot fire, and he was soon drying his clothes before it and scraping the mud from them. He was ready to drop from exhaustion, but the sharp, cold wind kept him moving, turning first one side and then the other to the blaze.

He baked on one side and then froze on the other, until finally his clothes

were dry enough to put on. Then drawing his coat over his head, he sank onto the sand beside the bed of coals and instantly fell asleep.

Toward the hour of sunrise, he awoke, rubbed the cramps out of his legs and climbed stiffly to the hill, where he saddled the skittish black. Stars were paling. In the cold dawn, the outlines of the distant mountains to the west were dark and forbidding. A dim light camped the eastern peaks. Down on the main trail, a moving dust cloud warned him that the drive was under way. He could make out the camp wagons. In one of them lay Eagle-eye Gibbons.

**P**ULLING his torn coat tighter about him, Dalton hunched forward in his saddle and rode toward them. He had to learn how the old man was. It would kill Mother Gibbons if anything happened to Eagle-eye.

Dalton's lips were dry, his throat harsh and sore from thirst, and hunger knawed at his stomach. But he put aside thoughts of himself as he waited near the road in an ocotillo thicket, one hand on his mustang's muzzle to prevent its whinnying.

The wagons lumbered past, raising clouds of dust. Hunky was cracking his long whip from the seat of the chuck wagon. A lean, saddle-colored Mexican drove the hoodlum wagon.

Dalton was wondering how he could get a look inside that wagon at old Eagle-eye, when Gibbons's voice struck his ears.

"*Lentamente, chico!*" trumpeted the boss's cracked voice. "Take it slower. You don't have ter hit every rock in the road."

Dalton breathed freely. At least, the old man was alive and as peppery as ever. In his canny way, Eagle-eye was making Bronc believe he did not suspect him. His life would not be safe if

Bronc Bradley felt that the old fellow would interfere with his plans.

The Four-spoke Wheel boss was entirely helpless. All his hope lay in the fighting ability of Dalton Clark, and Dalton resolved that the hope would not be misplaced.

Drawing nearer the camp, Dalton watched the point man gather the leaders while the vaqueros hazed the red beasts to moving in one direction. Among the leaders were a number of larger cattle—the timber critters.

Bronc had not cut them out as ordered. This meant that he was going to use them to help steal the herd. All that stuff about buying them from a traveling horse outfit had been lies. Bronc and his men had planted the fat woodland steers in the trail herd, knowing that they would break away when they got near their old stamping grounds.

"That's it!" exulted Dalton. "It can't be anything else. My job is not to let them mossies out of my sight for a minute. They hold the key to this whole cussedness."

The big herd moved on, leaving the camp deserted. As soon as the drags vanished, Dalton rode in, drank deep of the cool water, loosened the cinches to let Midnight do the same, and then began a careful search of the grounds. If only he could find a blanket, a frying pan, coffeepot, and some salt! He had no bedding, no food, no utensils for cooking any meat he might kill.

His search proved fruitless. Nobody had left anything of value. He picked up a can to serve as a frying pan, filled it with water and started on, following the main trail, looking for a stray. His stomach was empty, and he was still weak and shaken from the fight. He longed for a cup of coffee or a smoke.

The sun mounted. Wind devils sent swirling twisters into the air, traveling across the desert like small cyclones. Dust filled his eyes. Drawing his red

bandanna about nose and mouth, he pulled his hat low and plodded on.

Toward mid-morning, he shot a crippled dogie and stopped long enough to fry a steak in his can. Without salt, it sickened him, but he wolfed it down and rode on, carrying some meat with him, never letting the timber cattle out of his sight for long.

Days passed. Dalton added to his equipment little by little from articles picked up from deserted camp sites—an old blanket, a coffeepot, a can of coffee, an old frying pan. Not until he found a full canteen hidden in some brush, did he awaken to the fact that Eagle-eye was dropping some of those things for him.

Nothing happened. Bronc Bradley made no hostile move. Dalton's greatest fear was that of being seen. If any of the punchers saw him or cut his sign, the game was up.

**T**HE trail grew steeper, narrower, and rockier. Dark, forest-clad mountains reared skyward on all sides. Greasewood and cactus vanished, and in its place appeared junipers, firs, spruce, and pine.

Mountain streams tumbled in silvery torrents down rocky creek beds. Golden orioles sang among the fringed thread-like stems and yellow flowers of the Gila plant and the delicate rosy petals of the lilac mariposa.

White-tailed deer lured Dalton to hunt, but he dared not leave the trail herd now. The hill cattle were getting more and more restless. The big fellows stood for long periods of time gazing at the cool, inviting canyons, working their nostrils as they smelled the aroma of pine cones, Arizona fescue, and wild wheat. Once the leader broke for cover, but a vaquero tailed it down, and more riders, coming to his assistance, halted a threatened break.

"Reckon we ain't got to the right spot yet," mused Dalton uneasily.

"When them timber critters get near home, there'll be no stoppin' them, and they're bound to take the herd with 'em. And I've got no way of guessin' when it'll happen."

What he would do—one man against so many, when the break came—Dalton did not know; but he set his jaw and hung on, inspired by the memory of Mother Gibbons's faith in him.

From a timber-lined hilltop, he watched the trail camp in the starlight for the tenth night. For three days, he had stood a twenty-four-hour shift, catching snatches of sleep in his saddle, nerves worn to a frazzle by lack of proper food and rest.

Doubts assailed him. Was it worth while torturing himself like this? What if he had guessed wrong, and Bronc had some other plan altogether?

Suddenly he leaned forward, peering through the darkness at a lone rider who moved away from the camp. It was Bronc Bradley. The black-bearded foreman was riding like mad, northward.

"Yeow!" exulted Dalton Clark. "Git after him, bronc!" He fed steel to the black as he spoke, and careened in pursuit. "The fight's started. Heck will be poppin' soon!"

## CHAPTER V.

### TRAPPED!

**O**N the eastern rim of the trail camp, a broad cow trail dipped down onto a wide plain covered with knee-high black galleta grass, dotted here and there with large patches of hackberry and juniper.

There Dalton reined in behind some rocks, savage mutterings of chagrin on his lips. He had lost sight of Bronc Bradley. The foreman had given him the slip. The soil was too badly chopped up by hoofs to trail him, especially in the darkness.

"Dang!" grumbled Dalton. "A fine

scout I turned out to be. If he gets away from me now, I'll never know what he's up to."

Out of sullen eyes, Dalton swept the gentle slope and expanse of mountain meadow beyond, clear to the high, impassable cliffs on the far side. Nothing moved down there. If Bronc had gone that way, he was already under cover.

Dalton tightened the reins to forge ahead. The saddle-galled black started, but stopped as the cowboy reined him in with a sharp exclamation. A little herd of big red longhorn cattle burst from a patch of Western yellow pine and came up the slope toward him. Behind the steers galloped a swarthy vaquero and a bigger man whose features seemed to be obscured by a dark mask. As they came closer, the mask was revealed as a beard. It was Bronc Bradley, coming back.

Dalton snorted in disgust. "Another false alarm," he muttered. "Bronc is just ketchin' up some strays."

He leaned forward abruptly, gaze fixed on the brands of the fifteen-odd cattle. They were big steers, Spade-branded. Timber cattle, exactly like those in Eagle-eye's herd.

"Bronc's drivin' them up here to help lead the Four-spoke Wheel stock to the Spade hideout!" growled Dalton. "It's a slick trick. Look! Bronc's riding away again. Git after him, Midnight, old hoss!"

The Spade-branded mossies scattered out on the ridge. Dalton galloped down onto the meadow in pursuit of Bronc, keeping to cover of trees, gullies, gulches, and fringes of brush. He managed to catch glimpses of Bronc until he almost reached the cliff.

The slender trunks, scented yellow flowers, and spreading branches of the white-barke'd morning-glory trees screened the fleeing foreman and the vaquero from view. Just beyond loomed the seemingly impassable granite cliffs.

Bronc could not escape. If he turned to the right or left, he would be out in the open. To go ahead, up the rock wall, appeared to be impossible.

Throwing all caution to the wind, Dalton rode in among the tree acacias, dismounted and peered across the level that separated him from the talu-strewn base of the cliffs. Bronc was not in sight. He and the vaquero had vanished.

But where? There was no cover of any kind near by. The only possibility was a narrow, densely brushed slit in the rock wall. At every other spot, the cliff was unscalable for several miles.

For long minutes, Dalton leaned against a tree trunk, absently peeling the white tissue-paper bark with his fingers, eyes on that slit in the rocks. If Bronc and the vaquero had entered there, they might be watching. To ride across the open space would invite death. Yet Dalton did not hesitate.

Mounting, he urged Midnight out of the thicket. No shots came. There the ground was trampled by cattle hoofs, wiping out any trail Bronc might have left. Trees, weeds, and grass grew thickly among the boulders at the base of the mountain.

Dalton reined in before the brushy fissure and looked about him in alarm. The slit was impassable. The entrance was thickly filled with brush, bushes, intertwining vines and brambles that would have stopped a rabbit.

He looked at the ground for hoof-marks; but could find no sign. Raising his eyes, he saw that steep rocky walls rose straight toward the sky just beyond this thicket. Evidently this was only an indentation and not a passage at all!

**D**ALTON slumped in his saddle, all the starch taken out of him. The expectation of a fight had keyed him up, but now the exhaustion of sleepless nights and foodless days

told on him. Without enthusiasm, he made an examination of the rock wall for two miles in both directions and scouted the surrounding country in vain.

As he was resting under a live oak, a thought came to him that sent him galloping back toward the trail camp. What if this was a trick to lure him away while the herd was being stampeded?

Not until he came in sight of the dark mass of cattle bedded down in a large clearing on the ridge did he slacken his pace, and then only to substitute caution for speed. There! Some of the cattle was moving. The mossies were on their feet, looking off toward the wide plain, their nostrils dilated, heads up, tails curling over their backs.

Dalton looked for the guard on that side. He was gone! Everything was all ready for the stampede. It was a perfect set-up.

A noise behind Dalton caused him to turn quickly. A tongue of flame licked out at him from the black depth of a thicket. He felt the wind of the bullet as it zipped past his face, and the next instant, he had the old .44 in hand and was pumping lead at the spot. Powder flashes leaped at him from a pile of rocks, and he turned to fling a shot at the second gunman.

Midnight reared and plunged, terrified by the spurts of flame and the roar of six-guns.

The animal abruptly leaped forward with a squeal of pain, stumbled and went to its knees. As it lurched to its feet again, Dalton left the saddle, alighted, doubled up and rolled over and over until he brought up behind a tree trunk.

Bullets chipped bark from the tree trunk and churned the pine needles and cones on both sides of him. Dalton snapped his gun at an exposed sombrero, but there was no explosion. Jacking the dead shells out of the cylinder,

he fumbled fat .44 cartridges out of the belt and plugged them home.

A hullabaloo of noise came from the trail camp. Loud yelling and the firing of guns mingled with the hawling of frightened steers and the subdued drum of many hoofs on rocky road and lava cap. Above the rumble rose the shrieking voice of old Eagle-eye Gibbons.

"Stampede!" howled the old man. "Stop 'em! Stop that stampede! Turn 'em back! Get 'em to millin'! Stop—stop 'em!"

Gripping his loaded .44, Dalton listened, with teeth clenched, eyes bitter, face drawn in a grim expression. Eagle-eye had relied on him, and he had failed. Bronc had trapped him, unhorsed him, and now had him pocketed while Bronc stampeded the Four-spoke Wheel stock.

This meant ruin for the old man, for Mother Gibbons. It meant the loss of their ranch, their only home.

The firing in front of him ceased. Had the gunmen left, thinking him helpless afoot? The black horse, Midnight, was down, hopelessly crippled. He lay on the ground at the foot of a little ridge, still thrashing around.

Dalton poked his hat around the tree. A bullet clipped through the crown, and a six-gun roared its warning. The killer was still in front of him. Dalton cautiously started to worm his way backward from the tree trunk. A slug kicked leaf mold into his face, and another zinged from a rock just beyond him, causing him to jump behind the tree again.

Would he have to crouch here like a fool and let Bronc Bradley's gang run off the Gibbons's cattle? His whole being rebelled against it. He was tired, sick, hungry, desperate, ready to risk all in one mad try.

Quick as the thought, he made the try, leaping out into the open and firing at the blob of yellow flame that bloomed in a thicket to his right. A bullet seared the flesh of his hip as he charged at the

thicket. Another nicked the lobe of his ear, but he did not stop. Only one gunman was opposing him. The other had left or was down.

Dalton tore blindly through the brush, throwing steel-jacketed death at each flash of the enemy gun. His gun hammer clicked on dead shells, but he did not stop. Clubbing his gun, he leaped over the last bush, ready for a hand-to-hand struggle. A dark huddle lay at his feet. One look at the swarthy face told the story. It was a Four-spoke Wheel vaquero, dead.

**R**EMOVING the dead man's gun belt, Dalton crossed it over his own, picked up the .45 six-gun, knocked the dirt out of the muzzle, and began loading it as he circled swiftly in search of the Mexican's horse. Precious minutes passed. He called, but the mustang did not whinny or move.

Dalton widened his circle, crawling through brambles, tearing his hands and face, calling softly to the animal. In his fuming impatience, he lost track of time. He had to get a mount and he knew that the dead gunman must have one hidden near by. But where?

The noise of the stampede died away. Bronc's gang was escaping with the cattle. Dalton spoke hot words savagely, loudly. A horse whinnied so close to him that he jumped. There, under a tree, stood old Eagle-eye's white-stockinged chestnut.

In a flash, Dalton popped into the saddle and was whipping along the twisting trail and in among the ruins of the camp. Pots, pans, bedding, saddles, and other articles, hopelessly trampled, littered the place. The fire had been scattered. The tongues of both wagons were broken. A big coffeepot with a great dent in it lay on its side.

With a sinking heart, he turned toward the hoodlum wagon, where all was now silent. What had become of Eagle-eye Gibbons?

"Hello, there!" he yelled.

"Hello yourself!" yelled Eagle-eye's voice, and a tousled gray head appeared above the end gate. "Git after them rustlers, you ding-danged, fozzle-headed, horse-faced idiot! I trusted yuh. I thought you'd outfox Bronc. But he was right. Yo're just a purty-faced yahoo."

The old man said a lot more, but Dalton was out of earshot, riding pell-mell across the camp grounds, past the broken-down rope corral and onto the side trail that dipped down to the meadow. Little groups of runaways were running in all directions, but the main body had vanished. Bronc had got away with it!

Shifting his six-guns within easy reach, Dalton spurred boldly out into the open, down onto the plain, quirting the chestnut to a dead run toward the high cliffs. The solution must be over there, where Bronc had disappeared so mysteriously. A sound caused him to rein in, but he went on again when he saw that it was only a bawling calf, lost from its mother.

As he reached the ghostly, white-barked morning-glory trees, a triumphant cry escaped him. On all sides, the saplings were crushed and trampled. There were marks of cloven hoofs and gobs of dark soil that had been thrown up. He was on the right trail. The stolen cattle had to be somewhere near.

For the second time that night, he hesitated in the shelter of the tree acacias, uncertain which way to turn. The steers could not be far away, yet he could neither see nor hear them. In front of him was the cliff which offered no passage even to a man on foot. On his left were unscalable mountains. Off to the right stretched the rolling plain that offered no concealment for such a large body of stock.

Circling about, dismounting to read sign, staggering from weariness, Dalton at last gave up in despair and started

slowly back to camp, clinging to his saddle horn to keep his seat. At least, some of the steers could be rounded up and saved. It was unlikely that Bronc had led all of them into his trap.

Again the bawling of a calf reached his ears. The spindly-legged, long-eared little fellow squatted down behind a bush and did not even move when the cowboy picked it up. It began to kick and bellow louder as he held it on the saddle before him.

"By jinks! Mebbe you c'n lead me to them critters," exclaimed Dalton. "Yore ma will shore answer, little feller, if you c'n reach her with yore big bazoo. Let's go!"

Back to the trampled tree acacias rode Dalton, clinging to the kicking, struggling calf, fighting to keep control of his excited horse. He dropped the animal where the broken brush showed that the herd had gone through, and waited. The calf darted away, circled, bawling louder, and then made for the impenetrable hedge that barred the gap, with Dalton right to its tail.

At the brushy slit in the rocks, the calf stopped, lifted its head and filled the air with strident cries. Dalton flung himself into the thick growth and began to claw his way forward.

"The opening's got to be here," he growled. "Even the calf knows that."

Pawing clinging honeysuckle aside, cutting at wild-rose thorns with his knife, he suddenly felt his blade hit something solid—a board. His next slash exposed a gate, painted green.

**R**ECKLESSLY tearing his way through trailers and vines, he climbed the high gate and dropped to the other side, six-gun in hand, eyes sweeping the crooked, twisting canyon in which he found himself. No one was in sight. No shots were fired.

Here rock walls rose in front of him, but a side trail led off into a larger

canyon. Fresh cattle sign was plentiful. The stolen herd had come through there. But he still could not understand how the herd could have come through this gate without trampling the dense foliage that guarded it.

The gate was an enormous one, supported by many huge hinges. As he went over to lift the bar that held it shut, he noticed that the free end rested on a wheel and that there were deep marks in the soil, showing where it had rolled back.

Yanking hard, he pulled the gate toward him. The rusty hinges groaned, and the wheel wobbled as it supported the free end of the heavy structure. At the sound, Dalton ceased pulling and whirled around, both guns in his hands. Still nothing happened.

Now Dalton saw that the trailers, vines, brush, brambles, and rosebushes moved inward with the gate. They were growing on a platform attached to the gate. The whole mass moved inward with it. When closed, it gave the impression of a deep thicket. Moss and vines concealed the platform.

"I've got a chance to surprise them," grumbled Dalton. "I'll jest git my boss—"

His words broke off in a groan as the calf burst through the opening and darted up the canyon, bawling loudly.

"Dang!" snarled Dalton, leaping for his mustang. "They'll know the gate's been opened. The calf will warn them."

Through the gate he rode, made the right-hand turn and emerged into a grassy canyon rimmed by towering cliffs. Willows fringed a deep, clear pool ahead of him. Douglass spruce and white pine dotted the level floor. Far ahead, he detected a faint flicker of a camp fire among live oaks, and he galloped toward it.

At a narrow place in the trail, a dark figure appeared, blocking the way. Some one over at the fire was yelling. That crazy calf had warned them.

"Who is that?" bawled the lookout. "That you, Snooty? Ride forward easy, feller, and give the password. I got yuh covered."

## CHAPTER VI.

### BRONC BRADLEY'S SECRET.

AT the challenge, Dalton's hand dropped to his gun, but he did not draw. The lookout still thought he was Snooty Saunders. If he could keep up the deception for a few seconds longer, it might delay the gun play. Over at the camp, he heard Bronc Bradley's voice raised in a bellowing command to the lookout.

"It's me," yelled Dalton, imitating Snooty's nasal voice. "Gangway for a gun fighter!" He was lifting his lass rope from the saddle horn as he shouted.

The lookout drew aside, still peering at him suspiciously as he continued forward at a gallop. Suddenly the guard let out a yell and reached for his six-gun. A wild-cat loep darted from Dalton's hand, dropped over the lookout's head and jerked tight around his neck.

The rope snapped taut. The yell ended in a gurgle and a loud thump, as the lassoed man was jerked from his saddle and hit the ground hard.

Letting the lariat drop, Dalton kept going toward the camp fire at full speed. Behind him, the man he had roped, lay motionless, his cries stilled; but at the camp, Bronc was shouting excited questions, his suspicions aroused.

"It's me," shouted Dalton, still imitating the *segundo's* voice. "Get inter yore saddles." He lowered his head to pass under a tree branch as he spoke and made a running dismount in the shadows.

In the clearing around the camp fire, he could see three men standing beside their mustangs. Two were Mexicans. The third was Bronc Bradley, and at sight of the horse which Bradley held, Dalton felt a surge of triumph sweep over him.



Bronc's mustang was a white-stockinged chestnut, a mate to the one Dalton rode. Through Dalton's mind flashed a picture of Mother Gibbons, and her words rang again in his ears:

"When you find the other chestnut horse, you'll have the man who murdered my boy!"

The gray-haired mother's hatred of Bronc was justified. The foreman had slain Grant Gibbons and had not been able to resist the temptation to steal the fleet half thoroughbred!

"I got him!" growled Dalton under his breath. "I got a rustler and a murderer in one."

Bronc was roaring angrily at the supposed Snooty Saunders.

"Where are you, Snooty?" he yelled. "Get the heck over here! What are you stoppin' for?"

His answer was the sight of twin six-guns, poked above the chaparral tops at him, and a sharp command in Dalton Clark's curt voice, ordering him to raise his hands.

"I got all three of yuh covered!" Dalton rapped out. "The jig's up. Hoist them dewclaws!" This last was spoken as Bronc made a move toward his six-gun.

Outlined by the firelight, perfect targets for the hidden gunman, the three rustlers stiffened in their tracks, eyes glued on the black gun barrels. The Mexicans surrendered instantly. Bronc lifted his hands more slowly.

"You fool!" snarled Bronc. "You can't get away with this. You can't fight my whole crew alone."

"Lower one hand easy, Bronc, unbuckle yore belt and let it drop," was Dalton's grim reply.

Bronc made no move to obey. His white teeth gleamed in a sneer behind his blue-black beard. He thrust his head forward defiantly.

"I'll make you an offer, Clark," he said. "This is no piker deal. There's thirty thousand dollars in it, if there's

a cent. We've worked for months to make it perfect, and we ain't letting no two-bit bronc-peeler spile it. Snooty and me split two ways, payin' the Mexes wages. I'll cut you in for a third, if you'll listen to reason. That's ten thousand dollars, twenty years' pay at forty dollars puncher's wages. Are you listenin'?"

"Yeah," drawled Dalton Clark. "I hear you."

"Well, what do you say?" rasped Bronc impatiently.

"I say, shuck them irons or I'll drill you clean!"

"You wouldn't dare kill a man deliberate," flared Bronc Bradley.

"I'm countin' three, and then I'll cut yore pins from under you," threatened Dalton. "Yo're stallin', waitin' for help to come, but it won't work. One—two——"

AT the count of two, Bronc lowered one hand, unbuckled his belt and let it and the guns drop to the ground. One at a time, Dalton made the two Mexicans disarm. The guns of all three lay on the grass. Dalton changed his language to Spanish.

"*Ahora, señores,*" he growled, stepping forward into the open. "Bradley says you get only wages as thieves. I offer you wages and one hundred dollars in gold to be honest vaqueros. What do you say?"

"Don't listen to him," burst out Bronc Bradley. "He's a liar. He's got no one to help him, or he wouldn't need you hombres to help him. I'll give you two hundred dollars in gold besides yore pay."

"'Hombres'!" snorted Dalton. "You see, señores, this burro insults you. He does not know how to address a Mexican gentleman."

The Mexicans consulted in quick-spoken words. Dalton had touched a tender spot. The *paisanos* from across the border are very proud men. They

tolerate American discourtesy with inward resentment.

Bronc kept bawling at them, coaxing, threatening, increasing his bid, not knowing that Dalton's finer strategy and knowledge of the Latin mind had won him victory.

"*Bueno*, Señor Clark," said Felepe, the larger of the pair. "We do w'at you spik. *Vamos!*"

"Wait," ordered Dalton as the vaqueros started to mount. "First, I want you to tie up Bronc Bradley. Use them piggin' strings in his belt. Bind his hands behind him. *Comprende? Ata-lo!*"

With a snarl, Bronc turned on the Mexicans. "The heck, you will!" he flared. "If you dirty skunks lay a hand on me, I'll kill you both——"

A knife flashing in a brown hand warned Bronc too late that he had said the wrong thing. Uttering a little gasp of fear, he took a backward step, chilled at the threat of cold steel. Only Dalton's command saved him.

"Wait a minute there, men!" burst out Dalton. "Don't kill him. And you need not bind his hands. Get into yore saddles, all of you."

Back of him, Dalton could hear groaning and swearing coming from the man he had roped off the horse. The fellow was recovering and must be taken care of at once.

"Which mustang is yores, Bradley?" concluded Dalton.

A startled expression crossed Bronc's face, to be quickly masked by lowered lids and a mouth that clamped tightly shut.

Felipe pointed to the chestnut. "Thees a one, she belong to heem," he volunteered.

"That's a lie!" cried Bronc. "One of these Mexes slapped my rig on this chestnut, but I never saw the horse before."

Dalton grinned at Bronc sarcastically. "What's the matter, Bradley?" he

drawled. "Why are you so scared to claim the chestnut?"

Bronc fell silent, gazing sullenly at the ground. Dalton's eyes flamed with savage anger. His fingers tightened on his six-guns.

"I'll tell you why!" he exploded. "It brands you as a murderin' hound. That's Grant Gibbons's horse. The feller that killed him, took it. You plugged Eagle-eye's son!"

Bronc's head jerked up. "I did not," he denied hotly. "You can't prove it. It was an accident. Even old Eagle-eye didn't blame me. You can't prove a thing."

"I'll have a long time to get proof," promised Dalton, "while yo're rottin' in prison for cattle stealin'. You're busted. Your men will squeal. They'll tell me how you got possession of Grant's bronc. Tie him up, señores. *Ata-lo.*"

To Dalton's surprise, the Mexicans did not obey. Instead, their wide-open eyes focused in alarm on something behind him. Too late, Dalton realized that he was trapped, even as he started to turn about.

The hard metal barrel of a six-gun prodded him in the ribs, and Snooty's nasal voice rose in a harsh, triumphant guffaw.

"Tie him up, señores," mocked Snooty. "Ain't you nice to the Mexes? Yeah, tie him up." Snooty's laugh rose shrilly and then died to a snarl. "Drop both guns, you sneak!" he grated. "If you make a false move, I'll kill you deader'n a doornail!"

**D**ALTON felt his stomach turn over from the sheer nausea of despair. Certain victory was being snatched from his hands. He had been too cocksure of himself. Now he was beaten, ruined, almost certainly doomed to die.

In front of him, he saw the triumphant Bronc Bradley stooping to recover

his fallen six-gun. The vaqueros vaulted into their saddles and took to cover.

Dalton could not see Snooty behind him, but by lowering his eyes, he got a glimpse of an enormous deformed foot, toes swollen by bunions, corns protruding from slits in a boot. It was Snooty's bum foot.

The inspiration came. Holding the rest of his body very still, Dalton slowly raised a boot and then, with a stabbing movement, set his sharp heel down hard on Snooty's throbbing corns.

Paralyzed by the awful pain, Snooty waited a split second too long to pull the trigger. In that short space of time, Dalton spun around, knocked the gun out of his back and slashed backhand at Snooty's face with the weapon he still held.

A deafening explosion almost shattered his eardrums. Powder stung his neck and cheek. Reeling backward, grabbing his cut face with one hand, Snooty still held onto his six-gun and tried to fire again. Dalton could have shot the half-blinded man, but instead, he struck the gun from Snooty's hand and then knocked the rustler to the ground with his own six-gun barrel.

Snooty sank with a groan. Dalton heard an exultant snarl behind him, and turned just as Bronc opened fire. Bronc was charging straight at him, a six-gun in each hand, shooting as he came, his black-bearded face twisted in a sneer, mouth wide open as he yelled defiance.

Dalton swung up both of his Colts, fingers on the triggers, knuckles whitening as he held the big guns with steely grip. His forefingers squeezed triggers. The six-guns jumped and jerked in his hands, spurting orange-tinted death. But Bronc kept coming, still fring.

A blow jerked Dalton half around. His left arm fell to his side, and the six-gun dropped to the ground. He tried to lift the arm, but could not. Crimson began to drip from his finger tips. Falling to one knee, he steadied

the other weapon, took careful aim and fired. The spurt of flame and smoke and the upward jump of the six-gun veiled his vision for a moment.

As the haze of drifting gun smoke puffed away and his glaring, bloodshot eyes resumed their normal focus, he saw Bronc lying on the ground, face down. Walking over to the foreman, he turned him over with an effort. His knees sagged. One sleeve was soaked with red, and the injured arm flapped against his side like a dead thing.

Yet he steeled himself to keep going. He dared not give up, now that victory was his.

Bronc Bradley was dead. The law had been cheated of punishing the killer of Grant Gibbons. But Mother Gibbons would be just as glad to know that it had come out like this.

**A** SHOUTED command in Spanish brought the vaqueros riding in. They were anxious to join the winning side. They brought in the staggering lookout, who also promised to obey Dalton.

Then the tall Mexican skillfully treated and bandaged Dalton's arm, talking to him in Spanish, proud that the American understood him.

Snooty Saunders stirred and sat up. He tried to lift his arms, but could not. Pigging strings held them behind his back. Grant Gibbons's white-stockinged chestnut stood beside him.

"Here's yore hoss, Snooty," said Dalton Clark. "Get up and mount. The vaqueros are already hazing the herd back to camp. The jig's up. Reckon we won't lose very many critters, after all."

Snooty lurched to his feet, head down, eyes venomous.

"You'll suffer for this," he snarled. "Wait until Bronc Bradley gets you —" He broke off speaking, as he saw Bronc's body draped over a saddle. "Heck!" he gasped. "You got him, too!

You beat the gang, single-handed!  
What kind of a wild cat are you?"

"Just wild cat enough to nail the man  
that killed Grant Gibbons," said Dalton.  
"Get aboard that chestnut. Felipe will  
help you. That's yore hoss, ain't it,  
Snooty?"

Snooty recoiled from the chestnut as  
if it was a snake.

"No!" he cried violently. "That's not  
mine. It's Bronc Bradley's."

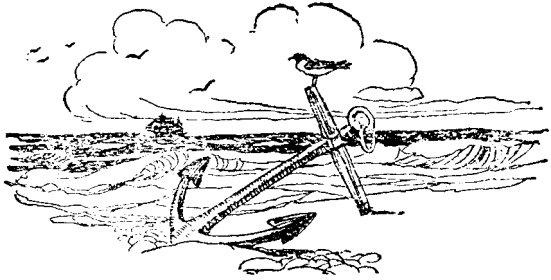
"That's funny," mused Dalton. "I  
reckoned you killed a feller—got him  
trampled to death in a stampede—and  
then run off with his saddle hoss—"

Snooty's expression changed from  
defiance to terror.

"Gosh!" he gasped. "I'm a rustler,  
but I ain't no murderer. I swear I'm  
innocent. It was Bronc got Grant killed  
in that stampede. Grant got wise to us.  
Bronc said he would take care of him,  
but I never expected murder. You got  
to believe me. Can't I do something to  
convince you?"

Dalton reined his bronc away with his  
one well hand and took up the slack on  
the other chestnut's lead rope.

"Come on," he said wearily. "The  
vaqueros told me Bronc done it, but I  
just wanted to check up. I couldn't go  
back to face Mother Gibbons until I  
was sure her son was avenged. Too bad  
it was a bullet 'stead of a rope."



## UP-ANCHOR!

By CRISTEL HASTINGS

WE'VE got the rusty mud-hook up—  
She's green with weed and slime.  
We're sailing with the turning tide,  
No more of cities' grime!  
We'll head for clean blue waterways  
And, mates, we'll drink our fill  
Of winds that howl across our bow  
And through the hatches spill!

We'll drink *jamoke* and cuss a lot  
Before this cruise is done.  
We'll fight and pray—and fight again  
Through spray that weighs a ton.  
We'll sit around a fo'c's'le lamp,  
Each man in his bare feet.  
We'll slap the greasy cards about  
In plays that can't be beat!

We'll spin our yarns and talk of home  
As sailor men will do.  
We'll brag of girls in other ports,  
And wonder if they're true!  
We'll split the old harmonica  
With all the tunes we know,  
And then begin again—unless  
We have a fight below!

We'll hate each other worse than rats  
That leave a sinking ship  
Before the news of "Land Ahead"  
Leaps forth from lip to lip.  
And then, some day, the lookout's cry  
Will drift aft, like a sob—  
We'll drop the hook and roll ashore  
The same as any gob!



**It was plain murder. But these were hardened service men and they'd see it through if it took**

# The Last Man On By William M. Stuart Guard

**B**OATSWAIN DAVIS, of the coast-guard cutter *Conesus*, shifted his quid from starboard to port, and spat impressively. "You birds wanta get it into your heads that this ain't no holiday excursion. The skipper didn't put us ashore here at False Pass to collect geological specimens. We're here to stop the *Vampire*—if she comes along—and we're goin' to do it!"

He glared at his audience of five. "Any o' you dubs wanta ask questions?"

"I'm not sure, bos'n, that I understand all of the features of the case. Just what are we to do if the *Vampire* comes along? Are we to fire upon her?" Ordinary Seaman Herbert Craney saluted and stood at attention.

Boatswain Davis's stained lips twisted into a sneer. "Features, eh? Well, Craney, your features don't give you away as a regular fire eater. I mind now that you was some scared the other day when lightning hit the foremast o' the *Conesus*. However, I'll answer

your civil question. This is the whole dope:

"The *Vampire* is the damndest outlaw craft in these waters. She's an old-timer at the game of illegal seal hunting. Well, the Old Man has positive information that she's now in Beriug Sea with her hold full of seal hides. Naturally, she wants to get out and leg it for Vancouver. To do this, she's got to run through one of the passes of the Aleutian chain of islands. So our captain has landed a small party at each of these channels, or passes, to watch for her."

"She may try here?"

"It's more'n likely, I think, since we're quite a distance from the other nearest landing party. But, Craney, we don't slap no wrists in this matter. When the *Vampire* shoves her nose in sight, I challenge. See? If she don't stop, I'll open up with the machine gun and our rifles. They ain't no damn outlaw sealer goin' to twist the coast guard's tail and get away with it. And that's that! Any more questions?"

"Not from me, sir." Seaman Herbert Craney sank down on a rock and glanced in an embarrassed way toward his grinning companions.

"Well, then, we'll get on the job. The first thing is to find a good camp site. I don't know how long we'll have to stay. Maybe two weeks. I'll try hard to keep you birds amused. But let me warn you about somethin'."

He pointed at a number of seals who were disporting themselves on the rocks not far away.

"Don't none of you dare to take a pot shot at them seals! They're protected by law. We're here to guard their many old hides, or the hides of others like 'em. Any guy what fires at a seal will be court-martialed when we get back on the *Conesus*."

The boatswain spat again with evident relish, sprang upon a rock, and stared appraisingly about his little kingdom.

There was nothing especially impressive about the island, which embraced, perhaps, ten acres. A few clumps of pine trees managed to grow among the rocks. The berries the men had already found to be quite useless.

The salmonberries, which grew in riotous profusion, resembled large and watery raspberries, but they were almost tasteless. The whortleberries were even worse, being sour and full of seeds.

It seemed apparent that the island had no permanent population, if the small herd of seals were excluded. These animals now climbed rocks and gazed with the dignified gravity of old men at the party which had come among them.

"Some place!" snorted Boatswain Davis. He grinned sardonically at his men. "Guess 'tain't necessary fer me to warn you galoots to leave the likker alone."

He gave a hitch to his trousers and stroked his chin reflectively. "Before we camp we'll select a place to mount the machine gun. That high, rocky point'll do. It'll give us a plunging fire. Snap into it, you gobs, and roll up a breastwork of rocks. Them pirates on the *Vampire* may take it into their heads to shoot back when the ball opens."

The point selected rose perhaps a hundred feet above the water, and at its base the waves foamed and boiled among the jagged outcroppings of the precipice.

The islet to the west appeared very near, but it was, in fact, a mile distant. However, the navigable channel closely skirted the island upon which the coast-guard party had taken position.

A half hour's work sufficed to construct a snug little fortress. In this the machine gun was mounted. Its sinister muzzle projected over the barricade as though awaiting its prey impatiently.

"We'll take it down every night," an-

nounced Boatswain Davis. "Its innards are easily affected by salty night air. 'Twill take but a minute or two to put her into position if an alarm comes during the night. Now you, Murphy, you stand the first shift of guard duty, while the rest of us find a suitable camping place."

Highly pleased with his present executive position, which indeed was his first independent command ashore, the boatswain led the balance of his party on a tour of the island.

To facilitate the search, the men separated. Within a few minutes, a shout from one of the sailors drew the others to him. He had located a fairly sizable cave on the south shore, not more than three hundred yards from the fortress.

"Just the place," approved Davis. "Better than a tent. Now we'll rustle in the grub and blankets, and cook our first meal. I'll select one o' you guys fer to be the cook, who'll be relieved from guard duty. I'll take my regular shift at standing guard, but I can't cook. If a commissioned officer was here, he wouldn't do neither one. You, Prutzman, look like you used to run a delicatessen store, so you're unanimously elected cook. Congratulations—and hop to it. I'm as hungry as a walrus."

"Orders?" asked Prutzman, with a pained look in his eyes. "Or merely a suggestion?"

"Orders," said Boatswain Davis.

"I accept on one condition," warned Prutzman. "The first fellah that kicks on my cooking will have to take the job. Howzat, bos'n?"

"Sounds like mutiny, but I'll agree. And so will the others."

The rest voiced no objection. The provisions and baggage were transferred to the cave. Then the newly installed cook set about the task of preparing supper.

The muffled report of a rifle shot echoed outside the cave.

"Fer the love o' Pete!" bellowed

Boatswain Davis, as he sprang to his feet. "Is that damn steamer comin' already?"

THE boatswain, closely followed by the rest of the party, dashed out and charged toward Murphy's post. They found the sentry gesticulating angrily, and shouting at some one who was apparently at the base of the cliff. He turned as he heard his companions approaching. "That damn Siwash wouldn't stop," he announced, "until I plumped a bullet across his bow."

Far below, a native canoe containing a middle-aged Indian, a younger man, and a girl of about ten, had just beached in a little cove. Obeying Boatswain Davis's shouts and gestures, the natives climbed the steep slope and confronted the sailors.

The boatswain eyed the older man suspiciously. "Hunting sea otters, eh?"

"No, t'anks!" grinned the native.

"Whatcha doin' round here, then?"

"Oh, fishin' an' huntin' mebbe. Goin' back to village now."

"Huh! Got any pelts in your canoe?"

"Oh, no!"

Davis turned to Seaman Craney. "Run down and inspect this bird's skiff. I think he's lying."

Seaman Herbert Craney started promptly, and the little girl went with him. She grinned shyly as she trotted alongside the sailor.

Reaching the boat, Craney inspected it carefully, but found nothing save some fishing tackle, a muzzle-loading musket of a century-old model, some dried meat, and a blanket or two. Yes, there was another object—an uncouth doll carved from a piece of soft wood.

"Thass mine," declared the little girl proudly.

Craney turned and stared at the lass. Despite her coarse black hair, her beady eyes, and her dirty face, she reminded him of his own sister back in Maine. He

stroked her head and gave her a quarter.

"The next time your dad or your grandpa goes to a trading post, have him buy you a new doll," he said.

The child's smudged countenance blossomed into a delighted smile. "Nize man," she murmured. "You are nize. I lak you!"

As Craney turned to go back up the hill, the girl plucked him by the sleeve. "Nize man," she whispered, and a terrified look came into her eyes, "go away soon, quite queek. No stay here—get hurt, mebbe."

The sailor chuckled, patted the little girl's head, then went back to Davis and reported, "No game in the canoe, sir."

The boatswain grunted, and turned again to the Indian. "Well, you may go on. But don't let me catch you shooting seals or otters. Not even *my* men can shoot seals."

"Oh, no—s'pose not!" grunted the native incredulously.

"Say, bo," growled Boatswain Davis, "you don't know what discipline in the coast guard is. If one of my men shot a seal, he'd be clapped into jail pronto, see?"

"Huh!" The Indian allowed this startling announcement to sink in.

For a member of the Coast Indian tribe, he was a powerfully built fellow. Clad in garments of skin, he must have stood at least five feet eight inches in height, and his weight could not have been less than one hundred and eighty pounds. Sundry scars disfigured his naturally evil countenance, and one of his front teeth was broken.

He turned. "I go now."

"Just a minute!" Davis seized the native by the shoulder and spun him around. "I've heard tales that you Siwash are in cahoots with the sealing pirates. If you're one of 'em— Well, don't let me catch you at it, that's all. Now vamose!"

The Indian snarled like a vicious dog, turned, and descended the slope. He was followed by the girl and the young Indian, who from first to last had uttered no word. They entered the canoe and paddled away toward the north. A haze that had settled over the water soon hid them from view.

"Let's go back and eat," proposed Davis.

Supper was not yet ready, in view of the fact that Prutzman had followed the others to the rock, but a half hour sufficed for him to prepare a hastily and not too appetizing meal.

"These eggs," growled Boatswain Davis, as he stowed one away in his capacious mouth, "are the dammedest tasting things! But," he hastened to add, as a sudden memory stabbed him: "I like 'em! They're fine, Prutzman—give me another!"

**F**OLLOWING supper, the boatswain announced the schedule of night guard duty. Excluding the cook, the men were to rotate on four-hour shifts. The sentry was to call his own relief, hence there would be an interval of a few minutes when no one was on guard at the point of rocks.

However, Davis believed that this would not matter. It would take a steamer a considerable length of time to approach the passage after first coming in sight.

Now he turned to a young seaman named Graham. "Relieve Murphy," he ordered, "and send him in to supper. In four hours come in yourself and call Brown. That will be at nine o'clock."

Without a word, Graham shouldered his rifle and departed.

"Tell Murphy to bring in the machine gun," the boatswain called.

"Aye, aye, sir."

A few minutes later, Murphy stumbled into the cave puffing from the weight of the gun. "I'd hate to carry this thing for a mile," he growled.



"Anything stirring out there?" demanded Boatswain Davis.

"No, sir."

Murphy ate his supper in silence. Two of the sailors collected some sticks and kindled a fire at the mouth of the cave. Then the party all turned to and played cards for a couple of hours. Eventually, by mutual consent, they sought their blankets and stretched out on the rocky floor.

Some time later, the men were roused by Boatswain Davis, who stood with his flash light focused on his wrist watch. "It's ten o'clock," he muttered, "and Graham has not come in. Go out and relieve him. Brown. His watch must have stopped."

Brown rose, yawned, rubbed his eyes, seized his rifle, and departed. But within a few minutes rapid footsteps were heard approaching. Brown rushed into the cave.

"Graham's not on post, sir," he announced excitedly. "I didn't see him anywhere."

Davis sprang to his feet, swearing. "Kindle the fire," he roared. "I wonder if that damn gob has deserted. Did you notice whether our boat was still on the beach, Brown?"

"No, sir. I didn't take the time. Graham failed to challenge. I walked right into the fort, but he wasn't there. I called, and got no answer."

Muttering fiercely, Davis snatched up his rifle. "Craney, you come with Brown and me. We'll see what's the matter."

The three men rushed out into the night and presently were at the point. There was no moon, but the stars were brilliant and objects at a distance could faintly be discerned.

From the top of the rock, Davis turned his flashlight toward the spot where the party had beached their boat. The craft was still drawn up on the shore. "He didn't skip, at any rate," growled Davis.

"I have a possible explanation, sir," volunteered Craney.

"Well, shoot!"

"It may be that Graham sat down on this rock barricade, went to sleep, and fell off the cliff."

"Hah! I fancy you're right, Craney. Graham was always a sleepy bird—a dead one. The whole performance would be just like him." The boatswain leaned out over the rocks and turned his light on the dark surface of the water beneath the cliff. "Nothing in sight," he muttered. "There wouldn't be. But we'll go down and look."

The party hastily scrambled down the side of the elevation that sloped to the little beach where their boat was drawn up. From there they made their way as best they could to the base of the precipice.

They found not the slightest evidence of Graham's fate.

"Well, Brown, it's your trick," said Boatswain Davis, after the men had regained the redoubt. "Let this accident teach you to stay awake while on sentry go. Keep on the move—don't sit down for a moment." He consulted his watch. "At two o'clock come in and call Prutzman. He'll have to take his turn now, for we're short-handed."

Leaving Brown on post, Boatswain Davis and Seaman Craney returned to the cave. Davis made a brief explanation to the others, informed Prutzman of the change in plans, then sat down and gloomily smoked his pipe, occasionally muttering to himself.

**A**LL were oppressed by the tragedy, and none could sleep. Several suggestions were made, but the boatswain impatiently waved them aside. Finally he rose.

"I'll slip out and see how Brown's coming," he explained. "Keep the fire going. It seems to me there's quite a chill in the air."

In exactly three minutes he was back,

his face showing ghastly white in the glare of the camp fire. "Brown's gone!"

The three other men were instantly on their feet. "What?" they shouted.

"Murphy," panted Boatswain Davis hoarsely, "you stay here and guard the gear. Prutzman, Craney, come with me. There's devilish work going on here, and I don't understand it."

At the barricade, the men scanned every inch of the surroundings by the light of Davis's pocket torch. Brown's rifle lay on the ground, but there was no sign of the sentry.

Craney stooped, touched a rock with his finger, then held it up to the glare of the flashlight.

"Blood!" he murmured.

"Yes," said Davis with unwonted calmness, "just as I suspected. This was no accident. Brown was murdered."

"Some of the *Vampire's* people?" suggested Prutzman.

"Undoubtedly." Davis sank on a rock, the butt of his rifle resting against one foot. "This is the way the matter stacks up, boys: The *Vampire* is a regular treasure ship. Her cargo is worth a fortune. Therefore her captain will use every means in his power to escape. Our party is the smallest and most remote, so he'll try to force this pass. Besides, the *Conesus*, after landing us, steamed toward the west to inspect the other posts, and won't be back for several days. The *Vampire's* skipper must have been tipped off as to our weakness and location."

"The Indian," suggested Craney. Whereupon he told of the little girl's warning. "But I thought nothing of that," he added. "She was so small. Little girls are afraid of everything."

"Yes," agreed Davis. "Old Scarface is undoubtedly a spy. The *Vampire* is lurking somewhere off to the north, just out of sight. A boat's crew did this dirty work."

"But why," asked Prutzman, "didn't they take our boat?"

"Why?" snorted the boatswain. "Because they want us to throw up the sponge and get out. That would solve their problem. They don't care to do any more killing than is necessary."

He puffed thoughtfully on his pipe. "Men, shall we quit?"

"No!" growled Prutzman.

"No!" echoed Craney, promptly, if with less force.

"Bully boys!" approved Davis. "No, we won't quit. For the rest of the night, Prutzman and I will double up on this post. We're both old hands at the game. Craney, you're the youngest of the party, and therefore the least dependable. You go back to the cave with Murphy. To-morrow we'll figure out our plan of campaign."

The double guard was not molested; no further tragedy developed during the night. After breakfast, Davis ordered a thorough search of the shore to ascertain whether a boat lay concealed in a hidden cove. No trace of one was discovered.

"Haven't I heard that this island is cursed?" broke in Murphy. "And that the natives avoid it, saying that demons live here?"

"You've probably heard that bunk," sneered Boatswain Davis. "I have. But you may depend upon it, some one sent out that fairy story for a purpose. It would likely trace back to the skipper of the *Vampire*."

**A**LTHOUGH Boatswain Davis had been up most of the night, he would take no rest during the day. He superintended the mounting of the machine gun, and spent most of his time prowling restlessly about the island.

"One thing's certain," he said, "the boat's crew are not here now. They probably left right after bumping off poor Brown. I don't believe they'll come back. They believe that two murders will scare us off."

Throughout the day, nothing developed to disturb the routine. Save for a solitary eagle, a flight of wild geese, and the seals, there was no sign of life about the island.

The sky was clear, and the sea shimmered in the fierce sunlight. The blue outlines of islands farther to the west could faintly be made out.

As night approached, Murphy volunteered for the first shift of guard duty. "No one will sneak up on me, sir," he told Davis.

"I don't believe they'll be back to-night," returned the boatswain. "But if you hear oars, fire your rifle at once."

"Leave it to me," said Murphy with a smile of confidence.

But at nine o'clock, Murphy failed to call Prutzman as his relief. Boatswain Davis's face was solemn as he picked up his rifle to inspect the post. "Prutzman," he said, "I'll take Craney with me. If it's as I expect, both of us will remain on guard for four hours. Then I'll send Craney to call you. I'll try to stick it out till morning. Get some sleep if you can, for we don't know what's ahead of us."

The boatswain's worst fears were soon realized. As he and Craney made their way to the point of rock, no challenge rang out. They found Murphy's rifle, but no trace of the seaman. It could easily be imagined that the assassin had crept upon him noiselessly from behind, stunned him with a blow, and cast his body over the cliff into the sea.

Craney's teeth were chattering. "Lord, bos'n," he murmured, "this is awful."

"Cheer up," growled Davis. "Half of us are left. We'll hold this pass till hell freezes over. Hereafter, two of us will stay on guard together. I should have started that with the first shift to-night—but I had thought the danger past."

In spite of his fear, Craney could not refrain from admiring the grim cour-

age of his officer. The old bombastic air had now been discarded, and Boatswain Davis showed a cool determination to see the matter through.

"I'll stick with you," Craney murmured huskily.

"I think you've got nerve, after all," said Davis. "I did have doubts of it. But when a guy makes himself toe the scratch in spite of how he feels, why, that's real nerve."

Thereafter the men talked little. Sitting on a boulder, back to back, they patiently watched.

Scarcely a sound broke the stillness of the night. The waves lapped audibly at the foot of the cliff, and occasionally the flapping and grunting of the seals could be heard. But that was all. The stars burned coldly in the cloudless sky, and the air seemed charged with drowsiness.

Boatswain Davis often nodded, but regularly roused himself. "I'm all in," he admitted. "Up most of last night, all day, and so far to-night. But I'll stick it out," he added fiercely. "No dirty sealing pirates are going to beat me."

The hours slipped by.

"Go and call Prutzman now," directed the boatswain. "Then you turn in. Prutzman and I will hold the fort till morning."

Craney was glad enough to obey this order.

The fire at the mouth of the cave had sunk to a glowing bed of coals. Prutzman, rolled in his blanket, lay quietly in the middle of the rocky floor. He did not respond when shaken.

Craney turned his pocket torch on Prutzman's face, then recoiled with a cry of horror.

The sailor had been foully murdered as he slept!

Craney scarcely knew how he managed to stumble back to the post. Mechanically he answered the challenge and blurted out his appalling news.

"Lord!" rumbled Boatswain Davis. "So they've even invaded our cave."

He was breathing heavily. "Two of us left," he murmured. "We must stick 'er out. Craney, we must hold the fort together. Do you understand? The motto of our service, Craney—remember it: 'Always prepared.' In spite of hell and high water we'll be prepared for the *Vampire* when she comes. And somehow I feel that it won't be long now. We'll both go to the cave and get the machine gun. Night air or no, we'll have 'er ready."

They found Prutzman just as Craney had left him. He appeared to be sleeping peacefully. "In the morning we'll bury him," whispered Davis. "Now, we have other work to do."

So they carried the machine gun to the little fort and mounted it.

"I'm all in," murmured Boatswain Davis. "Too much responsibility, and not enough sleep. Must catch a few winks soon. Wish daylight would hurry. They won't bother us then."

The hours fled.

Silence on the island. The east began to redden.

"Almost daylight," murmured Davis. He motioned toward the south. "I'll sneak over there into the pine woods and catch a few winks of sleep. I don't think there'll be any more trouble this morning. But don't sit down, Craney. Keep walking and scan all the shadows. I daren't go to the cave, but I'll find a hole to crawl into somewhere in the woods. If you see anything the least bit suspicious, fire your rifle."

He was gone. Herbert Craney, eighteen years of age, inexperienced and constitutionally timid, was alone at the post where three men had already been murdered.

He glanced down at the boat from which his party had landed. Why not go down, enter that boat, and row away from this island of horror and sudden

death? The idea appealed to him. Why not?

He leaned over the rocky barricade and gazed longingly toward the west. Already the morning light was beginning to gleam on the water. But the boiling surf at the foot of the cliff was still garbed in the shadow of the precipice.

Near Craney a stunted fir grew at the very edge of the cliff and some of its roots, exposed by the crumbling soil, projected in air.

Leaning far out, Seaman Craney dropped a stone from one of these roots, and heard it plump into the water without striking the cliff on the way down. It was a sheer fall. Into this abyss his companions had been thrown. Perhaps his turn would come next. He shuddered.

But again the temptation—why not take this opportunity and leave before the menace that lurked somewhere on the island overtook him?

He strove to put the idea aside. A member of the coast guard must not even consider such a course. He held a trust. The motto of the service was just now in his care: "Always prepared." He must be prepared to stop the *Vampire*. But this hero stuff was hard to do—hard for him. Perhaps for some men—

Behind him he heard a faint shuffling noise. He whirled in a panic, and threw up his rifle. Then he laughed, shakily, immoderately.

An old seal, whose whiskers made the animal resemble a viking, had drawn near. The curiosity of these beasts was amusing—sometimes. Craney threw a stone and shouted. The seal flopped away.

The seaman turned and again studied the sea and the faint outlines of the peaks on the islands to the west. Already the highest peak was touched with the morning's sun.

Over there, in the bright light of day, was peace and safety. He yearned

to be there, to be anywhere except here. He was lonely. He almost wished that he had allowed the old seal to approach and enter the fortification. The companionship of a dumb animal would be welcome.

Suddenly Craney sensed danger! A shadow—a rush! He tried to turn to meet the danger, knew instantly that he could not make it. But, by sheer instinct, he fired his rifle and jerked his head to the right just as a glancing blow dazed him.

His senses did not desert him, but he fell forward on his face. The next instant he felt himself seized by powerful hands and projected into space.

**H**E twisted in air, and clutched at the stone barricade. His fingers slipped, but the next moment they touched one of the roots of the stunted fir.

With the frenzy of despair he clutched the frail support and swung back into the cliff with an impact that all but robbed him of consciousness. He felt his feet touch a projecting rock. But this gave way, and a moment later he heard it plunge into the water at the base of the cliff. Swinging his feet wide, he touched what appeared to be a ledge. He tested it. It held.

For the instant at least here was safety.

He was so confused by the blow and the terrific rush of events that for a time he was stupefied. Still he yearned for life. He must not die—yet! He cowered against the rock and panted.

He had been more fortunate, or perhaps more alert, than his companions. They had first been rendered unconscious, then hurled into the abyss. He had been enabled to claw like a cat at anything and everything within reach.

Now he believed that his assailant, should he peer over the edge, could not see him. The killer would believe that Craney, like the three previous victims,

had plunged into the water. The loosened rock would suggest that.

The ledge was sunk under the brow of the cliff—the rock itself, on the western side, was still in shadow. Might he not hope?

Soon he heard the rush of feet, the voice of Davis calling his name.

He did not answer—at first, because he could not muster sufficient strength, then because of a sudden brilliant thought. If he allowed Davis to effect the simple rescue, the murderer, in his secret place, would note this, and consequently refrain from further attacks—at least for a time. And now Craney's great ambition, his consuming desire, was to catch the murderer. Fear had left him.

Tentatively, Craney slid a foot along the ledge. He found that it extended for many yards across the face of the cliff, and eventually approached the side of the hill where the ground sloped away toward the south.

In ten minutes from the time of the assault, he was settled in a little ravine which led through the pine woods toward the southern shore. In the woods, it was still dark.

Full of a new-born purpose, Seaman Craney made his way to the cave. He scarcely realized why he approached with caution, for he felt certain that none but the dead was within.

But as he peeped into the cavern, he saw the little Indian girl, to whom he had given the quarter, bending over the form of Prutzman, and sobbing bitterly. Soon she arose and disappeared in a far recess of the cave.

Craney's mind was now abnormally active. He began to combine in a mental picture scraps of information that he had picked up from time to time—Nicodemus, the so-called native pirate, the confederate and stool pigeon of the sealers—supposed to live with his family on an island somewhere along the Aleutian chain.

This was his cave. Doubtless there was another—a hidden entrance. None of the coast-guard party had taken pains to explore the cavern. The sailors had been satisfied with room enough in which to sleep. Nicodemus had been on his way to warn the *Vampire's* skipper when challenged by Murphy.

The steamer's captain had then bribed the native to frighten the party away, and signal to that effect. Perhaps murder was not in the captain's plan. That had been the Indian's idea, prompted in part at least by revenge.

All was now clear, or Craney believed that it was.

He seized Prutzman's rifle—the object of his visit at this time—and hastily left the cave.

On a knoll to the right, a tall pine was blazing fiercely, sending aloft a dense column of smoke. The trunk of the tree must have been drenched with oil, otherwise it would not have burned so rapidly.

"The signal!" breathed Craney, and hastened on.

Taking pains to keep concealed—not a difficult feat, considering the gloom of early morning—he managed to make his way to within a short distance of the fortress, and hid behind a rock.

Here he could see Davis sturdily on guard, although the boatswain had reason to believe that he was now the sole survivor of the original party of six.

Craney thrilled with admiration of the man. In spite of his pompous air and his provoking tongue, the boatswain was a thoroughly dependable coast guardsman, indomitable to the last.

Just now Davis was leaning on the barricade as Craney had done, anxiously scanning the waters of Bering Sea.

Then he must have become aware of the burning pine, for he whirled and shielded his eyes with his hand. For a time he stood looking at the signal. Then he turned and gave his attention to the machine gun.

He knew that the pirate steamer would soon heave in sight, and he intended to be ready.

Now Craney inhaled deeply and tried the bolt of his rifle. He saw the same old seal that had annoyed him drawing near the barricade. And as Craney had done, so did Davis now. He shouted at the animal and threw a stone. Then, as the seal made as if to move away, Davis resumed his work at the gun.

At that moment, the seal stood bolt upright, shed its skin, and a scar-faced Indian sprang forward with brandished club.

Instantly the heavy, jarring report of Craney's rifle sounded!

The murderer stopped as though hit with a sledge, twisted in his tracks, and pitched headlong to earth.

**T**WENTY minutes later, the *Vampire* came shoving through the haze that covered the water. Boatswain Davis promptly hailed her.

On the deck of the steamer, men rushed about, a bell jangled, the ship forged ahead with increased speed—rifles flashed.

Then the machine gun perched high on the rocky point spat, barked, and growled, sending a veritable stream of metal right down upon the deck of the sealer. A brief fusillade was enough. The *Vampire* hove to and ran up a white flag.

For two days the brace of coast guardsmen kept the piratical craft under their guns. Then the cutter *Conesus* came in sight, anchored, and threw a prize crew aboard the steamer.

When Boatswain Davis made his report, he finished with the statement: "And, sir, I recommend Ordinary Seaman Herbert Craney for promotion. Brains, sir, are as necessary as courage. Craney has both, and he was the only member of the party—not excepting myself—who used his brains. He's a credit to the service, sir."



***The red-headed timberbeast from the Oregon woods knew from the first that he was***

# Sky Topping With Death

By Vance Richardson

Author of "Straw Boss," etc.

*A "Zip Sawyer" Story*

**N**EVER before had "Zip" Sawyer fully realized the height of a Douglas fir. But now he found himself more than a hundred and fifty feet above the ground, with the spikes of his climbing irons driven deep into the trunk of a tree.

Supported only by a belt of heavy leather, which encircled both his body

and the tree, Zip leaned back and gripped the handle of a five-foot, one-man saw. At that height, the tree trunk was only eighteen inches in diameter.

To and fro, to and fro, he drew the thin ribbon of steel across the tree he was about to top. At each stroke of the saw the fir swayed violently. Fighting against the thought of what would happen to him, should his safety belt break,

to and fro, to and fro, he dragged the shining saw.

Suddenly the saw was almost jerked out of his hands, and close to his head he heard what seemed like the whine of a rifle bullet. Could some one be hidden among the underbrush, a hundred and fifty feet below him, trying to shoot him out of the tree?

Zip's first impulse was to drop the saw and clamber down; then to report the matter to "Smiling" Smith. True, once Zip had excited Smiling Smith's anger by making a laughing-stock out of him. But Smith had made up with him since then, and, after all, Smith was the logging-camp foreman, and the man to notify.

But then Zip wondered if he could make Smiling Smith or any one else really believe that he had actually been shot while sky-topping a tree.

He kept telling himself that he was a fool to risk his life by keeping on the job, but somehow he just couldn't bring himself to quit it now and bring such a ridiculous story back to camp headquarters. Could he have just imagined the whine of that bullet? There hadn't been any report of a rifle.

Zip drew the saw out of the tree and examined it. On the thin steel blade, within six inches of its end, he found a leaden splash left by a glancing bullet. As he continued to examine this mark, which proved that this was an actual, and not an imaginary, attempt upon his life, a pencil-sized hole appeared in the bark of the fir within two feet of his face.

"Heh! Using a silencer, yuh dirty coward!" exclaimed the red-headed young timber beast. "I'll just keep that slug for a souvenir."

**F**ORGETTING his fear in anger at the hidden woodsman, Zip let go of the saw and jerked out a short-handled ax which stuck in the trunk of the tree. With half a dozen

blows he chopped out the bullet, looked curiously at it a moment, then dropped it into his shirt pocket.

While Zip was trying to make up his mind whether or not to stay with his job, he heard Smiling Smith shouting up to him.

"For the love o' Mike, Sawyer, are you goin' to take all day to sky-top that fir. What the hell you scared of?"

Ignoring the jeering voice of the foreman, Zip returned to his work and furiously began to draw his saw to and fro. Then, suddenly, his heart seemed to leap into his throat, as a bullet pierced the safety belt where it hugged the tree.

At the same instant, the top of the big fir swayed heavily away from Zip, and did not regain the perpendicular.

A moment later, another bullet drilled the safety belt. Feeling it give to the strain of his leaning body, Zip drove the spikes of his climbing irons deeper into the tree, and flung his arms around it a foot beneath the swaying top.

*Crack! Crack!* Carrying the tree with it, the top swung forward. Parting company with the main trunk, it plunged through the air, and crashed headlong to the ground. Immediately the trunk swayed back and forth with such violence that Zip had all he could do to keep from being thrown from his dangerous position. Only his belt and his climbing irons kept him from being hurled headlong.

At last the pendulumlike swings of the big fir began to grow shorter. The tree was almost stationary when suddenly Zip's bullet-pierced belt gave way. With a cry of horror, he dropped toward the earth more than one hundred and fifty feet below.

As Zip felt the air rushing past him, an instinct of self-preservation caused him to fling his arms upward. By sheer luck they closed around the stub of a lopped-off branch. With his arms feeling as if wrenched from their sockets,



Zip dangled in space a moment; then his feet touched the stub of another branch. With an unspoken prayer of thanks, he rested a moment, then, painfully and slowly, he made his way to the ground, where he found the foreman awaiting him.

Before Zip could utter a word, Smiling Smith stepped toward him. The round, red face of the giant logging boss was wreathed in his habitual smile, but his amber eyes were blazing as, from his height of more than six feet and five inches he looked down at Zip.

"You're a hell of a sky-topper!" sneered the big foreman. "First, you take four times as long as you'd oughta to top that tree; then you try to get yourself killed. For two licks with an ax I'd tie a can to you and send you down the trail."

With his nerves shaken by his narrow escape from death, Zip pointed dumbly to his safety belt. Beads of sweat were standing out on his forehead, and his face was chalky beneath its tan.

"Bullet holes!" exclaimed Smiling Smith in a startled tone. "Do you mean to tell me somebody was shootin' at you while you were sky-toppin' that fir?"

"He was using a silencer, too," said Zip. "I didn't hear a single shot."

**S**MILING SMITH, who was no longer smiling, glanced up at the tree Zip had succeeded in topping; then he turned again to Zip.

"Nobody but a damn fool would have stayed with that job with bullets hummin' around him," said the foreman. "What made you stick it out?"

"Because I didn't have any better sense, I guess," said Zip. "I was too mad to realize what I was doing."

"I've been expecting trouble," said Smiling Smith. "The Ilqua River Lumber Co., for which we're both working, owns the land on both sides of this ravine. The ravine itself is owned

by a rich old miser named Lew Gorriby. He squatted on the land years ago, and he's got a gov'ment title to it. Lew Gorriby and his two sons wouldn't let us haul our logs across his land to the river, so the supe told me to rig a sky line and swing our logs across Gorriby's ravine onto our own land."

"Then I guess we can lay the shooting to the Gorriby clan?" said Zip.

"You can lay it to any one you like, but it's another thing to be able to prove it," said Smiling Smith grimly. "If I could prove that one of the Gorribys done the shootin', I'd have him in jail so quick he'd never know what happened."

"Meanwhile, there's the tree you told me to top on the ridge across Gorriby's ravine," said Zip. "How about it?"

"I don't like to ask you to top that tree after what you've been through," said Smiling Smith. "Still, if we can once get that sky line rigged, all hell can't stop us swingin' our logs across Gorriby's Ravine."

"How about tackling the topping job after dark?" suggested Zip. "At least I'd be safe from bullets."

Smiling Smith rubbed his jaw with a big, freckled hand, and looked down into Gorriby's Ravine. Following the direction of the foreman's gaze, Zip saw a plume of gray smoke rising out of the heavy underbrush three hundred feet below. Somewhere a dog was barking.

"Why do the Gorribys object to the sky line?" asked Zip. "Not a log would touch their land unless the rigging gave way."

"Why do some of these old webfoot Oregon mossbacks object to anything?" growled the foreman. "Just general cussedness, I guess. When we first started logging operations in here, Lew Gorriby and his sons went to work in one of our camps. One day young Matt Gorriby was a mite too slow in getting out of the way of the rigging, and a main line snatched him off his feet and

cut him in two. The rest of the clan quit the same day. They've been trying to raise hell ever since."

"It seems queer that a family of squatters can buck an outfit like the Ilqua River Lumber Co.," said Zip. "Why don't you take a bunch of the boys over to their place and run them out?"

"We'd raise hell runnin' 'em off their own land!" exploded Smiling Smith.

Zip watched the smoke rising out of Gorriby's ravine, then he turned again to Smiling Smith.

"Well, what about rigging the sky line after dark, like I said?" he inquired.

"I don't know about that," said the big foreman. "I'll have to talk to the superintendent first."

Suddenly an idea seemed to strike Smiling Smith. "How would it be if you were to go down and talk to the Gorribys?" he asked Zip. "You might be able to make them listen to reason."

"Yeah?" drawled Zip. "What can I say to 'em that you ain't already said? Likely they'd gang up and beat the tar out of me as soon as I set foot on their land."

"Scairt of 'em?" asked the foreman.

"No, I'm willing to take a chance," said Zip, "but I don't think it'll do any good."

"All right," said Smiling Smith. "You go talk to the Gorribys. While you're down there, I'll go ask the supe what he thinks about riggin' that sky line after dark."

**A**S Smiling Smith turned away, Zip began to clamber down the steep side of the ravine. Presently he found himself on the bottom, where a small stream rambled through a heavy growth of salal bushes, above which rose thorny stems of devil's club, covered with huge, green, fan-shaped leaves.

Pushing his way through the under-

brush, Zip stepped into a narrow trail, wet and soggy from lack of sunlight, and bearing fresh marks left by hob-nailed boots.

Here and there, at each side of the trail, scarlet-capped, poisonous toadstools crouched like evil spirits beneath the overhang of rotting logs. In the green, wet silence the whistles of the donkey engines sounded from afar like distant voices from another world.

The air, humid and stuffy like that of a greenhouse, was alive with the buzzing, stinging, winged insects which had their being in Gorriby's Ravine.

Zip was by no means a coward; yet as he listened to the squishing of his boots in the soggy ground, he could not rid himself of a feeling that he was being watched. It seemed to him that, from behind each rotting log, unseen eyes were peering at him, and that every green tangle of devil's club concealed a lurking enemy.

Fifteen minutes after stepping into the trail, Zip came to a set of wooden bars, which formed part of a worn fence built of split cedar rails. Beyond the fence were a few acres of cleared land, part of which was covered with standing green corn, potatoes, squash, and other vegetables.

Beyond the truck garden, which was surrounded by a fence of its own, a few horses were grazing among the fire-blackened stumps and blackberry vines of a rough pasture, which stopped abruptly at the foot of a ridge.

To the right of the pasture, built so that it faced down the ravine, stood an old log house and some dilapidated out-buildings roofed with weathered cedar shakes.

The house was about three hundred yards from where Zip leaned over the bars of the fence. There was nothing menacing about the house, and yet for no reason that he could have explained Zip found himself suddenly remembering a story he had once read about an

ogre who dwelt alone in a house in the woods.

"What's the matter with me?" Zip asked himself in an effort to shake off his uneasiness. "I'm no kid to be scared of bogies."

Having clambered over the wooden bars, Zip was walking toward the house, when, barking savagely, two great dogs came rushing toward him. When they were within ten yards of him, they parted company and charged down upon him from left and right.

So fierce was the aspect of the great brutes that, fearing he would be slashed by their gleaming fangs, Zip yelled to them to go back; but ignoring his shout, one of the animals nipped at his leg in passing.

Quick as a cat on his feet, Zip whirled. His right foot came up in a lightning kick that caught the dog beneath the jaw and nearly knocked its head off.

Before the other brute could close in, Zip snatched up a rock and hurled it with unerring aim. Came a sudden *plunk* as the missile struck the second dog squarely in the ribs.

Yelping with pain, both animals fled, and Zip continued on his way toward the house.

**R**EACHING it, he saw a long, wide, low-roofed porch. On the wall at the back of it somebody had nailed the body of a great owl with extended wings, two or three raccoon skins, and the tawny pelt of a cougar.

Seated in a homemade rocking-chair on the porch, a man was whittling at a stick with an eight-inch hunting knife. A Winchester rifle leaned against an arm of the chair. Its muzzle pointed at the porch ceiling.

Zip stopped, raised one foot, rested it on the floor of the porch, and bent forward so that his face was almost at a level with the head of the man in the rocking-chair.

"Howdy," said the young timber beast. "Are you Mr. Gorriby?"

The whittler shaved a sliver off the stick of split cedar in his left hand; then he rested the handle of his hunting knife on one knee, so that the keen blade pointed upward. Deliberately he tested the edge of the knife with a black-nailed, calloused thumb. Keeping his thumb against the edge of the knife, he raised his head, and Zip found himself looking into a pair of small black eyes set close together above a thin beak of a nose, which centered a long, narrow face.

As Zip noticed the big-lobed, prominent ears sticking out from beneath black hair long uncut, he found himself thinking of a bat, an ugly bat wearing a battered, greasy old Stetson with a bullet hole through its crown.

"Aye," said the man in the rocking-chair. "I'm Gorriby."

Zip mentioned his name, and extended his right hand in offer of friendship.

"I'm from the camp," he explained. "I came over to talk to you about that sky line we're rigging"

Gorriby stared at Zip's hand as if it were a strange and deadly thing which he feared to touch.

"I reckoned you was from the camp," he said, "when I seen you kick hell out of my dogs."

"I'm sorry——" began Zip.

"No, you ain't," cut in Gorriby. "What's the use o' lying?"

Zip's teeth came down on his under lip, and his gray eyes flashed dangerously; but he fought against making a display of temper which he knew could do no good.

"Just why do you object to the company using a sky line to snatch logs across your land?" he asked quietly.

"Listen," said Gorriby, leaning forward in his chair. "When Smilin' Smith started cutting timber in hyar, I had three sons. Now I ain't only got

two. Matt, my youngest, was killed by one o' them infernal lines. The logging company paid me five thousand dollars damages for the death of my boy, but they'll never swing a log across my land."

"I can see things from your point of view, Mr. Gorribly, and I am sorry that your youngest son was killed," said Zip. "But you can't expect to win your fight with the lumber company by attempting murder."

"Murder!" exclaimed Lew Gorribly. "I didn't say nothing about murder."

"That's what it came mighty near amounting to," said Zip.

Fear darted into Gorribly's black eyes as he stared at the bullet which Zip drew from his shirt pocket and held out in the palm of his hand.

"I don't—[I don't understand," mumbled Gorribly. "I ain't been tryin' to kill nobody."

"Somebody tried to kill me," said Zip grimly. "I was fired at several times 10-day while I was topping one of the sky-line anchor trees."

He eyed the rifle leaning against Lew Gorribly's chair. The hammer lay at full cock, and, on the steel barrel, a few inches from the muzzle, were the marks left by the screws of a Maxim silencer.

"Yes," said Zip in a meaning tone, "somebody shot at me and tried to kill me with a rifle which made no sound."

Lew Gorribly extended a bony hand toward Zip.

"Gimme that slug," he said. "Thar ain't only one man around hyar uses a silencer on his gun."

Suspecting that Gorribly might refuse to return the bullet, Zip was about to draw his hand back, when, with the swiftness of a striking snake, the squatter's goaried fingers closed around his wrist. With his other hand Gorribly snatched up the hunting knife which lay on his knee. Exhibiting unexpected strength, he jerked Zip toward him and

pressed the point of the hunting knife against his throat.

"Drop that bullet," snarled Lew Gorribly. "or I'll stick you like I would a dog! You can't pin no 'tempted murder on me."

Rigid in every muscle, Zip strained backward as the point of the knife pricked his flesh. Then he whipped up his left hand in the hope of gaining possession of the knife, but his arm dropped to his side as the squatter growled a warning.

"Gimme that bullet, you young devil. I'll fix Snulin' Smith."

Eyes ablaze with almost insane fury, with freakish strength he drew Zip forward, until the point of the knife penetrated the skin of the young logger's bronzed throat. Then, suddenly, Lew Gorribly's arm dropped to his side, and the knife clattered to the porch floor, rolled over twice, then slipped point first into a crack between two boards.

Mortally stricken by a bullet, which had done its deadly work in silence, the squatter dropped into his chair, knocking the cocked rifle to the floor. A sharp report followed as the fall sprung the hair trigger of the weapon. A bullet whistled past Zip's head.

DEATH had struck so suddenly and unexpectedly that at first Zip did not realize what had happened. Almost foolishly he stood fingering the tiny gash in his throat; then, with a cry of horror, he bent over the man in the chair.

Lew Gorribly was dead. He had been instantly killed by a bullet which had left a small round hole between his eyes.

Having assured himself that Gorribly was beyond aid, Zip straightened up and stepped back a pace. Hardly knowing what he was doing, he dropped back into his shirt pocket the bullet he had been holding in his clenched right hand.

Confronted with murder, Zip's first

impulse was to flee; for he realized that it would be hard for him to prove that he had not killed Lew Gorriby. On second thought, Zip felt sure that neither Smiling Smith nor any of the men in the logging camp would believe him guilty, for he had had no motive to kill the man.

Deciding that the best thing to do was to get hold of Smiling Smith as soon as possible, Zip turned to leave, but he froze in his tracks as he found himself covered by two rifles held in the hands of a pair of tall, hard-eyed young fellows who bore sufficient resemblance to the dead squatter to stamp them as his sons.

"Raise yore paws and keep 'em raised, buddy," drawled the taller of the two hillmen. "Trab an' me seen you kill pap."

"It's a damned lie!" shouted Zip, but he raised his hands above his head as the hammers of the rifles clicked back to full cock.

"You'll have a hard time makin' the sheriff believe it," said the second man. "Ernie and me seen you fightin' with pap, then we heard a shot, and we seen pap fall."

Standing side by side, Lew Gorriby's sons leered at Zip over the sights of their leveled rifles; then the elder spoke to his brother.

"Git a rope and tie the skunk up, Ernie. Then we'll go git the sheriff."

Shifting his rifle into the crook of his left arm, Ernie Gorriby slouched over to an outbuilding. He returned in a few moments with a rope.

Covered by the rifle of the older brother, Zip had to submit to having his wrists and ankles bound. Then the two hillmen made him sit down on the floor, and bound him with his back to one of the posts which supported the roof of the porch.

"Thar you'll stay until the sheriff comes," said Trab Gorriby. "You'll shore hang for killin' pap."

"Listen, boys," pleaded Zip. "I had no reason to kill your father. Smiling Smith sent me over here to try to persuade you folks not to make any more trouble over the logging. Besides, the shot you heard was not the one that killed your father. He was killed by a rifle which made no sound."

Trab Gorriby gnawed a chew of tobacco off a plug which he took from the back pocket of his blue overalls; then he winked at his younger brother.

"Can you beat that for a lie, Ernie?" asked the lean young hillman. "Whoever heerd of a rifle that never made no sound."

Desperate with fear, Zip nodded toward the fallen rifle, which had belonged to the dead squatter.

"There was a Maxim silencer screwed to the muzzle of your father's rifle," said Zip. "What became of it? Did one of you boys use it on your own weapon?"

The younger of the two hillmen was about to pick up Lew Gorriby's rifle, but his brother grasped him by the arm.

"Don't touch nothing, Ernie, till the sheriff comes," he said, "or likely we'll get in bad."

"I tell you I had no quarrel with your father," said Zip.

Ernie Gorriby glanced at his brother. "Gimme a chaw offn yore plug, Trab," he said. Then he turned to Zip.

"Maybe you was figurin' on robbin' pap of his money," said the young hillman. "The money we-uns got paid for the death o' Matt."

"We'd better go see if the money is still where pap kept it, Ernie," said Trab. "Then we'll go git the sheriff."

**L**EAVING Zip tied to the porch post, Lew Gorriby's sons entered the house. Zip heard them talking inside, but he could not hear what they said. A few minutes later they returned.

"We're goin' after the sheriff now," said Trab Gorriby. "We'll be back some time to-night."

Seated with his back to the front of the porch, Zip could not watch the hillmen depart; but he could hear them talking as they strode down the ravine. The voices became fainter and fainter, and presently ceased. Somewhere a bird began to sing, and among the underbrush a squirrel chattered. Then came silence.

Seated on the porch floor with his back to the post, his wrists and ankles bound, and his legs extended straight out in front of him, Zip stared at his feet, wondering how long it would be before Smiling Smith came himself, or sent somebody to see why he had not returned. For Zip did not doubt that the foreman would be worried about him. Still, Smiling Smith might decide to await the arrival of the sheriff before coming; for Zip felt sure that Lew Gorriby's sons would report the murder to the foreman of the logging camp.

Zip was certain that one of the Gorriby boys had meant to kill him while he was struggling with the old man. He felt sure, too, that the silent bullet had struck Lew Gorriby through sheer accident. Afraid of being unable to prove that their father's death had been accidental, the Gorriby boys had decided to pin the murder on one of the loggers they had come to hate since their youngest brother had been killed while working in the woods.

Yet the bullet which had killed Lew Gorriby had struck silently, and Zip had noticed that there had been no silencer attached to either of the rifles of the Gorriby boys. He thought the hillman who had done the shooting had taken removed the silencer from his rifle.

Zip raised his head and stared at the dead man facing him from the chair into which he had dropped; then, with a shudder, Zip removed his gaze. Idly he let it rove across the floor of the

porch; then, suddenly, he uttered a low exclamation of surprise.

The handle of the hunting knife which had dropped into the crack in the floor was sticking up between Zip's feet.

Zip stared a moment at the staghorn handle, then he caught it between his boots and slowly raised it out of the crack in the floor. Inch by inch he worked it toward him until the knife was between his knees. Then, with the aid of his knees, he picked the knife up, and bent his legs. A moment later the knife was in his hands; five minutes later he was free.

Struggling to his feet, Zip turned. Rubbing the circulation back into his wrists, he was standing gazing down Gorriby's Ravine when something struck him a violent blow on the side of the head. Staggering backward, he tried to keep his balance, then suddenly he pitched across the floor and lay still with his head pillowed on one arm.

**Z**IP opened his eyes to find himself lying where he had fallen. His head ached terribly, and when he raised his hand to it his fingers came away sticky and red. Lying on the porch floor, he listened, then suddenly he stiffened in every muscle as he heard somebody moving around in Lew Gorriby's house.

Careful to make no noise, Zip managed to gain his feet. Dazed by the shock of the bullet which had inflicted a slight graze on his skull, he steadied himself by leaning against the front of the house. After a moment his dizziness passed.

It was nearly sunset, and in another half hour the donkey engines would whistle the hour of quitting work, for it was late autumn in the Oregon woods.

A quick glance around showed Zip that the murdered squatter still lolled in his chair. Three flies were walking across his face. The dead man's rifle lay on the floor beside the chair.

Stooping, Zip picked up the rifle, as quietly as possible, slipped another cartridge into the chamber, closed the mechanism, and drew the hammer of the Winchester back to full cock. Then he stepped off the porch, stole around the corner of the house, and stood waiting.

Inside the house he could hear heavy footsteps moving from room to room, as if somebody were looking for something he could not find.

A half hour passed, and in the woods the donkey engines whistled quitting time. In another half hour the loggers would be seated at the table, eating their supper. Zip wondered whether they would miss him.

A step on the porch broke into Zip's thoughts, and his heart seemed to leap into his throat. For a moment he hesitated, then he whipped Lew Gorriby's rifle to his shoulder. As he slipped around the corner of the porch, he found himself face to face with Smiling Smith.

The big foreman was the first to recover from his surprise.

"You young devil!" he roared, and started to raise his rifle; but he dropped it when he found himself looking into the muzzle of Zip's weapon, for Zip had seen a Maxim silencer attached to the muzzle of the giant foreman's rifle.

"Sit down, right on the edge of the porch," ordered Zip.

With the smile gone from his face, and his amber eyes blazing with hate, the giant glared at the red-headed young timber beast, whom he had disliked from the first time they had met.

"What are you trying to get away with, you young fool?" he blustered.

"Not murder, anyway," said Zip quietly. "We'll just wait here until the sheriff comes."

Smiling Smith's eyes darted to right and left as he sought a chance to escape; then he took a step toward Zip, but was halted by the rifle.

"Listen," said the foreman. "I've got the five thousand bucks the company paid old Gorriby. Let me go, and I'll split fifty-fifty with you."

"Not a chance," said Zip grimly. "I don't want to hang for a murder I didn't commit."

"Nobody can prove it on you," said Smiling Smith.

"I know it," said Zip grimly. "That rifle with the silencer attached to it will prove you guilty, even if it wasn't for the stolen money you say you've got in your jeans. Sit down, Smith. You and I are goin' to wait for the sheriff."

"Suppose I won't? What'll you do about it?" asked the giant.

"Do?" said Zip. "I'll put a bullet through your leg if you make the least attempt to escape."

Seeing that resistance was useless, Smiling Smith sat down on the edge of the porch and dropped his head between his hands, and there he sat, covered by Zip's rifle as dusk crept over the Oregon woods.

"You were smart to try an' fix the blame on the Gorribys for shooting at me while I was sky-topping that tree," said Zip presently. "And you were pretty slick to send me down here. But one mistake you made was when you didn't kill me as you intended. Had you shot straight, Smith, I have an idea that the murder of Lew Gorriby and myself would have resulted in the hanging of Gorriby's sons."

Smiling Smith made no reply; but presently he raised his head as he heard voices. Men were coming toward the house. Behind them followed the two great dogs which had belonged to Lew Gorriby.

Trab and Ernie Gorriby were the first to reach the house. With wide eyes they stared from Zip to Smiling Smith; then the elder of the two hillmen turned to a tall, hard-eyed man who wore a sheriff's star.

"Guess we're just in time, sheriff,"

said Trab Gorriby. "This red-headed kid must have been in cahoots with Smilin' Smith."

"Keep 'em both covered," ordered the sheriff. Then he turned to Zip.

"Drop that rifle," he said, "and hold out your hands."

Zip dropped his rifle as he was told, but his eyes narrowed.

"Just a minute, sheriff," he said. "Before you arrest me, I want to show you something."

"Go ahead," said the officer. "But don't dare to try any funny work. It just won't go."

Zip took from his pocket the bullet which he had chopped out of the fir he had been sky-topping, and explained how he had been shot at.

"You'll find that this bullet fits the rifle dropped by Smiling Smith," he said. "And if you'll examine the safety belt I was using, you'll find two holes in it made by the same sized bullets. And if you'll look at the wall of the house back of Lew Gorriby's chair, you'll find in it another bullet that, unless I miss my guess, will fit Smiling Smith's rifle."

There was a moment's silence as Zip ceased speaking; then, losing his head completely, Smiling Smith stooped and snatched up his rifle. He whipped the

weapon to his shoulder, took quick aim, and squeezed the trigger.

There came a slight hiss of escaping gases, and, missing Zip's head by a scant inch, a bullet brought Ernie Gorriby stumbling to earth with a hole through his shoulder. Then the crash of the sheriff's .45 Colt awoke the echoes. Still clutching his rifle, Smiling Smith toppled backward. A bullet hole was through his heart, and in his pockets was the five thousand dollars for which he had killed the miser of Gorriby's Ravine.

"There is one thing that puzzles me," said Zip to Gorriby's sons. "From what you said, I judge that you never saw a silencer until now, yet there are the marks left by the screws of a silencer on the rifle that belonged to your father."

Trab Gorriby picked up the rifle which had belonged to the murdered man, and examined it curiously.

"We-uns allus wondered what left them marks," said the young hillman. "That thar rifle is one that pap bought from Smiling Smith."

**The "Zip Sawyer" stories, written by a man with years of Big Woods experience behind him, have become big favorites with Top-Notch readers. Look for a new story of this series in an early issue.**







# Fandango Island

By Fred MacIsaac

***Wilbur Stetson discovers that even civilized men can become savages when there is a fortune in the balance***

A Three-part Serial—Part II.

If you missed the opening installment of this thrilling adventure serial, read the condensed version below. Then you can go right on with the story.

**W**HEN Wilbur Stetson sat at his bookkeeper's desk in the First National Bank of Stoutsville, New Hampshire, adventure seemed very far away. Nothing ever happened in Stoutsville, and nothing

ever would happen. And yet something did!

Wilbur's Uncle Harleigh, head of the bank, became irritated at one of Wilbur's boyishly impulsive acts, and Wilbur was discharged. Somehow, Wilbur felt glad of it. Now he could go out and collect the thrilling adventures he had always craved.

He studied to be a wireless operator, and managed to get a berth aboard the

British tramp steamer *Mermaid*, New York to Trinidad. The vessel was dirty and leaky, and had inferior engines, but she was the spirit of romance to Wilbur. He was not even greatly worried when the vessel foundered, and he saved himself by clinging to a raft; for at twenty-one a man has so much vitality and hope that his extinction appears impossible to him.

In the next few days, Wilbur Stetson ran into plenty of thrills. He was rescued by a rum runner, and set ashore

a fortune in Bank of England notes known to be buried on the island.

It wasn't long before Wilbur discovered that a fortune, whether in gold, jewels, or bank notes, will attract any one who knows about it—and that most of them will not be too conscientious about what they have to do to recover the treasure.

The British gunboat *Porpoise* was also very much interested in the expedition, and Lieutenant Blake of that vessel called on Carson after the Amer-

#### CHARACTERS IN THIS STORY

Wilbur Stetson, a bookkeeper with the heart of an adventurer.

Harleigh Stetson, his uncle, a banker without the heart of an adventurer.

Captain Brown, skipper of the British tramp steamer, *Mermaid*.

Frank Carson, an American yachtsman.

Cora Carson, Frank's sister, blond, pretty, and a trifle spoiled.

Denis O'Malley, ex-captain in the Irish Revolutionary army.

Rose O'Malley, his attractive brunet daughter.

Lieutenant Blake, officer of H. M. S. *Porpoise*.

in Nassau, on the island of New Providence. There he saved the life of an American yachtsman, Frank Carson, who was being attacked by a gang of natives.

As a reward, Carson gave him a berth as wireless operator aboard his palatial yacht.

It was not until the vessel was bound for an island, called Fandango Island by Carson, that Wilbur learned what the yachting cruise was about: and even then he did not learn all the facts.

The expedition worried Wilbur a little. It smacked of buccaneering. But Wilbur soon found that Frank Carson and his associate, Captain Denis O'Malley, formerly of the Irish Republican army, were too practical to search for sunken Spanish gold. They were after

ican's yacht had anchored off the mystery island.

"My business," said Lieutenant Blake, "is this: A band of Cuban malefactors recently broke jail, stole a fishing vessel, and are supposed to be in hiding on some of these islands. Several are convicted murderers. I strongly advise against your landing here on Fandango Island while these criminals are at large, particularly as you have your sister and Mr. O'Malley's daughter aboard."

"We can take care of ourselves, sir," Carson said confidently.

Wilbur had walked to the rail on the shore side of the yacht, and now could make out a house on the island. He saw white smoke curling upward from an invisible chimney.

"Look!" cried Wilbur. "There's a house on that island—and it's on fire!"

## CHAPTER VIII.

### THE SHOW-DOWN.

LIEUTENANT BLAKE leaped into his boat, which immediately got under way. As it cleared the yacht's bow, the officer arose and began to semaphore with his arms to the gunboat. A second later, a shot was fired from the vessel to indicate that he was understood, and then the warship began to move slowly in toward the island.

Those on the yacht saw the six seamen in the launch pick up rifles, while Lieutenant Blake, still standing, turned toward the shore and studied it through a pair of binoculars.

"Very nice of the British navy, I'm sure," commented Carson. "Who the devil fired the house?"

"The Cuban criminals," suggested Captain O'Malley.

"Rot! That's their excuse for following us down here."

"And for landing," said Cora. "Don't you see, Frank? If he knows so much about the captain, he knows all about him. He knows that he was the second officer of the *Orvista*."

"I told you it was a mistake for you to follow us to Nassau," said Frank testily.

O'Malley's eyes twinkled, and he emitted a cloud of white smoke. "There won't be enough of that house left to make a log for its fireplace, if there is a fireplace standing," he observed. "Sure, they've been watching me ever since I left Dartmoor. They had spies on my trail when you and I made our deal. Didn't I tell you they had me twice at Scotland Yard when I was in Dartmoor, to ask me fool questions about the sinking of the *Orvista*? Let them search the island all they like; they'll find nothing."

"Who fired the house?" demanded Carson.

"Maybe the British navy will find out for us."

"Captain Smith, lower a boat," shouted Carson. "Stetson, I'm taking you ashore with Captain O'Malley."

"Yes, and you're taking me, too," asserted Cora.

"No!" roared Carson, so loudly and vehemently that his high-spirited sister realized that, this time, she couldn't have her own way.

"Oh, very well," she said sulkily. Wilbur was so indiscreet as to grin, and encountered a glare from her which pulverized him.

In five minutes, Carson, O'Malley, and Stetson were speeding shoreward in the ship's motor boat. Frank steered, the engineer squatted beside the motor, and Captain O'Malley and Wilbur sat, tense, light, efficient magazine rifles across their knees. The fire ashore was sending up a dense volume of black smoke, which was flecked with sheets of crimson. The navy men had already landed, and were speeding across the beach.

It is one thing to take a shotgun and plunge into the woods of northern New Hampshire, in search of small game, and quite another to land upon a mysterious island in a tropic sea, with a rifle in hand which may have to be fired at an armed foe. Wilbur had buck fever sitting in the boat.

It occurred to him that the joy of adventure must be in retrospect—he was shaking with excitement, and the effect was not pleasurable. How did he know whether or not he was a coward? Carson had confidence in him because of the affair at the Bucket of Blood, but the mulatto with the knife had not been attacking Stetson, and Wilbur had taken him unawares, and it was all over before he had time to be frightened. He certainly had been terrified when the *Mermaid* went down.

**B**Y the time the keel of the boat touched the beach, Wilbur was certain that he was a physical coward, and yet, could he have been transported, by some magic, back to the shipping room in New York, he would not have taken advantage of the opportunity.

He would see this through, no matter if it cost him his life. Nevertheless, he was glad that those professional fighting men of the British navy were going in ahead of Carson, O'Malley, and himself.

They sank ankle-deep in soft, very fine, golden sand, crossed it at a run, galloped over a stretch of coarse grass, pushed their way through a new growth of bushes, and came upon a path which led up the slope, at the top of which stood the house.

Now they were among the coconut trees, and, despite his excitement, Stetson found time to admire the smooth, graceful trees, and observed the cluster of green nuts beneath their plumelike branches high in the air. The sun was mounting in the sky and making its heat felt already, and there was much humidity in the air, and the burning house was giving off heat like a furnace.

No shot rang out ahead, but the stillness of the island made the crackling and roaring of the fire seem loud and terrible. In a couple of minutes the yachting party debouched into a clearing, and in full view of the blaze.

The house was doomed, of course. Had a metropolitan fire department been on hand, it could not have been saved. The seamen from the *Porpoise* stood in a group at a safe distance, regarding the blaze with the enjoyment which people obtain from fires in which they have no personal interest. Lieutenant Blake detached himself from them and joined Carson and his friends.

"We have seen nobody," he said, "but the criminals undoubtedly are in hid-

ing. If you have no objection, I'll have a big shore party from the *Porpoise* hunt them down. I don't think they can escape us."

"Go as far as you like," said Frank ruefully. "I expected to be very comfortable in the house on that island. Now look at it!"

"They must have set it afire when they saw the gunboat," said Blake sympathetically.

"Wait a minute," exclaimed Carson. "Your remarks to Captain O'Malley on the yacht drove something very important from my mind. You think this fire was started a half an hour ago. I think it was caused by the explosion of a time bomb, or some such contrivance. Late last night, Mr. Stetson, here, heard a motor boat put out to sea. Your criminals may be a hundred miles away by this time."

Lieutenant Blake eyed him suspiciously. "You are not very eager to have us search the island, it appears."

Carson shrugged his shoulders. "I am pointing out that you are wasting your time."

"With your permission, we shall leave a search party here, and send the gunboat after that launch you have introduced into the affair rather tardily."

"You have my permission to take any measures you please to apprehend these Cuban criminals," replied Carson satirically.

Blake bowed. "In view of the destruction of your residence," he remarked, "I presume you will return to Nassau in your yacht."

"On the contrary, we shall camp here. A house in a climate like this is superfluous, don't you think?"

"You take your loss lightly, sir."

Carson laughed. "You see, I haven't had time to become attached to the house."

"Well," said Blake. "The skipper will wish to have a few words with you and Mr. O'Malley."

"Captain O'Malley," corrected the Irishman blandly.

"I do not recognize such titles as yours," retorted the naval officer.

"That's the way De Valera and myself feel about King George," replied O'Malley, with a broad grin.

And, in the meantime, the house was burning fiercely, and presently the roof fell in with a great crash, and a shower of sparks mounted to the sky.

Wilbur finally grew tired of watching it, and moved over to the left, where a little elevation gave him a view of most of the island.

FROM the yacht, it had appeared large and solid. He was surprised, now, to see that it was shaped like a horse's hoof, not more than a mile wide at its thickest part, which was where he was standing, but its two points tapered to a few hundred yards, and it contained a beautiful lagoon, about three miles wide, as blue as the deepest and rarest sapphire which glistened and glimmered in the morning sunlight. There was a boat landing on the lagoon directly below the house, and a boathouse.

For a coral island, the vegetation was dense, and he fancied that he was gazing down upon a tropic jungle, though the others would have disabused him of that idea. When he turned his back to the hideous smoke and the blackened ruins, the vista was so lovely that it brought a lump to his throat.

The island lay alone in the ocean, a dot in a vast reach of heavenly green and light blue and dark blue, with a cloudless sky above, and golden sunlight streaming down. And here was no winter, no snow and ice, no biting cold, no frost. Twelve months in the year the island bore its garments of green, and was bathed in warm, fragrant air, and it had been like this since time began. It might have been this island upon which Columbus landed.

Wilbur was boy enough to wish that some of the folks in Stoutsville could see him standing upon a hill, surveying a tropical isle, with a high-powered rifle on his shoulder.

Of course, he wouldn't care to have them know that he had never fired a rifle in his life.

In the meantime, the *Porpoise* had come through the reef and anchored not far from the yacht, and she had sent another launch ashore, which was crowded with white-garbed sailors, who now came upon the ground in front of the fire.

A man with gold on his white drill had approached Carson and O'Malley, and Wilbur hastened down to be present at the meeting.

"This is my chief, Lieutenant Commander Gibson, Mr. Carson," Lieutenant Blake was saying as Wilbur joined the group.

"How do you do, sir," said the captain of the *Porpoise*. "A bad business, what? Any sign of the criminals, Blake?"

"No, sir. Mr. Carson claims they made off in a motor craft last night, and left a time bomb in the house. I rather doubt that, sir."

Lieutenant Commander Gibson was taller, older, and less arrogant than his fellow naval officer. He was blond, with a small brush mustache and a pink color.

"We might as well have it out here, now as later," he said pleasantly. "We are informed, Mr. Carson, that you are conspiring with this person——"

"The name is O'Malley," remarked that individual.

"—to remove from this island property of the British crown."

"Your information is inaccurate, captain," stated Carson. "This island is my property. I have come here with my friends to take possession of it. You are very welcome, and I hope you catch your Cuban criminals. I wish

you had arrived here yesterday in time to save my house."

"I regret your loss, sir. I observe wireless antennæ on your yacht. Have you an operator?"

"Times are hard," replied Carson. "I decided to take my chances and get along without one."

"I see. You know, of course, that Mr. O'Malley is suspected of being aware of the location of the package which the late Sir Herbert Walsingham was taking to Brazil on the ill-fated *Orzista*."

Carson frowned. "Would you please tell me what that has to do with Cuban criminals, sir?"

"Your purchase of this island, and the presence here of O'Malley, indicates that you expect to find government property upon it."

"My dear sir," said Carson, "if you know that there is crown property on this island, please take possession of it, prove to me that the British government is entitled to it, and be off after your Cuban criminals."

"If Mr. O'Malley will tell me where to find it, I shall be delighted to comply with your request."

"By the powers!" exclaimed O'Malley. "Will you ever get that crazy notion out of your thick skulls? Sir Herbert Walsingham, the king's messenger, was lost at sea. I was the sole survivor of the *Orzista*, and I landed here with empty hands. That's my story, and I'll stick to it till doomsday. I'm here on a yachting cruise with my daughter. Mr. Carson owns this island."

"According to your statement to Scotland Yard in 1921," replied the captain of the *Porpoise*, "Walsingham left the *Orzista* in your boat after the ship was torpedoed by the German sub, and you floated on a raft to this island, after the sub had sunk your boat with machine-gun fire."

"Right ye are, captain."

"But you have entered into an ar-

rangement with Mr. Carson to return to this island. I wish to warn you both that you will be under surveillance, and, if captured with the contents of Sir Herbert's portmanteau in your possession, you will be tried and sentenced as common malefactors."

"Pleasant sort of person, eh, O'Malley?" commented Carson.

The captain turned, and his eye fell upon Wilbur Stetson.

"And that goes for you, young man," he declared. "Lieutenant Blake, deploy your men and search the island for the scoundrels who fired Mr. Carson's house."

Wilbur quaked a little, but managed to appear unmoved and uninterested, though he was astounded and bewildered by the remarks of the British naval officer. Neither Carson nor O'Malley looked to him like dishonest persons. Carson had stated that O'Malley was an Irish patriot in jail for his opinions, and he certainly was open-faced and likable.

Having said his say, Captain Gibson returned to his boat. Carson glanced at O'Malley, shrugged his shoulders, and laughed cheerfully.

"The game is becoming more exciting," he remarked. "Wonder if the *Porpoise* has six months to spare in these waters. *We* have."

O'Malley glanced at Stetson. "How much does the lad know?" he demanded.

"Just a hint. How do you feel, Wilbur?"

The youth from Stoutsville hesitated.

"I'd rather not go to jail," he replied. "And if we are here to steal something, I'm certain I'd like to be counted out."

"'Tis all in the way ye look at things, lad," replied O'Malley. "Just how useful is this gossoon, Frank?"

"Wilbur has saved my life. He is a wireless operator who can keep us informed of the movements of our oppo-

nents. He's a two-fisted scrapper. It looks as though he might be very handy. I didn't count upon active government opposition, myself."

"I told you in New York that they always suspected me. You remember the British secret-service man who warned you to have nothin' to do with me."

Carson nodded.

"Would you risk jail, Wilbur, for a large sum of money, if you were convinced that you had as much right to it as the British government or anybody else?"

"It isn't jail which worries me. I don't want to commit a crime."

"But if your conscience was clear?"

"I'd take a chance."

"O'Malley," said Frank, "suppose you tell him your story."

"Let's go back to the beach and make sure we have no British eavesdroppers," said O'Malley.

## CHAPTER IX.

### THE IRISHMAN'S STORY.

THEY picked out a plot of grass, well shaded, from which they had a clear view of the shore and the harbor with the two vessels riding at anchor—the *Cora Carson*, graceful as a swan, and the bigger *Porpoise*, looking like an ugly duckling.

"Here's the way of it, young feller me lad," said O'Malley when they had thrown themselves down. "On the fifth of June, 1915, a king's messenger, Sir Herbert Walsingham, sailed from England on the Bristol liner, *Orvista*. In those days I followed the seas and was second officer of the steamer. Walsingham had a leather portmanteau which he put in the ship's strong box. He was a tight-lipped, red-faced man who never talked to anybody, never took a drink. He lay all day in a deck-chair, reading.

"As we were running regularly from Rio to London, we knew, without his

saying a word, what his business was and what was in the portmanteau. In Rio they're not so discreet as they are in London, and before we left we had heard that the Brazilian government was selling Great Britain a brand-new cruiser, built on the Clyde and just delivered when the war broke out, for the sum of one and three-quarter million pounds. Now, the proper way would have been for the Bank of England to give the Brazilian government a credit of that amount, but Rio stuck out for thousand-pound notes. Easier to pass around, ye know. And we had it straight that Sir Herbert had the million and three-quarters in thousand-pound notes in the leather case locked in the ship's safe.

"German subs and cruisers were still roaming over the seven seas, and our instructions were to sail far to the west of our regular course to avoid them. On June 19th we were far, far to west and a hundred miles east of the southern end of the Bahamas. That afternoon a sub torpedoed us. I'll say for the Englishmen that they had perfect discipline, and we had time to get our personal effects and Sir Herbert took his portmanteau out of the safe and reported to my boat. We launched four boats in a smooth sea without any accident or incident, and we rowed away from the wreck. The barometer had been high when we left the ship, and we planned to set masts and sails and make one of the Bahama keys in a few days.

"I'm not one of those Irishman that was pro-German, but I didn't blame them for sinking a merchant vessel in time of war. All nations do that, and when the blasted submarine came to the surface, I wasn't alarmed at all. But you can imagine how I felt when the bloody butchers opened fire on the boats with a one-pounder they had mounted on the deck and proceeded to sink them, one by one.

"They had orders to 'sink without a trace' and, being that they couldn't reach their home ports and had to refuel from colliers met at certain positions at sea, there was a military excuse for doing just that, but it was cold-blooded butchery, and only fiends could have carried out such orders. My boat was leading the line, and at first we suffered less than the others. I saw the skipper's boat go down, and the mate's and the third officer's, and only darkness saved us for the moment and the fact that this sub had no searchlight to enable her to murder in the night. We were leaking badly, and half the twenty men in my boat were killed and among them, Sir Herbert Walsingham. We threw the bodies over to lighten the boat and rowed as fast as we could, for the sub was firing blindly in the dark. No chance to help the others. It was God's goodness that we had no women or children on the *Orzista*; they'd have butchered them just as quick.

"I saw the portmanteau when I threw Sir Herbert over the side, but I wasn't thinking about money at the time. I let it lie in the bottom. We had six wounded men and only four with their health and strength, and we made slow progress rowing. The compass was smashed, no stars were shining, and we didn't know where we were going. There was a heavy swell, though the sea was smooth. You can look down on the ocean from a ship's deck, lad, and not see a ripple and yet, if a small boat was alongside, you would realise that she was rising and falling four or five feet.

"On one of these drops we crashed against something which split the boat wide open. What was it but the hull of the submarine which was submerging and sank from under us. We had been rowing in a half circle, and she had been drifting.

"The boat turned over, and we went

into the water. I came up gasping for breath, struck out and my fingers touched something that started to sink. I grabbed at it instinctively and touched a handle. I was holding on to Sir Herbert's portmanteau. A million and three-quarter pounds in my fist, and me drowning in the ocean.

"I heard cries, but I saw none of the lads who had been in the boat, and presently the cries ceased. I almost drowned trying to hold the portmanteau out of the water so the bank notes wouldn't get wet.

"About the time I was exhausted, I bumped into a piece of planking torn either from my boat or one of the others by the shells from the sub. It wouldn't quite support me, but it helped, and it supported the portmanteau full of paper with pictures of the House of Parliament on them.

"After five or ten years, so it seemed, the sun came up and not a hundred yards away was a life raft from the *Orzista*. In a few minutes I climbed on it and fell asleep and, when I woke up some hours later, I was still holding the handle of the portmanteau. I tried to open it to see if the money was all right, but it was locked and it seemed to be water-tight. I spent three days and three nights on that raft, and I was out of my mind when we struck on a reef, which was the same you see out there. The raft was hopelessly stranded, but I could see the shore in the moonlight and a light in a house. So I went off the reef and came up on the beach. Mind ye, I had had no food or water for three days and the sun was doing things to my head, but I was cunning. I knew I oughtn't to present myself before anybody, with millions in my fist and, before going to the house, I hid the portmanteau in a place that nobody could find.

"They found me unconscious on the doorstep of that house you saw go up in flames and they took me in and put



me to bed. When I came to, about twenty-four hours later, my first thought was for the portmanteau. I knew I had hidden it, but I couldn't remember where, and I can't remember to this day."

"That's why we have bought the island," said Carson. "Otherwise, we'd just run in and make off with the portmanteau."

"This Jeffrey Johnstone that owned Fandango," continued O'Malley, "was a writer feller, who was steadily drinking himself to death and didn't want company. In a couple of days he shipped me off in a small steamer that brought him supplies from Nassau. I'd wandered around the island half crazy looking for the hiding place, but never a hint of it did I get.

"I landed in New York, broke. All the time I kept thinking that some day it would come back to me where I had hid the treasure, and I knew it would be safe till then. I took a ship to Liverpool, and there I learned from members of an Irish society I belonged to that Ireland was going to take advantage of the war with Germany to revolt, and small blame to her. What had England ever done for my country?—I ask you.

"I crossed to Dublin, met the Irish leaders and got deep into a conspiracy. I know I was insane, being like that. Well, I was in the Easter Week revolt, lay down my arms with the other patriots, got sentenced to death, and then my sentence was commuted to life imprisonment in Dartmoor. Why? I had no influence. I'll tell ye.

"The British government had learned that there was a survivor of the *Oroista*. They found the wreck of the life raft on the reef at Fandango Island. They were told by Johnstone that it was the second officer who was saved, and they knew by the number of Sir Herbert's stateroom that he would leave the ship in the second officer's boat. And I must have mumbled something about millions

in my delirium that gave them a hint. So they kept me in jail, and every now and then they offered to let me out if I would tell them what became of the portmanteau.

"Finally, they gave me up as a bad job and let me go, figuring I would lead them to the hiding place. And that's my story, lad."

Wilbur drew a long breath. "It's wonderful," he exclaimed. "And do you know now where you put it?"

"No, but I'll tear the island apart to find out."

Wilbur was silent. "After all," he said timidly, "it is the property of the British government, isn't it?"

"Not a bit of it. It's mine," declared O'Malley flatly.

**B**EING conscious of his small importance in the expedition, Wilbur Stetson was silent, but very dubious. Carson cast a whimsical glance at O'Malley.

"You think you've fallen among thieves," he remarked to Wilbur. "Let's have your views, Stetson. We won't make you walk the plank."

"Well then," said Wilbur slowly. "I worked in a bank back in Stoutsville. I know that it's illegal to hold money you know belongs to somebody else. There is no question that these British bank notes belong to the British government. That naval officer said so, and Captain O'Malley admits it. The captain of the *Porpoise* told us he would put us in jail if he found them in our possession. I'm honored by being in your confidence, and I won't betray you, but I hope we don't find that portmanteau, and that's flat."

"You're going to be a lot of use to us," exclaimed the Irishman bitterly.

"Certainly he is," answered Frank. "Wilbur is an honest, conscientious New Hampshire Yankee and speaks according to his lights. I'm going to show him that he is mistaken.

"Now Stetson, you know that the *Aquitania* is the property of the Cunard Line, don't you?"

"I suppose so."

"You can be sure of it. Do you think that anybody who found her wandering about at sea should return her to her owners?"

"Certainly. Why not?"

"That isn't the law of the sea. If she were found abandoned and taken into port by another vessel, the owners of that vessel would not release her until her owners had paid salvage which might amount to sixty per cent of her value under certain circumstances."

"I—I didn't know that," said Wilbur blankly.

"Walsingham's portmanteau went down into the sea. It was salvaged and buried on this island, which is my property. If I find it, it is treasure-trove, and under British laws, the Crown is entitled to fifty per cent of treasure-trove. If the British authorities can catch us here with the money in our possession, they will seize it and hold it, claiming that the law of treasure-trove does not apply in this case, but they can't jail us for finding it, and they know it.

"If we can succeed in getting it into the United States, they can claim only what they are entitled to under their own laws, and my attorney tells me there is grave doubt if they can collect that legally. However, I have a few principles myself and, by my deal with Captain O'Malley, it has been agreed that we will turn over fifty per cent of the find to the British Crown if it demands it. The captain agreed to do that because I refused to take on the job unless he did so."

"And I call it damn foolishness," growled O'Malley.

"The Bank of England must have the numbers of the bills," said Wilbur. "It can refuse to honor them."

"No. They are legal tender. They

could trace them and arrest a thief and force him to turn them over, but there is no question of theft in this case. They have to honor them. Half of one and three-quarter million pounds, even with England off the gold standard, is at least three millions of dollars. A stake worth fighting for, eh?"

"But they will accuse us of theft if they catch us, won't they?"

"Possibly, but they can't convict."

Stetson was silent for at least a minute.

"I guess I don't know as much as I thought I did," he said. "I didn't know anything about salvage or treasure-trove. Just the same, I'm not going to shoot at British officers."

Frank clapped him on the back. "Neither are we. It's a battle of wits with a big prize hung up for the winner, Wilbur. If they catch us, we'll take it smiling. Are you on?"

"I'll obey orders, of course, sir. But it doesn't seem as if the money could have been here all these years without somebody finding it."

"The owner, Johnstone, didn't find it," Frank assured him. "He was broke in New York and glad to sell. And the British government hasn't found it, or the *Porpoise* would not have followed us here. Whoever escaped in that launch last night might have discovered it—that's the only danger."

"It's here, and we'll dig it up," said O'Malley confidently. "Suppose we get aboard and get a drink, Frank? The girls are wiggagging to us."

While the crew of the *Porpoise* scoured the island, the adventurers remained comfortably on board ship. During the afternoon, the Carsons and the O'Malleys killed time by fishing off the yacht and pulled in quantities of the brilliantly-hued creatures which abound in these waters.

Among them were a number of angel fish with their winglike fins and their delicate coloring of blue and orange

and green, and these the girls insisted upon returning to their element, but the pompano, most edible and delicious of all fish that swim the seas, were seized upon joyfully by the steward.

Wilbur spent the day in the wireless room in hope of intercepting a message from Nassau to the *Porpoise*, but nothing which he could interpret came through the ether.

Late in the afternoon, most of the shore party returned to the gunboat, but half a dozen men remained on the island all night and their camp fire on the beach was pleasant to gaze upon.

## CHAPTER X.

### THE LOSS OF THE "CORA CARSON."

AT seven next morning the shore party rejoined the *Porpoise*. With much rattle of chains and winches, the vessel pulled up her anchor and slowly steamed out of the harbor without communicating in any way with the yacht *Cora Carson*.

"I call that very rude," declared Cora resentfully. "The least those officers could do would be to come on board to say good-by."

"My dear youngster," replied her brother, "you don't seem to realize that they don't think us respectable. Being literal-minded gents, they consider us no better than thieves."

"How absurd!" commented Cora. "Don't they know that 'findings are keepings'?"

"That's a purely feminine theory," he replied. "Wilbur Stetson will tell you, as a former banker, that it is the duty of a finder to restore what he finds to the owner, if he can locate him."

Cora tossed her head, threw a scornful glance at Wilbur who was within sight and hearing and observed, "Oh, Wilbur Stetson!"

Her tone made Wilbur wince, nor did the friendly smile cast in his direction by the glorious Miss O'Malley comfort him much.

"Well, I'm glad to see the last of them," continued Miss Carson.

"But we haven't," replied her brother. "They'll drop in on us frequently and inquire how we are getting along. Not being able to find the cache themselves, they are going to give us an opportunity to pull their chestnuts out of the fire for them. They are under the delusion that we know just where to go to lay hands on it."

"It may take us months, girls," said Captain O'Malley, "and the spalpeens who burned the house did you an ill turn. We'll have to camp out or sleep on the yacht."

The staterooms are too hot when the yacht isn't in motion," replied Cora. "We're going to camp. It will be a lark."

*Boom!*

There had been a dull, muffled explosion, a violent disturbance of water at the stern, and the yacht shook and quivered to her bow.

"They've torpedoed us," shouted O'Malley. He rushed toward the stern, followed by Carson and Captain Smith.

The *Porpoise* was nearly a mile beyond the reef and steaming off at full speed. She was beyond earshot of the explosion, and apparently ignorant of it. The Irishman shook his fist at the receding warship and sent after it a stream of invective in the Gaelic tongue.

Captain Smith grasped his arm.

"Not a torpedo!" he declared. "She was outside the reef when we were struck and could not possibly have directed it at us. It's an infernal machine of some kind." He leaned far over the side.

"She settling," he declared, "and the explosion tore off one of our propellers. Get the ladies into the launch, quick."

"You mean she's sinking?" cried Carson incredulously.

"Won't float a quarter of an hour. The rudder's intact, but there's a big hole just below the port crankshaft and

the water's pouring in." He rushed forward, shouting orders, and the crew sprang into action. The anchor was slipped, the engine started and the damaged vessel began to move slowly through the water as the captain arrived at the wheel.

"Get as much truck as you can into the launch," he shouted. "I'm going to try to beach her. Mr. Stetson, will you radio the *Porpoise*?"

Carson grasped Wilbur's arm. "No," he cried. "All she wants is an excuse to get us off this island. Over the side, girls! Come on, men—rifles and ammunition first."

The next five minutes was a scene of confusion. The launch was held at the accommodation ladder as the yacht headed for the beach, half a mile distant, settling rapidly at the stern and to the port. The passengers and crew had the cover off the small cargo hatch, and O'Malley and Carson jumped into the hold and passed up heavy boxes to Wilbur and the seamen, who carried them to the launch.

She steered with great difficulty because she was running on one propeller and her after end was already full of water, but she steadily approached the shore. Would she make it?

"Everybody into the launch," shouted Captain Smith. "You can't save anything else. She's sinking."

Wilbur, shipwrecked for the second time in a few days, had the nerve to linger long enough to help O'Malley and Carson out of the hold. The others were already in the launch, ready to cut her loose when the yacht made her plunge.

"Come on, captain," commanded Carson when all save the skipper were in the motor boat.

Smith shook his head. "I'll swim for it," he bellowed. "Cut loose."

The line was released, the launch dropped behind. It was a hundred yards to the beach, and the *Cora Carson*

was still moving but slowly and soddenly.

Her stern rail suddenly disappeared beneath the surface; her bow rose in the air. She plunged forward a dozen yards and struck on the sand, her forward end still above water. Captain Smith let go the wheel and waved his arms triumphantly. He had beached her.

"What a break!" exclaimed Frank Carson. "We can get everything out of her and maybe plug the hole at her stern."

Cora Carson was sobbing softly. It was her yacht, and she loved it. Miss O'Malley had embraced her and was weeping from sympathy and excitement. Frank ran the launch alongside and took off the efficient skipper, shook his hand and headed for the shore. In a few seconds the launch grounded.

Captain O'Malley turned and gazed at the partially submerged yacht. "She'll be covered at high water," he said, "but it might have been worse."

"Come on, men," commanded the skipper. "Get this stuff out of the boat. I congratulate you ladies. We'll be able to salvage your wardrobes."

"I'm more interested in the machine gun," said Frank. "And I'd like to know what happened to us and why. Funny the *Porpoise* hasn't observed all this."

O'Malley shrugged. "Not keeping a stern watch," he stated. "Somebody tied a bomb to your port propeller, me lad, with a clockwork arrangement. Same murdering villain that set fire to the house. And that means that we're not alone on the island, even if the British navy couldn't find anybody.

"Ah, well! let's be unloading the *Cora Carson*."

"Make yourselves comfortable, girls," suggested Frank, "but don't wander about. In a couple of hours the entire hull will be under water, so we have to get busy."

**D**URING the next hour, the launch made a score of trips between the yacht and the shore, and the pile of boxes and bales upon the beach above the waterline became formidable. Trunks, bags, bedding, silverware, crockery, kitchen utensils, practically everything movable on the *Cora Carson*, was assembled on the beach.

Included in the cargo were half a dozen dog tents which the seamen proceeded to erect in a shady spot a hundred feet from the water's edge while the principals congratulated themselves upon making the best of an unfortunate and unexpected incident.

"We are as well off as if we had the yacht," said Frank, "except that we can't get away with the loot if we find it. While I am certain that no naval officer would commit such a crime, the officers of the *Porpoise* won't weep over our predicament."

"They'll rob us most politely," remarked O'Malley. "The reception committee here will rob us and cut our throats. I'm sorry I let ye in for this, Frank, me boy."

Frank threw his arm over his friend's shoulder.

"It makes it more sporting," he assured him. "I fancy we outnumber our friend who makes the bombs and his gang and, if they want trouble, we'll make it for them. I only regret that we have the girls on our hands."

"A couple of headstrong fillies. My gurr! is a handful."

"Cora is impossible," said the honest brother, confidentially.

## CHAPTER XI.

### THE BEARDED ONE.

**W**HILE a young woman may have a haughty disposition, it is not on record that such a grave defect in a lady's character ever kept a young man from falling in love

with her if she happened to be golden-haired, blue-eyed, and beautiful.

If Cora had continued to behave toward Wilbur Stetson with the kindness and camaraderie with which she began the acquaintance, he might not have been so interested in her. Because having been imprisoned in Stoutsville all his life, he was still absorbed with thoughts of travel and adventure, and there was no room for girls in his life.

But Cora had turned on him and called him names and apologized for them in a manner almost as objectionable as the offense, and the air of disdain with which she had treated him since, got under his skin.

He told himself that she was an unpleasant young person and that it was lucky she had betrayed her real character before he had been ensnared by her obvious charms, but he kept thinking about her as he stood on post when the eventful day was waning. Carson had placed Stetson upon a rocky point about two hundred feet east of the camp.

Fundango may have been the peak of a sanken mountain originally, but for thousands of years the coral insects had been enlarging it and shaping it according to their whim.

The party had landed on the north shore. To the west of the camp, the island extended for nearly three miles to end in a reef which curled toward the south to form one of the breakwaters for the lagoon. To the east it stretched for a couple of miles and reached an elevation at its highest point of a hundred and fifty feet or more.

The house so recently destroyed had been erected upon a saddle about three hundred yards from the north beach and commanded a view of both lagoon and ocean. Camp had been pitched at the foot of this rise. While the beach ran all the length of the island to the west, limestone cliffs cut it off a short distance east of the camp.

From his perch, Wilbur had a clear view of the slope behind the camp and no one could approach along the shore from the east without being seen by him.

One of the sailors was posted on the west side of the camp. After dark, Carson proposed to place a third sentinel a little way up the slope. As they numbered only nine males, they could not take more elaborate precautions against surprise.

Stetson had been on duty about an hour, and had been thinking about Cora most of the time. It was what might be expected of a youth who had been flouted that he was hoping that he could get her infatuated with him so that he could spurn her. Spurning Cora would give him tremendous satisfaction, he thought. He yearned to show her that she didn't amount to much in his estimation.

As a sentinel, he was very remiss, because instead of keeping a sharp lookout eastward he was looking down upon the camp, the activities of which absorbed him strangely, for Cora Carson was down there.

Being a very healthy young man, his stomach began to serve notice that it would relish dinner, preparations for which were evident at the camp fire. In an hour he would be relieved and he would go on duty again at midnight. This was the life! He watched—all unaware of the grim menace behind him.

Roughing it on a tropic island! Camping out under the soft, perfumed breezes of the perpetual summer nights. Every delicacy to eat. Two beautiful girls to make things interesting—

*Whish!* He half turned, and then a rope fell over his head and a loop tightened around his neck. He emitted a sigh, which was stifled by a large hand that covered his mouth, and then his feet were kicked from under him and he landed on his face on the broad flat rock on which he had been standing.

A COUPLE of bony knees were jammed into the small of his back; his legs were shoved together and quickly bound, and his arms were grabbed and roughly tied behind his back. And then Wilbur Stetson was lifted, thrown over a brawny shoulder, his heels in front, head to the rear, and he felt himself being carried rapidly away from the vicinity of the camp.

Wilbur was overwhelmed with humiliation. He was more abased than terrified. Being a very conscientious person, his failure to perform the duty to which he had been assigned outweighed the seriousness of his position.

It seemed to Wilbur that he had been carried at least a quarter of a mile over rough ground when his captor stopped and flung him upon a stony beach.

He could see dimly that the person standing over him was a big man, half naked, who had a long beard. He was holding Wilbur's rifle in his left hand.

"Now," said the man in guttural tones, "you answer my questions or I'll empty this magazine into your body."

Wilbur looked up at him. His head had come into contact with a stone and pained him. He didn't answer.

"Who are these people?" demanded the bearded one. "What are they doing here?"

"Mr. Frank Carson's owns the yacht," replied Wilbur. "Was it you who blew it up?"

"I'm asking the questions," replied the other savagely. "What do they want on Fandango Island?"

"Mr. Carson has bought the island and was going to spend some time here," replied Wilbur cautiously.

"I won't have him here."

"You had better tell that to Mr. Carson," replied Stetson. "Did you set fire to the house?"

"What arms and ammunition has this party?"

"I don't know. Enough to make you behave, I guess."

"I watched them unloading the yacht through field glasses. One of those boxes looked as though it contained a machine gun. What's their plans?"

Wilbur twisted in his bonds. "I wish you'd untie me," he suggested. "I told you they own the island."

"They may own it, but they won't hold it long. What is your position with Carson?"

"I'm just a hired man, mister," Wilbur answered. "I don't know anything. What are you going to do with me?"

The man chuckled unpleasantly. "I'm going to tighten your bonds and leave you here for a while," he replied. "I'd gag you, except that you are out of earshot. Time enough to dispose of you when I have found out what I want to know."

He stooped down and examined the bonds around Wilbur's ankles. He had dropped a lasso over the negligent sentry's neck and had trussed him up with the deftness of an old plainsman or a sailor. The youth had already discovered that when he strained at the bonds around his wrist he tightened the rope around his neck.

"That's all right," said the man with a grunt, and Wilbur's eyes gleamed. The fellow had a knife in a sheath at his belt, and as he stooped, the knife slipped out and dropped on the ground beside the prisoner's thigh without a sound.

He did not observe his loss, but turned the captive over, examined his wrists, grunted with satisfaction, and straightened up. He picked up the rifle, hesitated, and tossed it to one side.

"You'll keep until I come back," he remarked and moved off into the darkness and in the direction of the camp.

IT was some satisfaction to the sentry that the enemy did not appear to have murderous intentions toward Frank and his party, since he had discarded a weapon with which he

could have picked them all off as they clustered around the camp fire, but, for the moment, his own problem was paramount.

The man with the beard had lost his knife, and it lay within a foot of the bound captive. At the risk of strangling himself, Wilbur succeeded in twisting until he had placed himself so that his bound hands touched the knife. He grasped it with eager fingers and tried to turn its blade so that it would cut the bonds on his wrists.

This he gave up as impossible after several precious minutes of fumbling. Next he tried, by bending his knees, to bring his ankles near enough to his hands so that he could sever the bonds around them. It was something that a contortionist would have had no trouble doing, but, like most people, Wilbur did not have an elastic spine. The knife failed by six inches to reach his pinioned ankles and the exertions tightened the rope around his neck so that he was being choked.

In alarm he straightened his legs and pulled the noose tighter. He was strangling.

He would die here in a minute or two unless his captor returned to loosen the noose. He tried to call out, and he could not hear his own voice. He was in agony, and then the blade struck against a taut line and the way of salvation occurred to him, almost too late.

Having bound and knotted the rope from Stetson's neck to his wrist, the unknown had carried the line down to his ankles. If he could cut the rope— He began to saw desperately against the line which his struggles had drawn taut. He could not apply enough pressure to cut through the line. Had it been rawhide he could not have sawed through it, but this lariat was ordinary hemp rope, three eighths of an inch thick.

He sawed steadily—felt it giving way, and suddenly it parted. He drew

up his arms and loosened the grip upon his neck and he kicked out with his feet with no tightening of the noose around his throat. Letting go of the knife, he tugged desperately at the bonds about his wrist and they began to slack. In another minute his hands were free.

With a sigh of gratitude, he gripped the noose which had been strangling him, pulled it over his head, swooped upon the knife and slashed the lines around his ankles. Free! In the neck of time.

There was a patter of bare feet, and the man with the beard appeared out of the darkness and charged upon him. He was a huge person, but Wilbur was no longer a helpless captive. He met the charge with savage rights and lefts, drove back his enemy, who was certainly not a pugilist, sent him to the ground with a solid right to the jaw, and then rushed for the rifle lying only twenty feet away.

Instead of disputing with him for the rifle, the prone man scrambled to his feet and began to run rapidly along the shore toward the east.

The rocky beach was feathering out in that direction, and only a hundred yards ahead came to an abrupt end. The fugitive might have climbed the bank to the right, but choose to run directly for the spot where the beach ended and sheer rock lifted out of deep water.

Wilbur picked up the rifle and took aim. He began to shake. The muzzle of the weapon described a perfect arc. Never in his life had he drawn bead on a human being, and despite the outrageous treatment he had received, he did not want to kill the man. He couldn't shoot him down in cold blood.

"Halt!" shouted Wilbur. "Halt or I'll shoot!"

The fellow continued to cover ground with long strides. Wilbur pursued. He aimed at the sky and pulled the trigger. The report was deafening

and was repeated by the echoes. Stetson expected the fugitive to stop and lift his arms but he only quickened his speed and Wilbur fired a second shot—this time in the man's direction. In any event he would catch him. Wilbur plunged along in his wake and in a moment saw his late captive brought to a stop between the towering cliff and the deep black water.

Wilbur was only a few rods behind him.

"Throw up your hands," he shouted.

To his stupefaction, the man lifted his arms and dived into the water. Wilbur was upon the spot from which he had dived in a couple of seconds and waited for him to come up.

He didn't come up. Seconds became minutes, but the diver failed to appear upon the surface.

## CHAPTER XII.

### SPECULATIONS.

WHILE it was dark, there was a faint glow upon the water, and Wilbur could discern such an object as a human head for quite a little distance. No head appeared. Wilbur waited five or six minutes before he decided that the man with the beard was gone for good. Had he deliberately committed suicide? He must have been crazy if he had. He should have known that Wilbur wouldn't kill him.

Wilbur's spine began to crawl. Suppose! He knew that the octopus and other devilish creatures of the sea lived in these waters. Frank had forbidden the girls to go in swimming off the yacht.

"I'm not afraid of sharks," Cora had asserted. "If you make a big splash they won't come near you."

"A splash keeps off sharks," Frank had answered, "but it attracts the barracuda. Of course a barracuda would be contented with an arm or a leg."



Cora had shuddered and decided not to go into the water. This fellow had plunged in fearlessly, and at night.

Greatly shaken, Wilbur shouldered his rifle and began to move along the beach toward the camp. He heard shouting from that direction and presently he discerned, in the murk, four men with rifles who were approaching. One of them shouted, and Wilbur recognized Carson's voice. He hailed Carson.

"What happened? Did you fire those shots?" bellowed Carson.

In a moment Wilbur was surrounded by his friends and was excitedly telling his tale.

"He knew what he was doing, of course," said Frank when Wilbur had finished. "He can probably swim quite a distance under water, came up silently with only his nose and mouth above the surface, and went down again. It was too dark for you to see him. The question is: 'Who and what is he?'"

"Sounds like a crazy hermit," commented O'Malley. "It couldn't have been that fellow who fired the house and bombed the yacht. Where would he get explosives?"

"*The shore party searched the island without finding him yesterday,*" said Frank thoughtfully. "That means he has a clever hiding place. And Wilbur has evidence that he is an expert swimmer. No boat could have got under the stern of the yacht last night without having been heard by the watch, so a swimmer who can remain a long time under water and who isn't afraid of fish must have fastened that bomb to our port propeller. Damned interesting, I call it. He talked like an educated man, did he, Wilbur?"

"Yes. He had a heavy bass voice and sort of rumbled, but he talked grammatically."

"He probably crawled close enough to the camp to hear what we were talking about," said O'Malley. "Fortunately,

we were only discussing the bombing of the yacht, and he knew all about that."

"I wonder if he is alone."

"We're likely to find out," replied the Irishman. "Whiskers, you say? Sure anybody who doesn't shave nowadays is crazy."

Frank threw his arm over Wilbur's shoulder. "You had a narrow escape, kid," he remarked. "But you shouldn't have permitted him to creep up on you. A sentry has to be alert at all times."

"I'm glad no harm came from my negligence."

"On the contrary. We know, now, of the existence of an enemy. He probably intended to drown you and then take off your bonds so we would think your death was an accident."

**T**HERE were two campfires burning when Wilbur Stetson was escorted back to the tents, and the steward had dinner set out on card tables, removed from the yacht for the owner and passengers, while the crew were eating on the ground at a distance of a hundred feet. Carson drew Wilbur to the tables where the girls were waiting and where he had to tell his story all over again.

Cora thrust a plate into his hand. "No chairs," she said gaily. "We must take our meals buffet fashion, Mr. Stetson."

And thus he was restored to the social position he had voluntarily relinquished on the yacht, and there was no further question regarding his status.

The sentries were drawn closer to the camp and warned of the peril in relaxing vigilance and, after dinner, the three men and two young women sat close together on the grass and discussed their problems like members of one family.

"The first thing to do is to build some cabins," said Carson. "While this is the dry season, heavy showers are frequent, and it won't be so pleasant while things are yet. Since various searching parties

have discovered no trace of the portmanteau, it's going to take weeks and even months before we locate it—unless the captain gets his memory back. Do you remember exactly where you landed, captain?"

"No," replied O'Malley, "except, it seems to me, I floundered over rocks. I don't think I could have come ashore on this sand beach. It is engraved on my mind that I hid the portmanteau in an ingenious place. I'm hoping that a tour of the shore may help me. Some object may jog my memory."

"It must have been ingenious. The authorities obviously must have searched the island several times during the last seventeen years since they suspected you of bringing it ashore, and subjected you to questioning while in prison. And this bearded person evidently knows that a treasure is hidden here. I wonder if it was he whose motor boat you heard night before last, Wilbur."

"He might have been reconnoitering," admitted Stetson.

Miss O'Malley leaned toward him. "Do you think he intended to kill you?"

"I guess not. He could have killed me in the first place. Instead, he roped me and carried me quite a distance."

"But that was so he could question you first."

"Maybe. I'm glad I didn't have a chance to find out what his intentions were. I'm still bewildered at seeing a man dive into the water and not come up."

"Stetson," said Carson, "you and I go on duty at midnight. The girls have the two dog tents on the left. Crawl into one of the others and get some sleep. We're all going to try our hand at house-building in the morning."

Wilbur rose obediently. As he walked away, Cora followed him.

"Mr. Stetson," she said, smiling very sweetly, "while you are perfectly hateful, I'm very glad that dreadful man didn't murder you."

"Much obliged," Wilbur said, blushing. "And say, you girls better be awfully careful and stick close to the men at all times."

Cora tossed her head. "Dear me," she said mockingly. "Your concern is very touching. If I had had that rifle instead of you I would have hit that whiskered devil in the leg and we wouldn't have anything to worry about at all."

"No doubt," he retorted hotly. "And probably you would have freed yourself from his bonds without any trouble at all, Miss Houdini."

"I would if he had kindly left me a knife to cut them with," she snapped, and turned her back on him.

As there were tools of every description, and as John Oleson, one of the deckhands, had been a carpenter, the business of constructing two cabins started next morning and proceeded rapidly. Axes rang cheerily against standing timber.

At low tide, the whole foreward part of the yacht was out of water and part of the stern was visible. Captain Smith made an inspection, found that a hole two feet in diameter had been torn in the steel hull just below the port-propeller, and despaired of repairing her.

"If she were a wooden ship, we could repair her boards and caulk her tight," he stated, "but we've no facilities for working in steel, Mr. Carson. Any temporary plug we might put in there would go out the first time she was struck astern by a heavy sea.

"Well, girls," said the yachtsman, "help yourselves to any gewgaws you find in the saloon or the staterooms. The rugs will dry out and the drapes, too. Fortunately we salvaged the bedding before she was submerged last night."

Canned goods were removed from a number of packing cases, the boards of which would sheath the cabins as soon

as the frames were erected, and O'Malley guaranteed he would do a creditable job of thatching the roofs with palm leaves.

"I was born in a thatched cottage near Killarney," he told them, "and I've helped my old father repair the roof many a time as a boy."

During the morning, Rose O'Malley and Cora took the launch, anchored a couple of hundred yards from shore, and fished industriously. The air was so humid that the men perspired freely from the slightest exertions; nevertheless they drove themselves at their tasks and by nightfall the trunks of palm trees had served to make the frames of two two-room cottages about twelve feet by twenty.

Immediate necessities drove their main purpose on the island from the minds of the three men who were in the know, and physical fatigue sent employers and employees alike to their couches soon after dinner—to be roused, to their annoyance, when it was time to go on watch.

THREE days later, two homely and inartistic but water-tight houses stood on the edge of the beach ready for occupancy. It was agreed that the girls should make use of one of the cabins and only be intruded upon by their relatives in case of bad weather, while the crew should be quartered in the other. It was so lovely in the open that the girls demurred against sleeping indoors, and only their natural prejudice for perfect privacy persuaded them to move in.

There were few mosquitoes on the island, no flies, and only a variety of gnat to make trouble in the open air. As there were rolls of cotton mosquito netting to protect the sleepers, conditions out of doors at night were ideal.

Despite a sharp watch, there was no evidence that there were other inhabitants on the island, and Wilbur be-

gan to believe that some horrible denizen of the deep had grabbed the bearded man when he plunged beneath the surface of the bay.

On the fourth day, Carson and O'Malley, accompanied by the girls, took the launch and made a circuit of the island and explored the shores of the lagoon. They returned tired and glum. The captain's fugitive memory had not returned.

"We've got to explore every inch of the shore methodically," said Frank to Stetson that night. "It may be months before we are finished. Do do you know, it has occurred to me to wonder whether O'Malley actually brought the portmanteau to the island? He was half delirious when his raft struck on the reef out there. He may have imagined that he swam ashore with the portmanteau and hid it after he landed."

"That occurred to me when he told me his story," said Wilbur. "You knew all the details in New York when you made your bargain with him, didn't you?"

Frank nodded. "I took a chance. I've been a very rich man, Wilbur, and I didn't make my fortune. I inherited it. So the notion of picking up millions instead of working for them appealed to me strongly."

"I never had any money," stated Wilbur, "and I always expected to work hard for what I got. You told me your yacht was worth a hundred thousand, only you couldn't sell it. Now that she is wrecked, can't you collect the insurance?"

Carson laughed. His laugh sounded a little mad, but it was agreeable. "The insurance ran out before we left New York and I didn't have cash enough to renew it. Besides, the insurance company would come down here, spend about ten thousand to repair the yacht and hand her to me on a platter. And I haven't enough money left to supply her with fuel oil. I told you that Cora

had hocked her rings to buy the island and to enable us to run the yacht down here. If this shot fails, you and I will be beachcombers together, Wilbur."

"It's going to be hard on your sister."

"She's a sport, and Rose O'Malley is another. There's a girl, Wilbur! She knows her father is a nut, but she sticks to him like glue. She's the most beautiful girl in the world."

"I think Miss Carson is more beautiful," declared Wilbur.

"Cora?" marveled the brother. "She's all right, but I don't think she's so much for looks. Say, if you handed her a line like that, she might not think you were poison ivy. You have to give women the old oil, Wilbur."

"I'm sorry Miss Carson dislikes me."

"She doesn't. Rose told me she said you were a bumptious, opinionated prig and she hated you. That's very encouraging." He laughed and strolled away.

Wilbur remained in deep concentration. It would be nice if he could perform some heroic action which would make Miss Carson admire him. So far he had signally failed to shine.

## CHAPTER XIII.

### DISASTER.

THE moon was visible, now, in the late afternoon and shone brightly after the sun had set but retired early. When Wilbur went on duty that night, the moon had long since disappeared and it was very dark. Wilbur relieved Johnson, the second Scandinavian, and took up his position on the pile of rocks where the bearded man had overpowered him on the first night ashore, and he kept a sharp watch toward the east from which the mysterious individual had crept upon him on that occasion.

The camp was in darkness. The girls were asleep in their cabin, and the men lay on their blankets in the open. The

night was so still that he could hear the occasional splash of a fish jumping out of the water to avoid a finny enemy.

He was a better marksman now than he had been, and he planned to shoot the brute with the beard if he had an opportunity. He wasn't afraid of him—he rather hoped the fellow would make a second attempt. This time he would be ready for him.

On two previous nights he had taken this post and nothing had happened, and he didn't really expect anything to happen on this occasion. Wilbur was a lot more self-confident than he had been when he had landed on the island, and days of swinging an axe had increased his strength—at least he felt stronger. The tan which had succeeded his sunburn rather pleased him. He was a man now, no longer a boy, and if the bearded scoundrel hadn't drowned that night and wanted trouble, he'd get plenty.

An hour went by—an hour and a half—and his ears caught a slight creaking sound out on the water. It suggested oars—muffled oars. The old villain was abroad again!

Wilbur moved carefully down the pile of rocks on the side away from the camp and stared across the harbor. He could see for only a short distance, but the sound was more audible. For several minutes he strained his eyes, and then a blacker shadow crept over the water and Wilbur heard the sound of muffled oars.

THE boat was dimly visible, now, with a single rower. It was moving toward the east, parallel to the shore. Wilbur might have risked a shot, but, in the dark and at a distance of a hundred yards or more, it was doubtful if he could hit his target, and it looked to him as though the occupant of the boat proposed to come ashore at a safe distance from the camp and creep toward it for observation or something more sinister.

Wilbur kept moving east along the pebble beach, rifle ready. He was shivering with excitement. When the fellow landed, he would look into the muzzle of a gun. It would be a triumph to drive the mysterious snooper into camp ahead of him and turn him over to Carson and O'Malley.

Unaware that sharp eyes were on him, the boatman came nearer to the beach. Suddenly he stopped rowing, stood up in the boat, and Wilbur saw a shadow hand go to a shadow ear.

And, then, there burst upon the silent night a rifle shot as loud as a cannon, followed by a heavy fusillade. It continued for perhaps half a minute. The boatman dropped back upon his seat and began to pull furiously toward the limestone cliff, but Wilbur's eyes were no longer on him. He was running for camp as fast as he could leg it. He had wandered several hundred yards from his post in pursuit of the phantomlike boatman. His heart was beating, his breath was coming fast as he plunged over the rocky shore, stumbling over unseen boulders, sick with apprehension.

He climbed the rock pile and looked down on the camp. Where all had been dark and still, now was light and confusion. A fire had been set, and its flames were leaping skyward. He saw Cora Carson and Rose O'Malley, with light silk wraps thrown over their night-dresses, standing in the firelight.

Carson, O'Malley, Captain Smith, the steward, the engineer and the deckhands were in the group, and their arms were uplifted. Around them were a dozen strangers—men in dirty white suits, men wearing nothing but ragged trousers, men who were white, and brown, and black. And one of them he recognized. It was the Englishman who had called on Frank Carson in Nassau Harbor and offered to buy Fandango Island from him.

While Wilbur had been pursuing the will-o'-the-wisp, these ruffians had sur-

rounded the camp and opened fire upon it. They had followed the fusillade with a rush, had captured the Carson company without a struggle and made them prisoners.

What was he to do?

Every one of these men carried a rifle. Wilbur might pick off a few of them, but he would be overwhelmed in no time. They would shoot him down like a rat as they might have done the other sentries. He looked for Oleson, who had been on post inland, but didn't see him. O'Malley had been on watch at the west side of the camp, but he was among the prisoners.

What would Frank Carson do in his place? Fight! Fire his rifle until he dropped, riddled with bullets? Sell his life dearly for his sister and the other girl?

It meant death, but a man had to do his duty. Wilbur dropped upon his stomach, put his weapon to his shoulder and sighted along the barrel. He must be careful that one of his bullets did not hit a friend. He would pick off the brigands on the outside of the circle. His finger touched the trigger, but, before he could fire, his rifle was torn from his hand.

"You simple fool!" hissed a harsh voice. "What good will that do?"

The bearded man had the gun. He had thrown himself beside Stetson, and the strong fingers of his left hand grasped the back of Wilbur's neck and pushed his face against the ground.

Wilbur struggled frantically, but he was helpless in the other's grip. He had sense enough not to make an outcry.

"Will you come with me quietly?" demanded the man who had a gift for capturing Wilbur. "Or have I got to knock you senseless?"

"Who are they? What are they going to do?" whispered the unhappy youth.

"They are the men I supposed to be

on the yacht upon which your party came," said the other. "Damn them, I won't have them here!"

"Come on, then. Let's rush them!" exclaimed Wilbur, eager for any ally.

"You idiot! They'd murder us out of hand. We must use guile."

The boy's eyes were fixed on the camp. He saw Bright point to the door of the ladies' cabin. The girls hesitated and Frank waved toward it. Reluctantly they went inside.

Several men detached themselves from the main group and moved toward the rock pile upon which Stetson and the bearded man were lying.

"Quick!" the bearded man commanded. "They're looking for you." He pulled Wilbur to his feet and dragged him down the other side of the mount. Wilbur tore himself loose.

"Will you help me save my friends?" he demanded. "Are you for us against them?"

"I don't want to be bothered with any of you, but I hate Sir Alfred Bright. Damn him! I'll leave you to his tender mercies if you don't make up your mind."

"I'll go with you," said Stetson miserably. It seemed like deserting his friends and benefactors, but he was helpless alone, and this lunatic seemed to know what he was about.

Together they ran over the stretch of rocky shore which Wilbur had twice covered within the last half hour, and presently they came to a small skiff pulled almost completely out of the water.

"Get in," said the man curtly.

Wilbur clambered in. With amazing strength the fellow pushed the boat into the water and jumped aboard. He picked up the oars and began to row east, close to the shore.

In a few minutes they came to the cul-de-sac from which the bearded man had escaped by diving into the water, and Wilbur eyed it, marveling, and cast

curious glances upon the hero of that episode.

They rowed on, and now the cliff rose abruptly from the water. The boat hugged the bluff. Sometimes the rower's left oar almost touched the face of the rock. Wilbur became aware that, while there was no surf, the sea was rising and falling several feet at this spot.

The rower pulled in his oars.

"Lie down in the bottom," he commanded. "Don't lift your head or you'll lose it. I'll tell you when to rise."

With many qualms, Stetson did as he was told, wondering if the fellow would brain him while he was prone. Yet, why rescue him from the bandits if murder was his purpose?

The bearded man squatted and put out one oar. He drew in his breath with a sharp hiss and then drove the boat straight at the face of the rock. Wilbur, despite the warning, partly rose and saw a miracle.

## CHAPTER XIV.

### THE GREAT CAVE.

JUST as the prow of the skiff was about to crash against the cliff, a small opening appeared, as the sea dropped momentarily. The boat plunged through this opening which, obligingly, enlarged. The bearded man was now lying flat, pushing with his hands against a rocky ceiling and, in a second the boat shot through the tunnel and was floating upon a black lake inside the limestone cliff.

"You can get up," said the boatman.

Wilbur sat up and gaped. He could see nothing. While there had been a faint radiance without, here was absolute darkness. The bearded man, apparently, had eyes like a cat, for he resumed the oars and rowed steadily for a couple of minutes, when the keel of the boat grated upon sand.

"Get out! Here, give me your hand!"

Wilbur stepped gingerly out upon solid ground.

The man stopped, and from a locker produced a flashlight. Its beam was as welcome as the sunrise after a night of horror. It revealed a beach of white sand extending back beyond the range of the light. The flash was snapped off, and Wilbur was being led forward in the dark. His legs felt as though they weighed a ton and, with each step, his perturbation increased. He was in a vast cavern which must extend well into the island, and he was in the hands of a crazy man. Better to have shared the captivity of his friends. Why had he weakly yielded to the cunning argument of the fellow? Why hadn't he refused to get into the boat, and what was the purpose of the bearded one in bringing him here?

They had proceeded forty or fifty feet when the man of mystery again turned on his flash and revealed, just ahead, a wooden platform set on posts and lifted four or five feet above the sands. Access to it was by means of a rude ladder.

"We are at home," said the fellow, with a hoarse chuckle. "Young man, this has been my residence for years. Climb up there."

Wilbur went up the ladder and stood upon a flooring of rough boards about twenty-five feet square. The flashlight revealed upon the farther side of the platform a pile of boxes and several packing cases and showed that part of the flooring was covered with straw matting. The air in the cave was dry, and the temperature warm and comfortable.

"Rest yourself, young man," commanded his captor. "I am going back outside."

"For heaven's sake don't leave me here alone," Stetson pleaded. "Suppose something happened to you. I'd never get out of this place alone."

The man laughed loudly, and echoes

caused his laugh to reverberate diabolically.

"I wouldn't advise you to try," he replied. "The pool in this cave is bottomless and there is, apparently access to the sea, far down in the bowels of the island, by which weird sea creatures obtain admission. And there are horrible things which sometimes crawl out upon the beach. That is why I built my residence on stilts. Under no circumstances descend from this platform."

Wilbur shuddered. "Can I have a light?" he asked anxiously. "I—I can't stand the darkness of this awful place."

"You'll get used to it," answered the bearded man. "However——" He walked to the rear of the platform, stooped over, and immediately a single electric bulb shone fearlessly in the vast blackness.

"You may expect me in an hour," stated the weird individual, who then leaped from the platform, trotted across the sands and in a few seconds was swallowed up in the murk. A little later Stetson heard the grating of the keel of the boat upon the sand and then the splash of oars which, muffled though they were, sounded very loud in the great cave.

**W**ILBUR huddled close to the light. It was a shaded lamp upon a steel standard, current for which came from an automobile battery box. While it was not able to illuminate the cave, it revealed clearly the area of the platform. Stores of all descriptions were piled up without order. There were cases of canned goods, sacks containing flour and meal, wooden boxes whose covers had not been removed and whose contents were not indicated. An open packing case full of books.

In the hope of securing some information regarding his fantastic host, Wilbur poked among the supplies, lifted boxes and replaced them carefully lest

the bearded one take offense at his curiosity. Suddenly he emitted a astonished ejaculation. He had come upon a case of dynamite.

He sat down to think that over. It explained to him the blowing up of the yacht. Here, then, was the criminal, and Wilbur was in his power.

It meant that the man was mad. There could be no question about it. But there was plenty of method in his madness. He was no ignorant lunatic. He understood the use of explosives and utilized them. He was well educated—the case of books proved that. Why did he live like a hermit in a cave? Perhaps this was a place of refuge when visitors came to the island. Most likely, he had been living in the house built by Johnstone and had fired it to prevent the discovery of evidences of his occupancy.

The weird disappearance of the hermit upon the occasion of their first meeting was explained, of course. The fellow dived, swam under water to a submarine opening into the cave and came to the surface within it.

Wilbur wasn't so long out of high school that he couldn't recall his geology. He knew that all limestone, and coral limestone particularly, was soft and unable to resist erosion from sea water. Action of the ocean bores holes in the base of limestone cliffs and causes the formation of huge caves, of which those in Capri in Italy and in Bermuda are most famous. This place was a grotto with an entrance for boats similar to that of the Blue Grotto at Capri. Probably admittance to it was possible only at certain stages of the tides which the hermit knew well.

No wonder the search party from the *Porpoise* had failed to discover the hiding place of the individual who had fired the house. He could hide here in safety for centuries, if he happened to live so long.

The youth was disturbed in his

meditations by a peculiar rasping sound close at hand, a sound like metal scraping on metal. It seemed to come from beneath the platform. He crawled to the edge and gazed down and yelled aloud in terror.

On the sand beneath was a hideous, shelled thing dimly visible. It was gnawing industriously at one of the posts which supported the platform, and the noise was produced by the sound of it, bony claws against a wrapping of corrugated iron which the hermit fastened about the four-inch post. It was a gigantic crab with claws like a lobster and each of these claws was nearly two feet long. Its body seemed, to Wilbur, to be at least four feet in length and two feet in breadth.

Had the post been without metal protection, there was little doubt that the monster would have bitten through it in a very short space of time and it didn't seem possible that the thin sheet of metal would resist the powerful teeth. Wilbur's hair stood, on end and a cold sweat seeped through all his pores. It seemed as if the thing might climb upon the platform if it could manage to stand on its tail.

He gazed frantically around for a weapon, but there wasn't even a substitute for a club. And no club would save him from those enormous claws if the great crab once came within reach of him.

**F**ASCINATED, Wilbur looked down. The single bulb enabled him to see for ten or twenty feet in all directions upon the sand, and he saw another monstrosity crawling swiftly out of the darkness. It was also a mammoth crab, but not the mate of the wicked thing which was gnawing away at the cast-iron sheathing, for the first monster was too intent on his task to be aware of the approach of the other giant crustacean until it was almost upon it. Too late, it released the



post of the platform and attempted to back away. One of the great claws of the newcomer grasped a leg and tore it from the body. A queer whistling sort of noise came from the wounded creature. It whisked its body away, bent its flexible spine and lifted itself, its great toothed claws held like the fists of a prize fighter. The other thing reared, and then they were locked in deadly combat.

His personal peril temporarily banished, Wilbur watched, fascinated, the battle of the shellfish who suggested in the shadowy light, mail-clad warriors of the age of chivalry. The clash of their weapons as they feinted for position did sound something like blows of maces and axes on iron, and their shells must have been almost as hard as steel cuirasses.

Each of the things not only wielded the monstrous, heavy claws but their front legs were armed with pincers, being intended by nature for warfare as well as locomotion. The clatter they made was echoed back and forth, and from both came the weird, whistling sound. Claws snapped at claws, slid over the hard shell harmlessly and snapped again.

For at least a minute there was no advantage and the loss of a leg did not appear to handicap the first leviathan. And, then, the second battler secured a grip of the arm which wielded one of his opponent's claws.

There was a horrid crunching sound, and the great mailed weapon was cut cleanly off and dropped upon the sand. It was the beginning of the end, and Wilbur didn't watch the end. He couldn't. He turned away and sat down in the middle of the platform and prayed for the return of the hermit, though even the bearded man would have come to grief if he had encountered either of the monsters and was armed with anything less than a heavy axe.

The crackling and crunching con-

tinued and the noise finally subsided. Curiosity drew Wilbur again to the edge of the platform. The battle was over. The first brute was dead and the second had turned him on his back and was tearing away at the contents of the giant shell.

By and by it shuffled off, and Wilbur was left in the company of the casing of what had been a ferocious crustacean.

His nerves were frazzled, his fingers and eyelids were twitching and he was shaking all over. Even though he told himself that the hermit must be familiar with the potentialities of the inhabitants of the cave and knew that the platform was high enough to be safe from invasion, he could not banish his terror.

Finally he went back to the inspection of the stores. He found a box containing a camp kettle and other cooking utensils. There was a huge coil of copper wire, a box of dry cell batteries, a complete kit of tools and other unusual possessions for a cave hermit. Finally he drew forth a partially rotted pigskin case about eighteen inches long by twelve inches and five or six inches in thickness. He inspected it curiously and saw traces of initials on one end. He peered at them. The initials were H. W.

"H. W." That suggested something. H. W.! Herbert Walsingham! The portmanteau of Sir Herbert Walsingham, the king's messenger who had lost his life after the sinking of the *Orvista*.

With shaking fingers he opened the case, which was not locked. Empty. It was empty!

And this was the portmanteau which had contained one and three-quarter million pounds in Bank of England notes. Empty and in possession of the hermit!

He stared stupidly at the case for several minutes and then became aware of the creaking of rowlocks, much amplified by the eccentricities of the cave.

Hastily he replaced the case where he

had found it and seated himself on the straw matting to await the return of the multimillionaire hermit who undoubtedly would knock him on the head if he learned that he had discovered his secret.

## CHAPTER XV.

"AL THE TOFF."

THE surprise of the camp had been complete, nor was Wilbur Stetson responsible for the success of the coup of Sir Alfred Bright. Shortly after the moon had set, a two-masted schooner with sails furled and propelled through the water by a powerful gas engine had appeared on the west side of the island and slipped into the lagoon. Taking every precaution against noise, her crew had dropped an anchor fastened with a hemp cable instead of a chain, immediately lowered a boat and, with muffled oars, rowed to the boat landing.

Three men had left the boat and proceeded to make a careful reconnaissance.

From the boat landing on the lagoon to the camp upon the north shore was nearly a mile. The ground appeared to be familiar to the men from the schooner, and they worked slowly and methodically toward the Johnstone house where they believed the Carson party to be quartered. The absence of lights from the residence perturbed them and increased their caution, and it was not until they were almost upon the ruins that the Englishman became aware that the house no longer existed.

However, from the site of the house, the lights in the cabins and the camp fires were visible, and the spies crept slowly down the slope and lay for an hour upon their stomachs studying the situation below.

Frank Carson could not be blamed for permitting an enemy to land unobserved upon the island. The smallness of his party made it impossible to post more than three sentinels, and these had

to be placed fairly close to the camp. While he was aware that he had an enemy or enemies on Fandango, he supposed that the bearded man was either alone or had no more than one or two companions, and he thought he could repulse any offense from that quarter without much difficulty.

He had not forgotten the threats of Sir Alfred Bright, but he had no reason to expect that individual to land on the island with a large force. And, had he anticipated such a thing, it would have been impossible for him to take more precautions than he had done. In one respect only was he remiss. He had neglected to remove from its box and to put together the parts of his machine gun.

Having studied the lay of the land and spotted the sentries, the spies withdrew as cautiously as they had come, re-entered their boat and rowed out to the schooner where several hours were spent in preparations. In the small hours of the morning, when the camp was asleep and the fires had been extinguished and only the men on watch were alert, twelve men carrying rifles were landed from the schooner and moved rapidly to the north shore of the island.

Two men were assigned to take care of each sentinel, and the main body clustered near the ruins of the residence to wait for the word.

Wilbur had been drawn from his post by the sound of muffled oars on the bay. Johnson was not aware of the approach of an enemy until a knife was driven into his back, and Captain O'Malley, who had revealed his exact location by lighting his pipe at that moment, had turned his broad back to the two stalkers who leaped upon it and bore him to the ground. The pair assigned to Wilbur Stetson rushed over the rock-pile and found it unoccupied.

A boatswain's pipe gave the signal; the main body fired a volley into the

camp and rushed it. They were upon the sleepers before they had staggered to their feet, and the camp was captured without a shot having been fired by the defenders.

In one respect only was the rush unsuccessful. They had failed to capture the man on post on the rocks. As soon as he learned that this sentinel was at large, Bright sent four men out to bring him in. The freedom of Wilbur was the only ray of hope for the defenders.

**F**RANK recognized Sir Alfred Bright as soon as Bright's followers had lighted a fire.

"What is the meaning of this?" he asked angrily. "You've put yourself outside the law by this action, sir."

"I warned you to accept my offer," replied the Englishman. "No harm will be done to the ladies or to any member of your party if you obey orders."

"For the moment you have the whip hand," said Frank with a shrug. "I don't like the looks of your followers, sir. May the ladies retire to their cabin?"

"Who are these pirates?" demanded Cora indignantly. "How dare they trespass on our property?"

Sir Alfred Bright bowed like a courtier.

"Please go into your cabin. Miss Carson," he said, "and take your charming friend with you. You need have no apprehension. I command here."

Cora's eyes flashed. "We have no apprehension," she retorted. "We can take care of ourselves; can't we, Rose?"

Rose placed her arm around the other girl and led her into the cabin.

"Make a search for weapons," commanded Bright.

In a few minutes all arms and ammunition had been piled on the ground near the roaring fire.

"I warn you that the gunboat *Porpoise* is in the vicinity," said Carson to his captor.

Bright laughed.

"She's back in Nassau Harbor. We shall have accomplished our purpose and be gone before she returns."

Captain O'Malley, who had been brought into camp by two sturdy negroes, had been staring steadily at the leader of the bandits.

"By the powers," he exclaimed. "If it isn't Al the Toff!"

Bright's unpleasant face cracked into an unpleasant smile. "At your service, you dirty Irish rebel," he replied. "Never expected to set eyes on me again, eh?"

"When did they let you out?" asked O'Malley insultingly. "This thieving scoundrel was in Dartmoor with me, Frank, me boy."

"Fellow jailbirds," replied Bright without rancor.

"I was a political prisoner," replied O'Malley with dignity. "You were serving time for robbery and attempted murder, you swine!"

"You see, Mr. Carson," Bright said with a grim smile, "I am a desperate character. I happen to be a gentleman and my title is authentic but I'll cut this Irishman's throat with pleasure and slit your gizzard, also, if you don't listen to reason."

"What in hell do you want?" asked Frank through clenched teeth.

The visages of the followers of Sir Alfred Bright had alarmed him because of the presence of the two girls, but he had supposed Bright to be a different type of villain. O'Malley's recognition of the man proved him to be a criminal like the rest.

"I want the portmanteau of Sir Herbert Walsingham," replied Bright. "That's why you bought this island. O'Malley knows where it is. Every man in Dartmoor Prison knew that he could lay his hands on millions when they let him out."

"I don't know what you are talking about," replied Frank contemptuously.

Bright laughed in a sinister manner. "I don't think you understand what you are up against," he replied. "You'll do what I tell you to do, or I'll hang you and O'Malley, like a couple of dogs."

*Crash!*

Carson's big fist had collided with the jaw of the British criminal, and Sir Alfred Bright went down like a log. Frank fell across his body, dropped by a blow from the butt of a gun in the hands of a big mulatto, and Captain O'Malley went down fighting furiously against half a dozen.

A Spaniard pinioned O'Malley to the sand and a negro's knife flashed above him.

"No, no, drop that!" shouted Bright, who had recovered almost instantly and flung Frank's senseless body off his chest. "Tie him up, but don't kill him. I need him. And truss up this Yankee prize fighter, too."

ALL night fires burned on the beach, and armed men patrolled the camp while Captain Smith, the engineer, the steward and the deck hands were squatting unarmed and helpless in the men's cabin, and Frank Carson and Captain O'Malley lay, side by side, on their backs on the sand, bound hand and foot. Sir Arthur Bright had turned in and slept as peacefully as though he had achieved some good deed. In low tones O'Malley told Frank what he knew about the man.

"In a prison," said O'Malley, "you learn about everybody in no time at all. This fellow was supposed to be a member of a good family gone wrong. He did his killing and robbing in evening clothes and a high hat, which is why they called him 'Al the Toff.'

"In some way the word got around the prison that I knew where there was a treasure buried, which was why the police sent for me to be questioned every now and then. He must have trailed me to America, found out that I

had taken you into partnership, and then came down to Nassau ahead of us."

"We have the girls to think of," said Frank miserably. "I'd chuck the whole thing for the sake of Cora. The trouble is that you can't tell him where the port-manteau is hidden and he won't believe your story. He is quite capable of carrying out his threats, isn't he?"

"He won't stop at torture," replied O'Malley, glumly. "'Tis a terrible situation we are in, Frank. My poor little Rose! I wonder if anything could save the girls."

"Either the unexpected return of the gunboat or Wilbur Stetson," said Frank. "Wilbur will do what he can, but it's one man against a dozen."

"And the gunboat is at Nassau. He found that out before he dared to land here," answered the Irishman. "What do you suppose became of the boy? If he saw them coming, he ought to have fired a shot. If he didn't see them, sure, they'd have knocked him over the way they did me."

Frank twisted unhappily in his bonds. "They haven't captured him," he observed. "That's a hopeful sign. And the only hope."

The two adventurers, sick at heart, lay back and talked no more, but neither closed an eye during the longest night of their lives.

## CHAPTER XVI.

### TORTURE.

THE sun came and climbed out of the sea with the speed it reserves for the tropics. Birds sang, palm fronds rustled in the morning breeze, and Sir Alfred Bright rolled out of his blankets and strolled to where his two chief captives lay side by side, trussed up like fowls.

"Fortunes of war," he said cheerfully. "I've nothing particular against you two blighters, but I have no time to waste on you."

He drew a sailor's knife from the pocket of his white drill trousers, stooped over and cut their bonds. Very stiff and sore, the two prisoners sat up and scowled at him.

"O'Malley," he said, "it's been a legend of the islands for years that you brought the king's messenger's millions to this island and hid them here and would some day return for them. Have you the money in your possession?"

"No," said the captain sullenly.

"You never could have got away with it," replied Bright. "The government proposes to give you plenty of rope, and all arrangements are made to nab you when you try to get out of Bahama waters. You're losing nothing by turning the stuff over to me."

"I'll see you damned first," retorted he Irishman.

"You have a chart, of course."

"I have not."

"Then lead me to the hiding place."

"He couldn't do that even if he wanted to," asserted Frank. "O'Malley doesn't know where he hid the portmanteau, Bright. He was delirious when he landed on this island and he has no recollection of where he placed the portmanteau."

Bright scowled. "A likely story," he remarked.

"Why should I buy the island?" asked Frank earnestly. "We figure it may take us months——"

"I'm pulling out of here to-day," said Bright roughly. "How come your yacht is beached?"

"It was blown up," replied Carson. "We don't know by whom."

"Have you seen anybody else on the island?"

"No." Carson saw no reason for supplying his enemy with information.

"Humph! That young man who was with you when I talked to you at Nassau. I don't see him among the prisoners. Where is he?"

"I have no idea."

"Well, we'll run him down. Gentlemen, I want those millions. I've been weeks in these islands waiting for O'Malley or his representative to come down here. My interest isn't known to the government, and my visit here is not known. Turn the money over to me, and I'll take my men off and leave you here without further trouble, though I'll help myself to what I need from your supplies. Refuse——"

"You're asking the impossible," Frank said earnestly. "I have no more notion where the portmanteau is hidden than you, and neither has O'Malley."

"I say there! Juan, Barney, Diego, Bill Hunt!" shouted Bright.

Four of his crew came running.

"Take these fellows up the hill," he commanded, "and fetch a coil of rope."

Frank and the captain were collared and forced up the slope, though their legs were so weakened by the bonds that they would hardly support their bodies.

Sir Alfred Bright, the modern buccaneer, followed leisurely.

Near the ruins of the residence he paused and cast an appraising glance around. Not far away was a banyan tree at which he gazed speculatively.

"Tie a rope around their necks," he commanded.

"Look here," cried Frank excitedly, "you can hang us by the neck until we are dead, but we can't tell you what we don't know. The game is in your hands, Bright. We're helpless. Surely you balk at murder?"

"With six millions of dollars at stake?" asked Bright, laughing wickedly. "For that amount I'd hang my own father. Cut that rope in two and make nooses and throw the ends over that branch there."

**W**ITHOUT protest or hesitation, his followers obeyed his orders and in a couple of minutes the Irishman and the young American stood beneath a spreading tree

branch, the nooses around their necks so tight they were pulled up on their tiptoes.

"Anything to say?" demanded the brigand. "No?" Put some weight on those ropes, men."

He had neglected to tie the hands of his victims and both involuntarily clutched at the nooses to save their necks as they were pulled off the ground.

Frank Carson was facing the lagoon as he swung clear. That Bright actually intended to hang him and his friend he could not believe—yet he was strangling. And then his staring eyes saw a disturbance in the sea at the bow of the schooner, clearly visible as she swung at anchor in the center of the lagoon. Immediately a waterspout rose fifteen or twenty feet into the air and a dull heavy report followed.

Bright had whirled and was staring at the schooner.

"Blown up!" he shouted.

He started to rush down the slope, and one of the hangmen shouted after him:

"I say, sir, shall we finish this job?"

Bright stopped. "Take them back to the camp," he commanded. "I've got to find out what has happened."

The two condemned men touched solid earth again and gazed at each other with astonished eyes.

O'Malley recovered his voice first and, according to his quaint habit, swore with picturesque fluency in Gaelic.

"Their schooner is sinking," muttered Carson. "Look, she's going down fast!"

But the brutes who would have hanged them without a qualm pushed them roughly back down the slope toward the camp, and they had no further view of the vessel which had been blown up as mysteriously as had the yacht *Cora Carson*.

By the time Sir Alfred Bright reached the boat landing, the two men on the schooner had tumbled into a

skiff and pulled away from the ship which was going down by the head.

The English criminal and his gang, like Frank Carson and his party, were marooned on Fandango Island. Their plight was worse than that of the yacht's company, because they had not had time to salvage anything from the schooner. On the other hand they were masters of the stores from the yacht.

When they had time to think it over, neither Carson nor O'Malley could credit that Bright actually would have suspended them in air until they died. Being fully convinced that they knew where the treasure was hidden, Bright had nothing to gain and everything to lose by their death. Nevertheless, the unknown bomber had exploded his mine under the schooner in time to save them from a horrible experience.

When their captors led them into camp, there was nobody visible from the Carson party. A man stood on guard in front of each of the cabins, and half a dozen ruffians were loafing in front of a camp fire upon which a breakfast was cooking, chosen from the choicest of the stores of the yacht.

The four savages in charge of Frank and his partner pushed open the door of the men's cabin and thrust them among their friends, after which they paralyzed their comrades by telling them of the destruction of the schooner, apparently through no human agency.

## CHAPTER XVII.

### MADMAN'S APPRENTICE.

**T**HE bare feet of the hermit carried him noiselessly to the platform and he was upon it before Wilbur realized that he was so near at hand.

"Well young man," he said in a tone which was not unfriendly, "how do you like my home?"

Stetson shuddered. He pointed toward the carcass of the great crustacean.

"That thing was trying to chew down one of the posts," he said in a shaking voice. "Another one fought with him and killed him."

"That's why I built on stilts," replied the other, squatting near his prisoner.

For the first time Wilbur had a good look at his captor. He had a very high forehead and very large features. His nose was big, broad, and aquiline. His beard was a grayish brown, matted and tangled and six or eight inches long. His hair was almost white. He had deep-set eyes of great brilliancy, and very white teeth which were regular and well formed. He was over six feet in height, his shoulders were very broad and his biceps were enormous. He was tanned the color of old leather.

"Those brutes are a variety of stone crab," said the old man. "Their shell is an inch and a half thick and will withstand a blow from an axe. They would tear a man into shreds in a few seconds, in case you are contemplating leaving here except in my company. The light drew them out of the water."

He reached over and turned out the electric light and blackness engulfed him and his captive.

"What is happening to my friends?" asked Wilbur anxiously.

"Nothing as yet. This scoundrel Bright entered the lagoon in a schooner, crossed the island and overpowered your party. I heard a discussion between him and your employer, Carson. Bright wants the portmanteau of Sir Herbert Walsingham." He laughed loudly and sardonically.

"Can you do something?" pleaded the youth. "We have two ladies with us. It would be awful if anything happened to them."

"Are you a good shot?" questioned the old man.

"Fair, sir."

"You may have a chance to use your rifle. I have more powerful weapons."

"Dynamite," said Wilbur.

"Ha! You have been poking about during my absence."

"No, sir. But you blew up the yacht, didn't you?"

"As some day I shall blow up the Capitol in Washington," replied the hermit blandly. "Young man, in this cave I have a store of explosives which would destroy a city."

A bony claw came out of the dark and grasped the young man's arm.

"Destroy to build anew," exclaimed the bearded man. "The world has already felt my power. Do you doubt me? Look!"

He reached out and touched something. Immediately there was a great illumination some distance in the rear of the platform upon which they sat. Wilbur rubbed his eyes as Aladdin must have done when the jinni of the lamp first displayed his wonders.

Fifty yards to the rear a great arc light had flamed and disclosed a much higher platform, or rather a room on stilts, the walls of which were made of steel netting. Its interior was part laboratory and part machine shop. Stetson saw lathes, a big gasoline motor, and a mechanic's bench on one side of this queer chamber and upon the other rows of porcelain sinks, and shelves lined with bottles of all sizes and shapes.

"I cannot be disturbed at my work," said the old man casually. "but my light draws vicious creatures from the sea. That is why I have caged-in my workshop."

He grasped the youth by the shoulder and shook him vigorously. "I am Vulcan," he declared. "But I forge my weapons, not for war, but for peace."

Wilbur couldn't reply. He was too frightened. Without question he was in the power of a lunatic.

**The final installment of this thrilling serial by Fred MacIsaac will be found in the February issue of Street & Smith's Top-Notch. Watch for it on the news stands January 20th.**



How short can a story be—and still be a story? This is the question which the Editor of Top-Notch is trying to answer in this section of the magazine.

The highest art of story-telling is to be brief, and yet to present in that brief compass, a whole act of drama, comedy, tragedy, or melodrama.

It is the purpose of this Corner of Top-Notch to present a group of short short stories of outstanding merit—one-act tales that will grip, thrill, or amuse.

## A Matter Of Importance

By Hal Field Leslie

**J**OHN RYDER tossed his half-finished cigar into the ruddy fire burning in the library grate, and reached for the telephone. The instrument stood upon a richly inlaid table within arm's reach of his easy-chair. His hand—it was as soft and as neatly kept as a fastidious woman's hand—lifted the unit from its base.

"Give me long distance. . . . Hello! Long distance? . . . This number is Denver 0001. John Ryder speaking. Connect me with the residence of William Hartley, Salt Lake City. . . . Hello! What's that? . . . I couldn't quite get you, operator—the infernal wind is making such a racket. . . . What's that? . . . Oh, you'll call me. Very well—but rush it; it's very important."

Ryder restored the telephone to the table. He glanced up at the clock on the wall above the fireplace. Its gilded hands marked the hour as eleven thirty—nearly midnight.

In the darkness outside the tall, draped windows of the library—each window decorated by a gaily ribboned wreath of holly—a storm was raging. Wind and snow were beating lustily upon the glass.

Ryder touched a button. A manservant came soundlessly into the room.

"Beastly night, Roberts. Touch up the fire."

"A fresh log, sir?"

Ryder nodded. The servant busied himself at the fireplace, and quietly withdrew.

Ryder selected another cigar from the humidor at his elbow, and lighted it leisurely. Then he settled comfortably back in his chair to wait.

**A** HUNDRED miles away from John Ryder's luxuriously appointed library, another fire was burning—not in the ornate fireplace of a rich man's home, but in the warped and heat-reddened stove of a humble mountain cabin.



It was storming here, too; storming as if all the wolves of high-country weather were unleashed. The dry snow drove and slithered like blown sand against the log walls and frosted windowpanes. The raging wind tore fiendishly at the eaves and angles of the little habitation, as if intent to wrest it loose from earth and send it whirling to destruction in the deeps of the nearby canyon.

In a corner of the cabin's one room stood a bed. On the bed, covered by a patiently wrought quilt of bright patchwork, lay a woman.

Beside her sat a man, a bronzed and strapping young fellow with a square jaw and determined chin. He was holding, very gently, one of her hands in both his own. In his eyes was infinite tenderness—and the shadow of a lively fear. Hers, however—wide and violet-hued in the lamplight—were glorified with the imminence of that greatest adventure that can come to any woman.

A particularly heavy gust of wind rocked the cabin. The bed trembled. The young man shook his head with something more than soberness.

"The doctor'll have to turn back. The trails were full before he started. He can never make it up here—not on a night like this one. Are you afraid, Mary?"

The woman—she was young, too—shook her head and bravely smiled.

"No, Dan. I am not afraid. This is Christmas Eve. And up here in these mighty mountains God is very close to us—very close."

Dan nodded, pressed her hand gently. There was a lump in his throat. He didn't speak. Except for the howling of the wind, the recurrent assault of the storm, the cabin was very still.

Presently a small bell rang—raspingly—imperatively.

The man rose and strode to the wall telephone in a far corner of the room. His strong hand shook a little as he

lifted the receiver. That would be the doctor, most likely, calling to say he couldn't make it.

But it wasn't the doctor; it was the trunk-line maintenance superintendent, far down in the kindly flatlands. His voice crackled in over the wire:

"McGrath, the line is down somewhere between you and Ed Collins. Can't raise Collins. Hop to it, Dan—we're trying to get a rush call through to Salt Lake." *Click!*

Dan McGrath's face was gray beneath its winter bronze when he turned away from the phone box. It was his job to maintain in good repair a certain section of those copper strands that carried a portion of the nation's telephone business over the great mountains. His job now was to find and splice the break.

"But I can't go away and leave you here alone, Mary!" he protested. "I can't. I'll not go!"

"You must, Danny boy," she insisted quietly. "I'm not afraid. I'll be all right. Who knows, Dan, what that broken wire may mean? It may be a matter of life or death for some one."

Life—or death! The thought, looking at her, choked him. But she had her way, finally.

Dan crammed the fire box of the stove with wood. He arrayed himself for storm, belted on his tools, slung a coil of wire across his sturdy shoulders. With snowshoes in one mittened hand and his climbers in the other, he stooped and kissed his wife good-by.

And she courageously managed to smile until the door had closed behind him.

**T**HROUGH the storm-whipped night, Dan McGrath valiantly fought his way upward along the precarious mountain trail. On the left, the great slopes rose like monstrous shadows crouching in the snow-filled gloom. On the right lay the canyon

—a whirling white void filled with the ever-present menace of destruction for the unwary.

Patiently—carefully, lest a slip of the foot betray him—Dan toiled on, plodding webs, straining his snow-stung eyes at every pole, and between, for the broken copper strand that he must repair.

At the crest of the pass, a mile above the cabin, Dan found at last the break. Wire had snapped midway of two poles that stood clear at the mercy of the wind.

Dan slipped off mittens and snowshoes, began to strap on his climbers. The cold bit like an acid. His fingers were numb before the first buckle was secure.

But at last the steel was on; and Dan unlimbered his coil of wire and started up the pole.

Here on the backbone of the mountains, the wind had all the force of a rushing torrent. The cold-tempered wood resisted the bite of the spurs. Halfway up, the raging wind tore away Dan's grip, tore away the grip of his climbers. He landed twenty feet away, on wind-scoured rock, with one leg doubled under.

For a moment Dan's face went white with fear—not for himself, but for Mary, alone down there in the storm-lashed cabin. He thought that his leg was broken.

But luck, and the resiliency of toil-hardened thews, had been with him. He found that he could move the leg; discovered that he could use it. Doggedly—though every lift of that twisted leg was agony—he recovered his lost wire and attacked the pole again.

This time he made it. He achieved the cross-piece, hooked that throbbing leg through the brace, and set to work. He clipped away the broken wire, and spliced in his coil's end at the insulator. It took time to do, working there in the cold fury of the storm, bare fingers

striving with cold metal. It wasn't in Dan to slight a job.

On the ground again, Dan carried his diminishing coil to the second pole, clipped away what he didn't need. With the end secure at his belt, he repeated the laborious climb and splice; strained taut and made secure the thin strand that was to carry a rush message down to Salt Lake City.

Fighting his way through white chaos, Dan came limping back to his cabin door. He had been gone a full two hours. And those two hours had left their mark upon him—not only from his battle with wind and storm, but from the anxiety that had ridden his shoulders up to the crest of the pass and back.

His numb finger that sought so eagerly the latch, were raw from the bite of steel and wire. His eyes were haggard. Mary, left alone these two hours—

But Mary was not alone—not now. Dan opened the cabin door upon a thin, small cry that thrilled him to the core and rooted him awkwardly to the threshold.

The doctor was there. The storm hadn't turned him back. He had reached the cabin a quarter hour after Dan had left. And it was this sturdy man of medicine who cried jovially:

"Shut that door, you confounded idiot, and come take a look at your Christmas present. A boy—eight pounds of good McGrath, if he's an ounce!"

And Mary—Mary was smiling. A smile that transfigured beyond telling her plain, strong features. It was such a smile as another Mary must have worn on that morn of morns so long ago.

At exactly half past one by the gilded hands of the library clock the telephone at John Ryder's elbow had rung. "There's your party, Mr. Ryder."

"Hello. . . . Hello, Bill Hartley. This is John. . . . Yes, John Ryder. And say, I've been trying for two hours to get you. Rotten service, I call

it! Very! . . . What's that? . . . What's on my mind? Oh, nothing much—I just called you up to wish you a Merry Christmas."

## Coffin Nails

By Alan Grey Mayne

**T**HE big blue roadster purred steadily up the winding canyon road. The way was dry and dusty. On either hand the parched, brush-covered California hills basked in yellow September sunlight.

There were two men in the car.

The driver was a thin, bilious-looking individual with a buzzard's nose and a twisted mouth. His companion was younger; but his face matched the other's in hardness of character if not in sharpness of contour. His eyes, their lids reddened by the constant dust kicked up by the tires, were gray and cold.

"How much farther is that town, Deek?" he demanded.

"Half an hour," responded the driver from a corner of his thin mouth. "It'll soon be over, Quigg."

There was a nervous impatience apparent in Quigg as he pulled out and opened a pack of cigarettes—the restiveness that possesses an eager fighter in the ring and awaiting the opening bell.

He lit a cigarette; proffered the pack to Deek. Deek never smoked—and cigarettes were his pet aversion. His hatred for the thin white cylinders was almost fanatical. Quigg knew this; and he took a keen delight in thus stirring his companion's irritation.

"Cigarette, Deek?"

"No!" Deek all but snarled the word. "No! Damn' coffin nails!"

Quigg grinned, returned the pack to his pocket. He smoked in silence.

The ascending road was narrow and

lonely. Infrequently they passed some roadside house with dust-laden oak trees in its dooryard and groves of lemon or apricot on the slopes beyond.

Once they met a barefooted Mexican boy. He stepped aside as the big car swirled past, and turned to look.

Quigg snapped away his cigarette rather viciously. "Damn' poor country up here," he observed—"judgin' from the looks of that kid we just passed."

Deek grunted. "It's richer in the high valley. Plenty o' vineyards—and the crop is in. That means money."

The grade began to lessen. The canyon gave out in a broad, flat valley. Vineyards, posted and wire-strung, lay far on either side of the road.

It was high noon when the two reached the upland town at the northern edge of the valley. The main street, lined with stores, a bank and a movie theater, seemed asleep in the sunlight. Deek had laid his bold plan well.

**T**WENTY minutes later the big blue roadster was swirling back down the dusty canyon road. A small black traveling bag with bulging sides lay secure between Quigg's feet. Deek, eyes on the road steadily, was making time.

Suddenly Deek's thin nostrils flared. "I smell smoke," he said.

Quigg sniffed. "So do I," he said. "There's a fire somewhere."

The car shot around a bend. They saw a hazy smoke cloud down ahead. Deek swore.

"Sit tight!" he said. "We gotta get through there before it gets so thick we can't see the road. I've seen brush fires before. They're hell."

His foot jammed down on the accelerator. The big wheels spun in the loose dust, caught footing, and the big car leaped on.

The pungent smell of burning brush grew more pronounced. The air was thickening. Quigg coughed a little.

Deek had to slow down for a dangerous curve. And on the other side of it, he jammed on the brakes, came to a stop. The way was blocked by a light truck squarely in the middle of the road. Two or three cars were parked at the ditch beyond. Men were clustered around the truck, pulling out shovels and gunny sacking.

A man in khaki came forward from the group. Quigg's hand stole toward his coat pocket.

"Take it easy, Quigg!" hissed Deek.

"Sorry, boys," said the man pleasantly, "but you'll have to lend a hand. Pile out and grab a couple of shovels. We've got a fire on our hands."

"But we can't stop," expostulated Deek. "We're late now for a business appointment in San Diego."

"You won't be held up long," the man assured them. "We've got quite a crew now, and we'll likely have it under control in an hour or so."

"We're not going to stop," asserted Quigg coldly. "Get that truck out of the road so we can pass."

The smile left the man's face. "You *are* going to stop," he said quietly. "I'm a fire warden, and you're under my orders. It's the law—and the State will pay you for your time. Come and get your shovels."

He went back to the group around the truck. Quigg scowled and again his hand moved toward his pocket.

"Cut it, Quigg!" whispered Deek. "The job was smooth, and there's no need to kick up trouble now. We can

slip away in the smoke and come back here. Throw the bag in the rumble and I'll lock it in."

Deek was just turning the key in the lock of the rumble when the warden came around back of the car. With him were two men carrying shovels, and a barefooted Mexican boy.

"These the men, Pedro?" asked the warden.

"*Si!* Yes, yes!" the boy assured him.

The warden nodded grimly. "I'm going to see that you two fellows do your share, since you're responsible for this fire," he asserted. "This boy saw you throw out the cigarette that started it. He tried to put it out, but it got away from him. Maybe fighting it will teach you a lesson—not to be so careless in dry-brush country. I——"

He was interrupted by the sudden arrival of a car that came slewing around the curve and almost ran them down before its driver applied the brakes. The car was filled with armed men.

Quigg ripped out a curse and his hand streaked into his coat pocket. The alert warden saw the move, saw the deadly intent in Quigg's eyes, and grappled with him.

Deek's gun leaped out—and went spinning when one of the warden's companions swung his shovel swiftly.

The men in the car piled out and joined in the scrimmage. And it was all over in half a minute.

"Stuck up the bank," explained one of the newcomers in answer to the warden's question. "Got away with fifty thousand." He glanced at the two prisoners, manacled wrist to wrist. "They'll swing for it. They shot the cashier and the teller—the only men in the bank at the time. Used silencers, and they might have got away clean if the teller hadn't managed to crawl out to the street and describe 'em before he died."

"Oh, well," observed Quigg grimly, "you've got us. How about a cigarette! I had a pack in my pocket——"

Some one lit a cigarette and shoved it roughly between Quigg's lips. Quigg grinned a little twistily. "Want one, Deek?" he asked.

"No!" snarled Deek. "The damn' coff—"

He stopped, swallowed dryly. He couldn't get the word out. The two

looked at each other. Quigg's lips went suddenly slack, and the cigarette fell unheeded. Quigg's eyes mirrored the awful realization that was on Deek's thin countenance.

The imagined pounding in their ears was the thud of a hammer driving nails in two plain pine boxes.

# The Shill

By George J. Brenn

THE excessively barbered, excessively manicured, excessively immaculate man with the pink jowls paused in the act of leaving his private office to regard the scene at the oaken rail.

It was obvious that a girl clerk was denying the gray-thatched wisp of a man outside the rail admittance to the inner office. This was a frequent occurrence at the establishment of Russell Seymour, Incorporated, High-class Investment Securities, and one which invariably resulted in Russell Seymour returning in haste to his sanctum when he observed such an encounter.

On this occasion, something about the old fellow at the rail—his voice, perhaps, or his slouchy posture—kindled a spark of recognition in the financier. He held his ground, satisfied that a moment or two of eavesdropping would suffice to verify his suspicions.

"I tell you," quavered the little gray man, "I saw Vic Magowan come in here. Jest tell him that Billy Lyons is here, and he'll be tickled pink to see me. Why, Vic and me was pitchmen together. Yep, we worked the curb, stores, medicine shows, and carnival companies—everything. Twenty years ago, there wasn't a grifter in the biz that didn't know Vic Magowan and Billy Lyons!"

"Let him in, Miss Whitney," ordered Russell Seymour, quietly imperative, and the girl swung the rail door open.

"Hullo, Vic, you ole son of a gun!" exclaimed Billy Lyons, shuffling through with arms outstretched.

It required but a moment for the other to whisk him into the private office and hurriedly shut the door.

"Indiscreet as ever, Billy," chided Seymour. "It probably never occurred to you that Russell Seymour is just another name. Those folks outside know me by a lot of others, but Vic Magowan isn't one of them."

"Reckon I did speak out o' turn," acknowledged the other, eagerly accepting a proffered cigar and lighting it. "Fact is, you looked so all-fired prosperous when you walked into this building that I figured you must be the kind o' captain of industry or finance that could afford to sail under his own moniker. Waal, Vic, you sure look gilt-edged."

"Things are breaking great, Billy," confessed the other. "I've got a sweet little racket, not too ethical, but strictly within the law. Another year, and I'll retire with half a million. And you?"

"Same's ever. Jest keepin' my head above water. Lots of angles, but mostly when I see a real one I don't have the stake to swing it."

"Same old Billy!" commented Seymour. "Stiil talking 'angles,' just as you did in the days of Doc Kleeman's Medicine Show. Remember the night in Harrisburg you made forty bucks sell-

ing rattlesnake oil, and lost the money ten minutes later to Lem Randell at monte?"

Lyons grinned whimsically.

"Sure do. Thought I saw an angle. Vic. I was purty good at three-card myself. But Vic, how about the time you and me bought and sold them oil land options in West Virginia? I invested my split in another track of oil land, but you put your dough in gov'ment bonds."

"I recall another occasion," Seymour observed, "when we were selling 'Cuban Ore.' Remember it, Billy?"

"Do I? That was in Chi. Scarfpins made of Cuban Ore; 'looks and wears like gold.' And we had half a dozen shillabers—fellers we paid to make fake purchases to encourage the sidewalk crowd."

"There was a chap out in Chi needed money to get home to his dying father, wasn't there, Billy?"

"Yep; so I took my Cuban Ore profits and helped him out by buyin' his two-carat rock. I'd always wanted a big rock, and that looked like the angle I'd been waiting for. I never thought for a minute it was a phony."

"You'll never change, Billy. When we were together you were the enterprising hustler, the sales genius, while I doped out the rackets. Trouble was, you could sell to advantage, but you couldn't buy worth a damn. Well, what are you doing now?"

"Nothin', Vic. I had a nice little matrimonial newspaper graft, but the post-office people come down on me."

"And right now?"

"Nothin', Vic. Busted. But if I had a stake—say five hundred bucks—I've got a chance at the sweetest angle I ever seen."

Seymour's check book and fountain pen were instantly pressed into service.

"Here you are, Billy," he observed, blotting the check and handing it over. "For old time's sake. I owe you a lot,

not only for faithful coöperation in the lean and venturesome years, but also because you've been the horrible example I've always kept in mind when I was on the verge of doing something foolish. God bless you, Billy, and may you hit a bonanza—a real angle—one of these days. And now I have a business appointment, so if you will—" and he expertly but affectionately hustled his one-time confrère to the door and dismissed him.

ONE day later.

The Eureka Investment Company, Philadelphia subsidiary of Russell Seymour, Incorporated, telephoning Mr. Seymour at the main office in New York. John Douglas, Philadelphia manager, speaking.

Russell Seymour listens attentively, reflects, and smiles.

"Ever see a fellow pitch a stand at the curb, Douglas," he asks, "and peddle cheap jewelry or medicine or novelties? And when he finishes his spiel, a number of fellows from the crowd eagerly plank down dimes or quarters to make purchases? Well, they're 'shills,' Douglas, my boy!"

"You mean, sir, that they are hired to stimulate sales?"

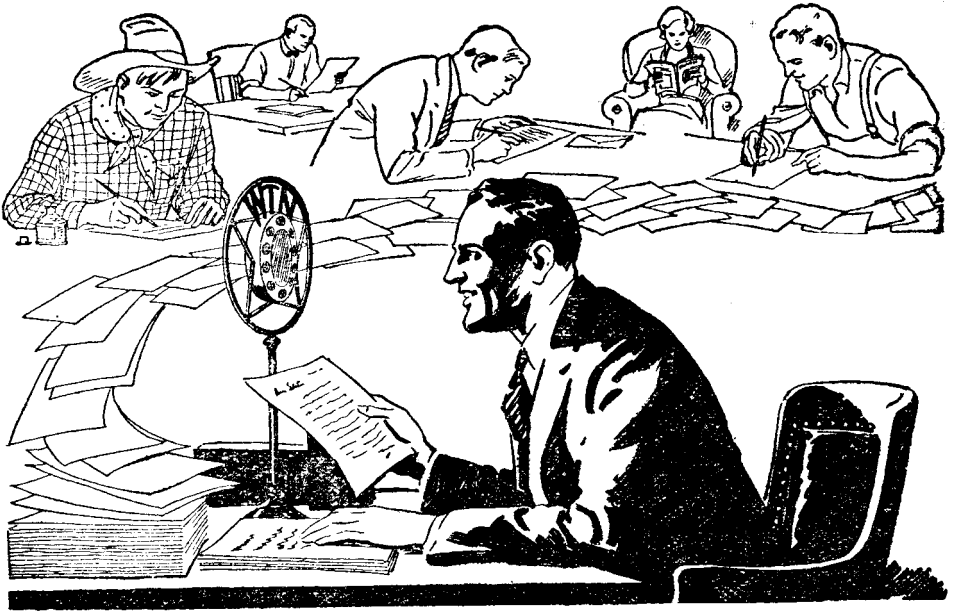
"Exactly. Now you say that you have an order for two hundred shares of Coronado Rubies at two dollars and fifty cents a share."

"Yes, sir."

"And that the prospective buyer incloses my check to his order in payment for the stock, indorsed 'William Lyons'?"

"Yes, sir, and I didn't think you'd want to sting a friend. What shall I do, sir?"

"Mail the check to me, and write him to call at my office. I'm going to dress him up and put him in the front office as a shillaber for Coronado Rubies. A shillaber, John, is a fellow who makes the crowd see the angle!"



## At The Top-Notch Mike

**O**N the air once again, ladies and gentlemen. Station WTN, located on the fifth floor of Street...& Smith's building, the home of good fiction, at 79 Seventh Avenue, New York City.

I want to make an important announcement to-night, folks. Top-Notch is inaugurating a new policy of running a long complete novel to lead off each issue, and the first of these will be by Malcolm Wheeler-Nicholson, in the February issue of Street & Smith's Top-Notch.

The title is "The House of Fang Gow," and you will find the issue containing it on the news stands on Friday, January 20th.

The story opens in New York City's mysterious and fascinating Chinatown, where a casual visitor may see the lighted restaurants, the quaint stores, the bland-faced Orientals shuffling about the streets, but where he can *not* see

back of the scenes where he is taken by the author in "The House of Fang Gow."

Here in this story you will find action, mystery, danger, intrigue, a dash of romance—and, in fact, everything that makes a story breathless and worth while. And you will get this new long novel complete in the one issue of the magazine.

"The House of Fang Gow" is only one of the many interesting features which you will find in the February issue of Top-Notch.

An announcement that I am positive will interest the readers of the Top-Notch now on the stands is that the February number will also include the second episode of the adventures of Ozar the Aztec in the Lost City of Karnux. This new story by Valentine Wood has for its title, "Ozar and the Plumed Serpent." It's at least as good

as the opening Ozar episode—which I feel is saying something.

There will be the final installment of Fred MacIsaac's adventure serial, "Fandango Island," as well as novell-ettes, short stories, and the increasingly popular Short Short Story Corner.

Remember that date, folks! January 20th!

Since the reduction in price of Top-Notch, I have been receiving from three to four times as many letters as previously. They reflect the different tastes of Top-Notch's many readers, and seem to indicate that the magazine is pleasing more readers to-day than ever before.

Harold F. Schaub of Buffalo writes that he has been a little disappointed in recent issues as he has not renewed his acquaintanceship with such Top-Notch characters as Pinto Martin, O. K. Polter, and Zip Sawyer, but says he likes the new characters in the stories by Chart Pitt and Russell Hays, and also Mr. Boston's serial, "Web of the Spider."

And Mr. Schaub adds: "As for the Short Short Corner, I don't know how we got along without it before. It's fine just the way it is, but if you do make any change in it, add a couple

more of those very short stories which never are tedious, but always good."

And this from Roger Frost of New Haven, Connecticut:

"I was glad to see The Hawk again. I wish you would have more stories of The Hawk, and cut out the Lazy Lucas stories. Best story in this issue, 'The Hawk and the Purple Clan.' Next best, 'Stop Sign.' Best short short story, 'Wise Guy.' Please keep up the Short Short Story Corner. My favorite author is John Paul Seabrooke. 'Rogue of the Highway' was a swell serial. I am a great Top-Notch fan."

Mr. Charles Miller of Girard, Ohio, mentions no particular stories or characters in recent issues, but writes: "I have been a reader of Top-Notch for about ten years, and a regular subscriber to same for the last two years. I think it is about the best magazine that is on the market to-day, and enjoy reading it very much. I could do without anything else, but could not miss one copy of the above-named magazine."

Clyde Duncan, of St. Louis, says that his only criticism is that the magazine does not come out often enough. His

**HELP EDIT YOUR TOP-NOTCH!  
READERS' BALLOT**

Best story in this issue .....

Next best .....

Best "short short" story .....

Who are your favorite Top-Notch authors? .....

Remarks and suggestions .....

Name and address .....



praise for the stories in the latest issue he had read at the time of writing were for "Tough Boss," by Al P. Nelson, "Southpaw," by Phil Richards, and "Pork and Beans," a short short story. "A dandy!" he writes in parenthesis.

I think I'll have time to read a few more letters from Top-Notch fans, and here they are:

Best story in this issue, "Stop Sign." Best short short story, "You Got To Be Hard-Boiled." A-1 for a dime, Like short shorts. Like 'em where the city boys ain't so smooth.—Nick Brian, *Ledgewood, New Jersey.*

Stories by J. Allan Dunn, Ben Conlon, and Allan R. Bosworth always good, and now I add Ralph Boston and Chart Pitt. Like your Short Short Story Corner and also I don't want to forget the marine stories by Arthur J. Burks.—*An Ex-leatherneck on Second Hitch, Walter Myers, San Diego, California.*

Favorite Top-Notch authors, Dunn, Hendryx, Boston, Coxe. Would like more stories by C. H. Coxe. Haven't seen any lately.—*Albert Issokson, Falmouth, Massachusetts.*

Time's up, folks. Listen in again on January 20th, when the February number of Street & Smith's Top-Notch will go on the stands.

## NEXT ISSUE!

(February Number—Published January 20th)

*A NEW FEATURE!*

*COMPLETE LONG NOVEL!*

# THE HOUSE OF FANG GOW

By MALCOLM WHEELER-NICHOLSON

*The Second Episode of the Adventures of*

## OZAR, THE AZTEC

"Ozar and the Plumed Serpent"

By VALENTINE WOOD

*ALSO THE FINAL INSTALLMENT OF FRED MacISAAC'S  
ADVENTURE SERIAL AND OTHER GOOD STORIES*

10 Cents a Copy at Your News Dealer's

Better Order Yours in Advance