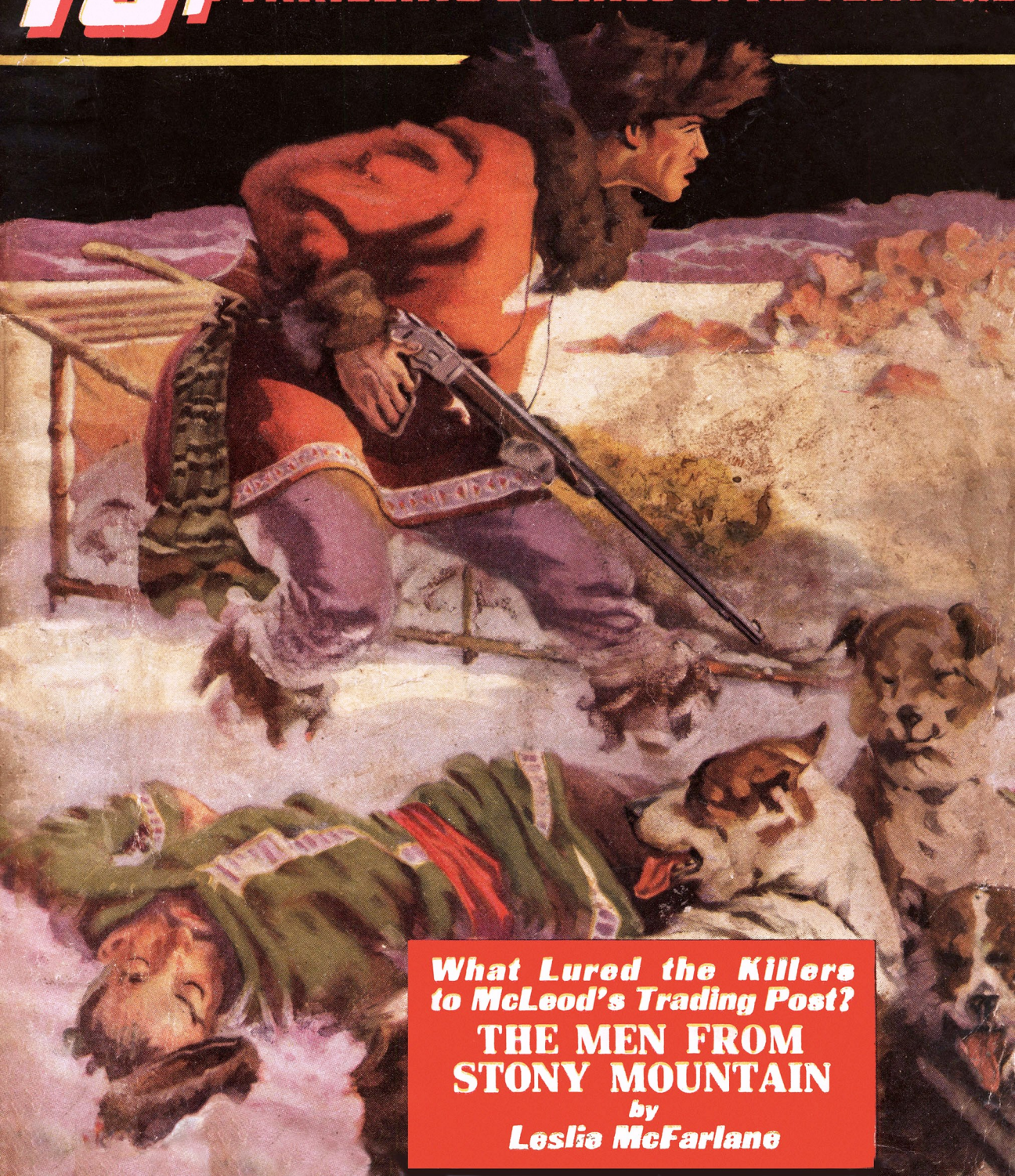


TOP-NOTCH ★

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MARCH 1936

10¢ THRILLING STORIES OF ADVENTURE



*What Lured the Killers
to McLeod's Trading Post?*

THE MEN FROM STONY MOUNTAIN

by
Leslie McFarlane

COLDS are dangerous infections - *give them* *Antiseptic Treatment!*

Listerine's success in reducing the number of colds is due to germ-killing action in mouth and throat

Colds are infections. Why not treat them as such—not with harsh drugs powerless against bacteria, but with a first-rate antiseptic that kills germs quickly?

Fewer, milder colds

People who follow this system may expect fewer colds and fewer sore throats. That has been proved over and over again by scientific tests in which Listerine was used.

The results of these tests begun in 1930 are corroborated by the experience of Listerine users as attested by enthusiastic letters to this company.

Remember, your cold is accompanied by germs, which invade the body through the mouth and throat. Promptly killed or even held in check, they may do no damage. Allowed to multiply, these bacteria are almost certain to get the upper hand. A mean cold or a nasty sore throat often follows.

Kills germs on membranes

Listerine holds such germs in check. When this pleasant though powerful



antiseptic touches the mucous membranes, it begins to kill by the millions, germs associated with colds and sore throat.

Even 3 hours after its use, vulnerable areas show a substantially reduced bacterial count.

See for yourself

Why not get in the habit of using Listerine twice a day this winter? You may find, as many others have, that it makes you less susceptible to winter ailments. Many report that as a result of using Listerine they have no colds whatsoever. Others say they catch cold seldom, and that their colds are so mild as to cause no inconvenience. Lambert Pharmacal Co., St. Louis, Mo.

Listerine

- at the first sign of Cold or Sore Throat

IF MEN WORE PRICE TAGS



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Top-Notch

Volume XCVIII

March, 1936

No. 3

A STREET & SMITH PUBLICATION

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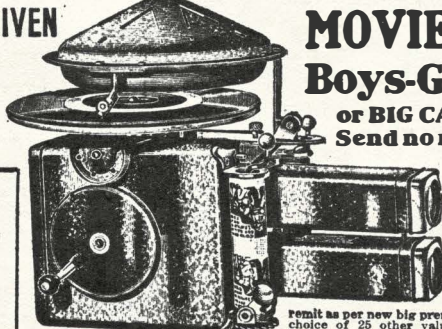
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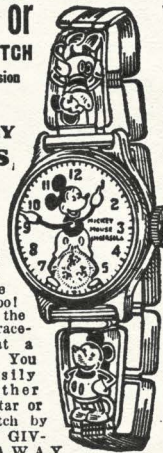
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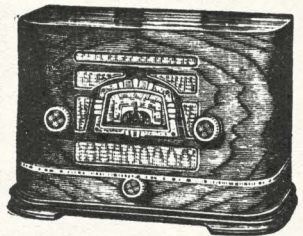
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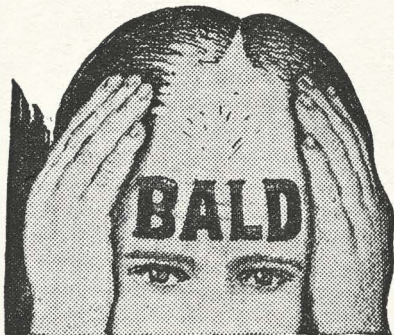
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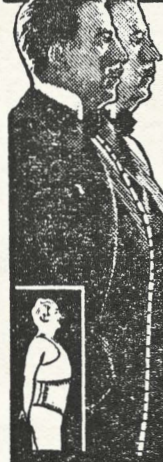
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| 32x5.50-21 | 3.10 | 32x4 1/2 | 4.20 |
| 32x5.50-22 | 3.10 | 32x4 1/2 | 4.35 |
| 32x5.50-23 | 3.10 | 32x4 1/2 | 4.50 |
| 32x5.50-24 | 3.10 | 32x4 1/2 | 4.65 |
| 32x5.50-25 | 3.10 | 32x4 1/2 | 4.80 |
| 32x5.50-26 | 3.10 | 32x4 1/2 | 4.95 |
| 32x5.50-27 | 3.10 | 32x4 1/2 | 5.10 |
| 32x5.50-28 | 3.10 | 32x4 1/2 | 5.25 |
| 32x5.50-29 | 3.10 | 32x4 1/2 | 5.40 |
| 32x5.50-30 | 3.10 | 32x4 1/2 | 5.55 |
| 32x5.50-31 | 3.10 | 32x4 1/2 | 5.70 |
| 32x5.50-32 | 3.10 | 32x4 1/2 | 5.85 |
| 32x5.50-33 | 3.10 | 32x4 1/2 | 6.00 |
| 32x5.50-34 | 3.10 | 32x4 1/2 | 6.15 |
| 32x5.50-35 | 3.10 | 32x4 1/2 | 6.30 |
| 32x5.50-36 | 3.10 | 32x4 1/2 | 6.45 |
| 32x5.50-37 | 3.10 | 32x4 1/2 | 6.60 |
| 32x5.50-38 | 3.10 | 32x4 1/2 | 6.75 |
| 32x5.50-39 | 3.10 | 32x4 1/2 | 6.90 |
| 32x5.50-40 | 3.10 | 32x4 1/2 | 7.05 |
| 32x5.50-41 | 3.10 | 32x4 1/2 | 7.20 |
| 32x5.50-42 | 3.10 | 32x4 1/2 | 7.35 |
| 32x5.50-43 | 3.10 | 32x4 1/2 | 7.50 |
| 32x5.50-44 | 3.10 | 32x4 1/2 | 7.65 |
| 32x5.50-45 | 3.10 | 32x4 1/2 | 7.80 |
| 32x5.50-46 | 3.10 | 32x4 1/2 | 7.95 |
| 32x5.50-47 | 3.10 | 32x4 1/2 | 8.10 |
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| 32x5.50-49 | 3.10 | 32x4 1/2 | 8.40 |
| 32x5.50-50 | 3.10 | 32x4 1/2 | 8.55 |
| 32x5.50-51 | 3.10 | 32x4 1/2 | 8.70 |
| 32x5.50-52 | 3.10 | 32x4 1/2 | 8.85 |
| 32x5.50-53 | 3.10 | 32x4 1/2 | 9.00 |
| 32x5.50-54 | 3.10 | 32x4 1/2 | 9.15 |
| 32x5.50-55 | 3.10 | 32x4 1/2 | 9.30 |
| 32x5.50-56 | 3.10 | 32x4 1/2 | 9.45 |
| 32x5.50-57 | 3.10 | 32x4 1/2 | 9.60 |
| 32x5.50-58 | 3.10 | 32x4 1/2 | 9.75 |
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| 32x5.50-60 | 3.10 | 32x4 1/2 | 10.05 |
| 32x5.50-61 | 3.10 | 32x4 1/2 | 10.20 |
| 32x5.50-62 | 3.10 | 32x4 1/2 | 10.35 |
| 32x5.50-63 | 3.10 | 32x4 1/2 | 10.50 |
| 32x5.50-64 | 3.10 | 32x4 1/2 | 10.65 |
| 32x5.50-65 | 3.10 | 32x4 1/2 | 10.80 |
| 32x5.50-66 | 3.10 | 32x4 1/2 | 10.95 |
| 32x5.50-67 | 3.10 | 32x4 1/2 | 11.10 |
| 32x5.50-68 | 3.10 | 32x4 1/2 | 11.25 |
| 32x5.50-69 | 3.10 | 32x4 1/2 | 11.40 |
| 32x5.50-70 | 3.10 | 32x4 1/2 | 11.55 |
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| 32x5.50-73 | 3.10 | 32x4 1/2 | 12.00 |
| 32x5.50-74 | 3.10 | 32x4 1/2 | 12.15 |
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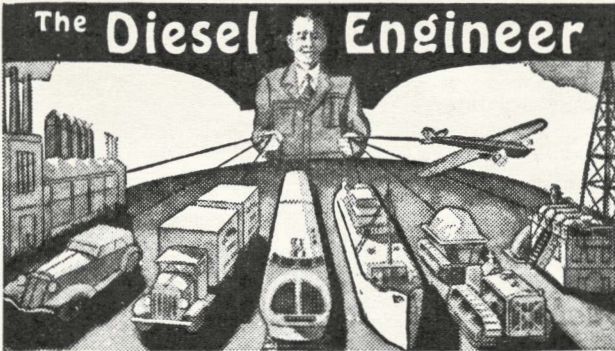
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The MEN from STONY MOUNTAIN

A Roaring Novel of the Mounties

by LESLIE McFARLANE



I HAD BEEN WAITING there in the dark for more than two hours, standing in that tiny, stuffy clothes closet until every bone in my body was aching and my eyes were heavy with sleep. I was waiting for "Blaze" Barker and my loaded gun was heavy inside my coat.

I waited there in the darkness of Blaze Barker's room—Blaze Barker who had sworn to kill me on sight.

I meant to take him, dead or alive. It would happen soon now, in this dark little room of a shabby Northern hotel. I was waiting for him with the patient watchfulness of a hunter in ambush for a cunning and savage wolf. Dead or alive—

Click!

There hadn't been a sound in the hall.

The girl moved—got between us—and then it happened—



But some one was at the door. Some one had turned a key in the lock.

That faint click aroused me to rigid eagerness, every sense alert. I heard the slight rattle of the knob, the squeak of old hinges as the door swung open. There was a moment of deathly silence. Then, suddenly, a yellow line of light appeared at the bottom of the closet

door and I heard some one moving across the room.

My gun was out. I listened to the sounds beyond the door: a coat flung on the bed, a chair thrust against the wall.

I pushed gently against the closet door. I had taken care to oil the hinges while I was waiting and it opened a little, quite silently.

Blaze Barker was standing with his back to me, not three feet away. I would have known him anywhere by the back of that square-shaped head with its bristly red hair, by those huge shoulders, those long, simian arms. He was in his shirt sleeves, but there was a gleaming black strap from right shoulder to the holster under his left armpit. He was in front of the washstand, pouring himself a drink—glass in one hand, bottle in the other. Now was the time.

"Get them up, Blaze!" I snapped, and kicked the door open.

HE WAS perfectly rigid for a second. He didn't jump, swing around or utter a startled yelp, like a normal man. Blaze Barker had no nerves. He just stood there as if frozen, holding the glass in one hand, bottle in the other. Then he extended both long arms wide, put the bottle on the bureau, the glass on the washstand. He raised his hands and turned around.

"Steve Sterling!" he said tonelessly.

"I've been waiting for you, Blaze," I said, and moved toward him with the nose of the gun trained on his stomach. "They told me you crashed out. I never did think they'd be able to keep you in Stony Mountain."

"You sent me there," he said in the same flat, dead voice.

"You sent yourself there, Blaze."

True enough, I had a hand in it. I was only a rookie in the Mounted when I hunted down Blaze Barker and brought him in for murder. That had been over in Manitoba, and when Blaze Barker drew a life sentence in Stony Mountain on a manslaughter verdict he spat defiance at me from the dock.

"I'll be out, Sterling!" he promised. "And when I get out I'll square this with you."

They had shut him up then. I laughed. But when Blaze Barker crashed out of Stony Mountain peni-

tentiary I knew my life would not be safe while he was at large. I had picked up his trail, lost it, picked it up again, and now I had run him to earth. What had brought him to Pine Post I did not know, nor did I care. It was enough that we were face to face again and that I was top dog.

"I wouldn't mind being taken by a regular Mounty—in uniform," he said loudly, "but you—a damned spying dick in plain clothes——"

Investigation work, you see, is my long suit. I've handled a lot of cases that couldn't have been tackled by a uniformed man.

"Especially you!" he said. His voice dripped rancor and bitterness. Then his shoulders drooped. "O. K.," he said wearily. "What now?"

His coat was lying on the bed. I reached for it, shook it. The coat was light—no gun. My left arm shot out and I wrenched his revolver from the holster beneath his arm. I slipped it into my pocket.

"Put on your coat, Blaze."

He was wearing breeches, shoepacks and a flannel shirt. When he got into the coat I gave him his mackinaw, his sealskin hat.

"What brought you up into this country, Blaze?" I asked. "You're away off the home range, aren't you?"

He looked at me sourly.

"Find out."

AND THEN entered the one simple, unexpected, staggering factor—the thing I had never foreseen: The light went out.

It happened in the flicker of an eyelash. In one moment Blaze Barker was standing in front of me, with his back to the door, the light shining on his pallid face and green eyes. In the next instant he was blotted out, the room vanished and we were standing there in utter blackness. I heard the sharp hiss

of his breath. I jammed the gun hard against his stomach.

"Don't do it, Blaze!" I snapped. "Don't make a move! So help me, my finger is on this trigger and if you stir there'll be a bullet in your guts."

He gave a wheezy, panting gasp. But he didn't move.

Evidently all the lights in the hotel were out because there was a sudden roar of voices from the lower part of the building. There were clamorous shouts for lamps and candles. Down the corridor a door slammed; some one blundered down the hall and stumbled on the stairs.

I edged around Blaze Barker, keeping the gun pressed hard against him, groped for the knob, found it, yanked the door open. I backed out into the hall.

"Come on! Keep close to me——"

Danger can be smelled. I know I sensed the presence of the other man out there in the hall before he made his move. But he struck so swiftly, so viciously that the instinctive warning of peril went for nothing.

Crash!

A chair swept down out of the darkness just as I stepped back. It smashed across my arm, knocked it down even as my finger jerked on the trigger. There was a belch of flame and a roar as the gun sent a bullet plowing into the floor.

The blow knocked the weapon out of my hand. It clattered against the wall. The chair had scraped my face, sent me stumbling back. It swung out of the darkness again and this time it cracked, splintering, against my head. I reeled, half stunned, slammed up against the wall as the chair crashed to the floor.

I heard Blaze Barker shout hoarsely:

"The back stairs, Nig! Give him the works!"

Blindly, I was tugging at Barker's gun in my hip pocket.

"*Bam!*" A revolver blazed not three feet away, with a blast of crimson flame. The darkness saved me. I pushed myself away from the wall and dived for a spot just below the flash. I came crashing against the man with a gun, hooked one arm around his knees and we went down. Luckily, I managed to clamp a grip on his gun wrist and I hung on like grim death.

His other fist came out from nowhere and smashed me full in the face. I was already groggy from the blows with the chair. Now my brain was in a fog. My man swung himself around, broke my hold and rolled free. A heavy boot shot out of the darkness and caught me square on the side of the head.

I could hear a terrific uproar downstairs and a wild confusion of voices. The shots had been heard all through the house. Another vicious kick and every ounce of strength seemed to drain from my body. I sagged to the floor.

"Nig! Nig!" Blaze was shouting from the end of the hall.

I could hear footsteps thudding on the stairs, saw a gleam of light on the landing. The gleam of light was swimming around and around. There was a salt taste in my mouth.

It was lucky for me that the fragments of that broken chair lay in my opponent's way. Otherwise I'm quite sure I'd have gone out then and there with half a dozen slugs in me. But as he stumbled away he tripped over the shattered chair, just as he fired. He went down with a crash, cursing, got up, kicked himself free of the chair and ran.

I groped for Blaze Barker's gun, tugged it free. Sprawling there I drilled a couple of shots down the hall. I dragged myself up, got to my feet, stumbled ahead, shooting.

Then my knees buckled. I toppled over and crashed to the floor again.

And that was how they found me, with my face a bloody smear and a

goose egg on the back of my skull. At that, it could have been worse. If Blaze Barker's sidekick hadn't tripped over that broken chair, for instance——

II.

IF ever the time comes when I won't be able to step into the average Northern town without being pointed out as a Mounty my usefulness as an undercover man will be at an end. I play a lone hand and seldom have to ask headquarters or local authorities for help. Lots of people have heard of Steve Sterling. Mighty few of them know me by sight.

So when the hotel clerk and a flock of interested bystanders came up with lights and found me there in the hall, I kept my mouth shut. I was down on the register as Joe Denman of Medicine Hat, and I stuck to my story that a couple of thugs had waylaid me in the hall and tried to roll me. The clerk had a brain wave and took a look at the master switch, in a cupboard at the end of the corridor. He learned why the lights had gone out. The switch had simply been pulled.

I could have kicked myself. I had taken it for granted that Blaze Barker was alone. It was plain enough now that the man he called "Nig" was a sidekick, occupying the next room, and that Blaze Barker had talked loud for a purpose when he was facing my gun with his hands in the air. The walls of these frontier hotels are like paper. Nig listened in, doped out the situation, turned out the lights and laid for me.

I washed my face, plastered up the cuts and reloaded my gun. Then I went hunting. I had a pretty good description of Nig from the hotel clerk. He was a short, thickset man with curly black hair and dark complexion, not forgetting a couple of gold teeth.

Pine Post is at the outer edge of nowhere, a jumping-off place for the fur

country and the new mining fields away up to the north. Blaze Barker and his pal couldn't go very far unless they hit into the snow country, which didn't seem likely.

But what had brought them to Pine Post in the first place? I couldn't figure that. Blaze Barker was an escaped lifer, of course, but he knew the North country well enough to know that it's no hiding place for a hunted man. Where people are few a stranger stands out like a sore thumb. If you've got to hide, take to the cities. Blaze Barker knew that as well as I did.

I prowled around, went down to the railway yards. There wouldn't be a train going out until next morning, not even a freight. Back uptown I headed for the Glory Hole, where I thought I might pick up some gossip.

The Glory Hole was a gambling joint, running wide open and doing fair business. It wasn't much of a place, the back room of a pool hall, but aside from the blind pigs and a couple of cribs it was all Pine Post had to offer in the way of sin. It was a murky, stuffy little dump, with a couple of poker games, a blackjack game and a crown-and-anchor layout. Over in a corner a fat man was fading a crap game, munching a dead cigar and clutching a wad of bills in his fist.

Nobody paid any attention to me. There wasn't much noise, just a drowsy buzz of voices, the click of chips, the rattle of the bones. I lounged over to the crap game, gambled a few dollars and lost. I heard two or three men talking about the affair at the hotel, but no one seemed very interested, and the gossip told me nothing I didn't know already.

THE DOOR OPENED and a tall, lean, lantern-jawed fellow came in. When he took off his fur hat I saw that he was as bald as an egg. Apparently he was a stranger, for no one had a

word for him. He looked around, then came over to the crap game, standing across from me.

He didn't play, just stood there watching the game. Once I happened to catch his eye.

His brows came together in a squint. He jerked his head in a barely perceptible sidewise motion.

He told me, without a word: "I want to talk to you."

I raised my brows inquiringly. "To me?"

Again he jerked his head in the direction of the door.

I nodded and bet a couple of bucks on Li'l Pheobe. She came through and I let it ride. Old "Snake Eyes" clattered out.

"No luck to-night," I muttered and pulled away.

Outside the Glory Hole I waited. It was a clear, cold night, without wind. There was a white moon riding high. I stood in the doorway until the bald stranger came out, turning up his coat collar.

"You're Steve Sterling, ain't you?" he said in a husky, confidential voice.

"Why?"

"I got some dope for you. It's about what happened to-night."

"Where do you come in?" I asked him.

"Look!" he answered, his voice huskier than ever. "If I'm seen talking to you, it's curtains for me, see? I know where you can catch up with Blaze and the other guy. I can give you the dope. Can't we go somewhere and talk?"

"Come on up to the hotel."

"I'll go, but I won't walk with you. I guess you know Blaze is gunning for you, huh? Well, I don't want to be with you, for he'd blast me too, sure."

"Go on up to Number Seven on the first floor. O. K.?"

He nodded. "Sure. I'll go up there and wait for you."

"What's your name?"

"Baldy Garrison. You don't know me, mister, but I've heard all about you."

"If you're trying to pull a fast one, Baldy," I warned him, "don't do it. Others have tried. Turn on the light and leave the door open when you go to that room. I'll be with you in five minutes."

"O. K.," he muttered and stepped out of the doorway. He went down the street at a queer, shuffling stride. I whistled softly. "Baldy" Garrison, if that was his name, hadn't been out of the pen long enough to shake off the prison walk.

I gave him time to get to the hotel and then struck out after him. Who was he? What did he know? Was he on the level or not? I figured this for a trap of some kind, but there had been a convincing ring of anxiety in his voice when he told me it would mean curtains for him if he were seen with me. I didn't know. I was ready for anything.

"A fellow just went up to your room," the clerk told me when I went into the hotel. "He said you told him to wait."

"It's O. K."

"Find anything about those guys who beat you up?"

I shook my head. I hadn't told him a thing. I hadn't told him that the pair occupied adjoining rooms on the top floor. A little later I planned to go through those rooms. Blaze Barker and Nig might have left something that would bring them back.

THE CLERK was eyeing me suspiciously as I went up the stairs. He thought I was taking the whole affair pretty coolly and it must have been obvious that I was covering up. He knew there was something queer, but it was over his head.

My door was open and the light

streamed out into the hall. So far, Baldy Garrison had obeyed orders. I pulled out my gun, slipped it into the side pocket of my coat and, still gripping it in my right hand, walked into the room.

I just had a glimpse of Baldy Garrison sitting in a chair in front of the window, with his hat off and his overcoat unbuttoned, when hell broke loose to greet me.

The window glass smashed into a thousand pieces. I heard *Bam! Bam!* and Baldy Garrison leaped out of the chair, clawed at his throat and pitched forward on his face. *Bam!* A bullet plucked at the top of my hat. I had my gun out by now and I drilled two blind shots through the shattered window, then ducked and hurled myself back through the open door.

In the hall, I dived for the door of the next room, kicked it open and strode inside. I leaped toward the window. The room was in darkness so I had the advantage. Through the glass I had a glimpse of a dark figure plunging across the roof of a shed just below the window level. There wasn't time for a shot. The figure jumped from the roof and vanished.

I turned and ran back into my own room. Baldy Garrison was crawling painfully to his knees, gripping the side of the bed. He was done for. A look told me that.

"McLeod!" he muttered in his husky voice. His eyes were staring with pain. "McLeod—warn him——"

The effort was too much for him. It exhausted his strength. He sagged down against the bed, his fingers clawing at the blanket.

"The moose!" he rasped. "The bull moose—you'll find——"

And then he went out. He slipped down from the side of the bed and his body slumped to the floor. His dead eyes stared fixedly at the light.

III.

WHATEVER the secret Baldy Garrison wanted to pass on to me, it was now lost in the silence of death. And as I crouched there beside him, gun in hand, I wondered if those bullets had really been meant for him. After all, Baldy Garrison had been sitting in that lighted room, unharmed and unmolested, until I stepped across the threshold. Not until then had the bullets come crashing through the window.

Had Garrison been murdered deliberately, silenced before he could tell me what he had to tell? Or had he been merely luckless enough to get in the line of fire when Blaze Barker, lurking out there in the moonlight, tried to rub me out?

There was little doubt in my mind that Blaze Barker was the killer. I knew his vindictiveness, his unrelenting hostility toward me too well. He had sworn to get me and he meant to carry out that purpose. Back of it all I had the conviction that I had somehow stumbled into some scheme of Barker's, that my removal was more urgent to him now than it had ever been. He wasn't up here for nothing.

"McLeod—warn him——"

Baldy Garrison had managed to gasp out that much. His cryptic utterance about the bull moose was, of course, unintelligible to me, but the reference to McLeod was clear. Angus McLeod operated a fur-trading post up in the snow country, thirty miles to the north. Some danger threatened him and Blaze Barker was at the bottom of it. That much I gathered.

Footsteps thudded down the hall. I heard a gasp of astonishment and looked up to see the clerk, in his shirt sleeves, standing in the doorway.

"My Lord!" he blurted. "You've killed him!"

I don't think I realized then just how the picture must have seemed to him.

A man had gone to my room to wait for me. I had gone upstairs and immediately guns had blazed. Now, revolver in hand, I crouched beside a dead body. All this within an hour of a gunfight in the upper hall. The clerk didn't wait for explanations. He let out a frantic yell, backed away, whirled and leaped for the stairs.

Baldy Garrison was past help now,

but there remained the business of hunting down the killer. I shouted after the clerk, but he was clattering down the steps at a great rate. I cursed his stupidity and ran down the hall to the back stairs. A moment later I was outside in the cold air and the clear moonlight.



*There stood Blaze Barker,
not three feet away. Now
was the time!*

Bachona

The shed at the back of the hotel had been made to order for the killer's purpose. The roof was only a foot or so below the window level and a man standing there could easily command a clear view of my room. Baldy Garrison hadn't pulled down the window shade.

A pile of boxes stacked at the back of the shed made it easy for any one to climb to the roof. I scouted around and found the footprints where the killer had leaped down into the snow.

I followed them. They led me back into a lane where the snow was hard-packed. There I lost the trail. I had the general direction of the killer's flight by then, however, and I headed down the lane. My man had a few minutes' start, but I knew he couldn't be far away.

The lane opened out on a road and beyond that lay a clear field and a little group of shacks beyond. I had a glimpse of a dark figure, clear against the snow, plunging into the shadow of the shacks. A dog began to bark.

I PICKED UP the trail across the field easily enough—a beaten path—and ran toward the shacks. The dog was still barking. When I ran up behind the tiny cabins I saw the dog facing a narrow alley between two of the shacks, yelping madly. He whirled around and turned his attention to me, but I drove him off and ran between the buildings.

When I came out onto the road in front of the shacks I fully expected to catch sight of my quarry again. But there was no sign of him and in the packed snow of the road I couldn't pick up his tracks again. I knew he must have turned off somewhere and I went along the road hunting for a fresh trail, but there were so many little bypaths that it was useless.

I went in among the huddled shacks again and prowled around in the hope of catching sight of him. The dog was

still setting up a great racket and arousing the neighborhood. A door opened; a man looked out and cursed the animal. The barking stopped.

I hunted around for a while without success and then decided to go back to the road. I tramped through the snow, rounded a corner of a small shed—

A heavy, thickset man leaped out at me, crashed against me, knocked me sprawling. The attack was so swift and sudden that I could do nothing to defend myself. I went down with my face in the snow, and in the next instant he was astride me, pinning down my arms and bawling for help. There was a rush of feet, a gabble of voices.

"Got him?"

"You bet! I got him!"

"Frisk him, Jake. He's got a gun."

"Grab his arms, somebody."

"Wait a minute. I'll put the cuffs on him."

I struggled, but I was roughly handled and dragged to my feet to find myself surrounded by half a dozen men, while my original captor made short work of snapping a pair of handcuffs on my wrists.

"Didn't get very far, did you?" he growled.

"Take them off, you fool!" I raged. "I'm hunting for the murderer myself."

He laughed curtly and his laugh was echoed by the others.

"Yeah! Well, you can stop hunting now, for he's caught. You come along with us."

A moment's swift reflection told me to take it easy. This man evidently represented law and order in Pine Post, such as it was. I had heard of him—Jake Paget by name—and what I had heard wasn't savory.

Obviously I had been arrested as the suspected murderer of Baldy Garrison, and obviously I couldn't blame Paget greatly for the mistake. And it was equally clear that I would gain nothing just then by revealing my identity as

Steve Sterling of the Mounted. He wouldn't believe me. Best to show proof of that when there were no witnesses on hand, otherwise Pine Post would be crossed off my list so far as future undercover work was concerned.

"You're all wet, Paget," I told him. "Let's go. Where's your jail? You won't hold me two minutes when you get the dope on this business."

"I've got all the dope I want," he grunted, taking a firmer grip on my arm and steering me down the alley, with his helpers trooping alongside.

WE collected quite a crowd by the time we reached the main street and the crowd reached the proportions of a mob by the time Jake Paget came to a halt in front of the Pine Post calaboose and unlocked the door. There was a rush to get inside, but Jake shoved me into the little office ahead of him, then barred the way.

"Nothing doing, boys! I've got to question this prisoner."

"Question him, hell!" shouted somebody. "String him up."

In some communities this would have meant a rush on the jail, but in Pine Post it didn't mean anything. There aren't any lynchings in the snow country, thanks to the Mounted.

Paget admitted a fat, blue-jowled man with a scrubby black mustache, but closed the door on the rest. He snapped on the electric light. The office was small, furnished with a desk, three chairs and a stove. At the back was the barred door of the one-room jail.

"Sit down!" said Paget.

He was a big man with a mean, tight-lipped face and gimlet eyes. The fat fellow with him, I happened to know, was the mayor of Pine Post—Riddell by name, and incidentally owner of the Glory Hole. They were a fine pair of crooks.

"I'm holding you for the murder of a man over in the hotel a little while

ago," said Paget, with an important air. "What's your name, where do you come from and what have you got to say for yourself?"

"I'll say what I've got to say to you in private," I snapped.

"Mr. Riddell is the magistrate," grunted Paget. "He stays."

I shrugged. There was no way out of it.

"A fine mess you've made of things!" I stormed. "I'm here as a member of the R. C. M. P., you dope, and every minute you hold me here is a break for the murderer."

Riddell sat up, blinking. This was a shock. Paget stared.

"Get these cuffs off and let me out of here."

"You don't get out of here that easy," said Paget. "Just by saying you're with the Mounted. Where's your uniform? Where's your proof?"

"Send over to the hotel and get my grip from Number Seven. I'll show you proof. And look here, Paget, if you ball this case up on me and I lose the men I'm looking for, I'll see that there's a clean-up in Pine Post mighty quick. How come your town is running wide open, eh?"

"Maybe you'd better send over for that grip, Jake," muttered Riddell, beginning to sweat. He turned to me. "If you're a MOUNTY, as you say, mister, we don't want to stand in your road. But you can't blame Jake for bringing you in, can you? There was a man killed and the clerk at the hotel said you were right in the room with him, holding a gun in your hand, and then you ran away."

"He's bluffing," declared Jake Paget. "I'll send for the grip, all right, but it's a bluff and I'm calling it. If he's a MOUNTY, why didn't he report here when he came to town and ask for my cooperation? Why did he run away when that man was killed? Why was the fellow

killed in his room, a minute after he went upstairs?"

"Send for the grip. I'll show you my authority," I said.

He opened the door and dispatched some one over to the hotel. Within five minutes the man was back. Jake talked to him outside for a moment. When he came in his face was triumphant.

"Told you he was bluffing," he remarked to Riddell. "There ain't no grip in his room."

IV.

WHATEVER had happened to my luggage, containing the papers that would establish my identity and authority in case of emergency—papers which I had never had occasion to use in five years of undercover work—there was no getting away from the fact that I was in a bad spot.

The arrest didn't bother me, although it was annoying enough. It was the fact that every minute gave Blaze Barker and Nig more time for their get-away. And where would the get-away take them? To McLeod's place? Some danger threatened McLeod from that pair, if Baldy Garrison was to be believed.

There was no use telling Paget the whole story. He had made up his mind and with the obstinacy of stupid people he was not going to be easily moved. Eventually, of course, the truth would be proven and I would be released, but what would happen in the meantime?

"I'll be fair with you," he mumbled, unlocking the cell door. "I'll wire Mounted Police headquarters to-morrow. Can't do it to-night because the telegraph office is closed. But I'll wire them."

What had happened to my baggage? I learned later that it had been shunted into another room in the confusion of removing Baldy Garrison's body, but just then my mind was full of all sorts of possibilities, chief of which was the notion that Paget knew all about me,

knew I was telling the truth and was deliberately playing in with Blaze Barker.

For a moment, as Paget unlocked the handcuffs, I meditated handing him a sock on the jaw and making a break for it. But it would only make things worse. There was still a crowd outside the jail. I wouldn't get across the road. So, fuming, I went into the cell and heard the door clang behind me.

Riddell and Paget talked for a while in low tones. Riddell was nervous, afraid Paget had made a bad move. Paget was stubbornly insistent that he had done the right thing. After a time they went out.

"How about the stove?" I shouted. "I don't want to freeze here to-night."

"I'll be back," said Paget.

He left a light burning in the office. I investigated the cell. Pine Post was a new town and this was a new jail. I soon saw that there wasn't a chance of crashing out by force.

"If this ever gets back to headquarters," I told myself, "I'll never hear the end of it. They'll kid the pants off me. Steve Sterling locked up in a small-town jug on a murder charge!"

I lay down on the bunk and thought things over. Baldy Garrison's last words kept running through my head, puzzling me, bothering me: "McLeod—warn him— The moose—the bull moose— You'll find—"

It sounded like the most utter gibberish. But there was something to it. McLeod was to be warned. But what did he mean by that reference to the bull moose? What would I find? And where? Of what was McLeod to be warned?

And who was Baldy Garrison? What did he know about Blaze Barker and Nig? What had prompted him to talk to me? How did he know I was Steve Sterling? Had he been silenced or had he been killed by bullets meant for me?

I couldn't figure it out. After a while

I heard footsteps crunching in the snow at the outer door of the jail. A key rattled in the lock.

I rolled off the bunk and sprawled face downward on the floor, lying limp and motionless.

THE DOOR OPENED. Some one clumped into the little office, puffing. The place was heated by a small stove and I heard the stove lid rattle, then the sound of coal being dumped on the fire. By the absence of voices I judged that the visitor was alone. It was Paget, doubtless.

He moved across the office, came over to the barred door. I heard his gasp of astonishment when he saw me lying there.

"Good glory!" he muttered, aghast. Keys rattled and jangled swiftly.

He unlocked the door, thrust it open, blundered into the cell.

"Hey! What's the matter? Are you sick?" he demanded.

I didn't answer. He knelt and turned me over.

Paget didn't have much sense. I had him by the throat in a split second, choking off his yelp of alarm, and whipped him over on his back. I dug my knee into his chest, held him down with one hand and searched his pockets with the other. I found his gun, assured myself that it was loaded, and got up.

"Not a yip out of you!" I told him.

Paget sat there on the floor, rubbing his throat. He looked very ridiculous, his mouth open, his eyes popping out of his head.

There was a towel beside the wash-basin, so after I had manacled Paget with his own handcuffs I gagged him with the towel. It wasn't a very effective gag, but at least it would muffle any of the howls he was sure to let loose when I got out, and at least I wouldn't have to worry about the chance that he might smother. He spluttered and cursed, but

he was afraid of me and afraid of that gun, so I had no trouble with him.

"You wouldn't believe me, Paget," I told him, "so this is what you get. Maybe I'll be back later with a couple of prisoners. But if they've made a get-away I can thank you for it."

He just gurgled.

I walked out, locked the cell door and looked into the stove. The coal was burning up nicely, so I shut off the draft. Paget wouldn't freeze at any rate. Then I put on my hat and coat, turned up the collar, let myself out of the building and left the keys in the lock.

There was no one in sight when I stepped out of the jail. The street was deserted.

I had already decided on my next move. There would be no sense in resuming the hunt for Blaze Barker and Nig, for if they were still in town they were sure to be well hidden. I couldn't afford to stay in Pine Post much longer, for just as soon as Paget got out of jail he would be after my scalp. My only course was to follow up that clue Baldy Garrison had given me—to warn Mc-Leod.

It was entirely probable that Blaze Barker had decided that Pine Post was too hot for him. Perhaps he had already cleared out, gone on to Mc-Leod's place on some sinister errand.

So I struck out for Lapierre's. He was the local outfitter. He supplied guides and canoes to hunting and fishing parties in the summer; he bought furs, sold hunting licenses, repaired guns. You could rent any sort of outdoor equipment from him, all the way from a sleeping bag to a dog team.

THE PLACE was in darkness, but I kicked at the door until Lapierre himself opened it. He was a fat, be-whiskered French-Canadian, and he stood shivering in his underwear.

"'Allow!" he said, blinking sleepily. "What you want, eh?"

"I've got to make a trip," I told him. "How about a dog team and an outfit?"

Lapierre rubbed his eyes.

"*Sacre!* Another man wants a team! What is it—a gold rush?"

He opened the door. "Come inside."

"Did some one else go out to-night?"

I asked quickly.

"Sure thing!" answered Lapierre, turning on the light and hunting for his pants. "Two fellers came here about an hour ago and took a team to go north. What's all the excitement, eh?"

"What did they look like?"

"Big feller with red hair. The other man was short and dark. They seemed in a big hurry, too."

Lapierre had given me an idea.

"It's a gold rush all right. How about it? Can you fix me up?"

"Sure. I fix you up. What do you want?"

"Everything. Dogs, grub, sleeping bag, rifle, snowshoes."

Lapierre got dressed and we went into the warehouse at the back. He was a good outfitter and had grub and a cooking outfit packed for me in a few minutes. When sleeping bag, pack sack and snowshoes were ready he went out to get the dogs and hitch them up. I stood at the front window, waiting.

It was long after midnight then and the straggly main street of Pine Post was as quiet as a graveyard. The frontier town was asleep—with the possible exception of Paget, who was doubtless turning handsprings in his own jail at the moment.

Suddenly I heard footsteps crunching in the snow. *Crunch-crunch-crunch*, closer they came. A man trudged past, head down, hands deep in his overcoat pockets.

Riddell!

He was going toward the jail. I knew that instinctively. Perhaps Paget had promised to meet him and he was suspi-

cious of the man's delay. The moment Riddell disappeared around the corner I slipped out the door and hurried around to the back, where Lapierre was hitching the dogs.

"Make it snappy!" I urged.

The dogs were sleepy and sullen. Lapierre grumbled that he was doing his best. But it was a good five minutes before everything was ready and I went swinging down the road behind the dogs, heading toward the frozen river.

I hadn't gone a hundred yards from Lapierre's place when the uproar broke loose. There was a confusion of shouts. I looked back and saw two men running down the road.

Suddenly one halted and flung himself in the snow. There was a flash and a report.

A rifle bullet whined overhead just as the dogs took the slope to the river.

We hit the ice at top speed and the dogs straightened out, my whip crackling and snapping over their heads.

Whack! Bing!

Two rifles were speaking now. The bullets were singing perilously close. I crouched and trusted to luck and the deceptive moonlight. Ever try shooting at a moving target in moonlight? It isn't easy.

The dogs didn't enjoy the gunfire any more than I did. They fairly flew. It seemed no time before I was out of range.

But I knew I would have to make the most of my lead. Paget wouldn't take this lying down. More than ever now he would be convinced that I was the murderer of Baldy Garrison.

There were fresh tracks ahead, clearly visible in the moonlight, leading downriver.

Blaze Barker and Nig!

The team swung around a bend. I lost sight of the town. In a few minutes the dogs hit out onto Wolf Lake, a white, flat, five-mile expanse. We fol-



We hit the ice at top speed, and the dogs straightened out, when, suddenly—

lowed the trail of the other sled and sped swiftly northward out across the lake.

Halfway across, I looked back.

Far behind was a dark, moving speck on the white plain of ice.

Paget was on the trail. I was being hunted, with enemies behind and ahead.

V.

I BEGAN TO SEE where I had worked myself into a fine jam. Luck, nerve and wits might see me through just as they had served me well at other times, but, as a matter of plain fact, I wasn't so sure I was going to come out

of this affair at all. Paget was eating up the back trail, and he would start shooting as soon as he got within range. As for Blaze Barker and Nig, I knew just what to expect from them.

There was nothing to do but go on and meet trouble when it came. So I urged the dogs on toward the dim-and-misty outline of the northern shore. It was bitterly cold out there on the lake, but fortunately I had found a parka in Lapierre's place and I was well-equipped to face the icy wind.

I still held a good lead over my pursuer when I got off the lake finally and hit Howling Wolf River. By that time I had no illusions as to the worth of my dog team. Lapierre hadn't given me a fresh outfit.

They had been eager enough on the get-away, but after a few hours' travel they were lagging badly. The lead dog began to get rebellious, and I had to touch him up with the whip a few times.

Those hours on the Howling Wolf were bad—monotonous, grinding toil, struggling on and on into the darkness, fighting the dogs, holding them to the trail. The great ramparts of evergreens on the river banks frowned down at me.

IT WAS getting on toward dawn when I knew the odds had turned definitely against me. The lead dog was in open revolt. The others were snarling and sullen. To make matters worse their paws had been badly cut on a section of glare ice farther back and they were limping.

Paget was coming on. There had been no sign of Blaze Barker and Nig, other than that trail that unraveled continually before me, but Paget had gained steadily. I could hear the frenzied yapping of his dogs from time to time, the sound drawing steadily nearer.

The river straightened out and I had a clear run of more than half a mile without crook or turn. It was when I

was urging the sullen dogs near the end of this straight course that I heard the wild outburst of barking that told me Paget's dogs were within sight. I looked back. There they were, sweeping around the distant bend, in full cry.

Paget had a team of matched huskies as against my outfit of mongrels, as I discovered later, and they were gaining swiftly. I swung the dog whip until my arm was tired. My team struggled around the next bend, but I knew it would be only a matter of minutes before the man from Pine Post overtook me and came within gunshot.

A small creek opened up to my right. It was only a few feet across, a tiny white path that vanished in the obscurity of the trees. On a sudden impulse I swung my dogs from the trail and ran ahead, grabbing the lead dog by the collar, breaking the snow as I guided the animals from the river into the little creek.

There was a chance that in the darkness Paget might miss those telltale tracks or that if he saw them he might assume they were made by some trapper striking off from the main river trail to the bush the previous day. The tracks of Blaze Barker's sled were clear and fresh down the river. Paget knew nothing about that other outfit ahead.

Yes—there was a chance. It was a slim chance, but I had to take it.

I got the dogs into the creek, broke trail for them in the deep snow and got them out of sight of the river. There I let them rest and they dropped into the snow, panting. I stood over them, whip in hand, ready to beat them into silence, for one yelp might betray me.

A FEW MINUTES LATER Paget's dogs sped around the bend. I couldn't see them, but I was so close to the river that I could hear the rustling of the sled on the snow, the creak of the harness. One of my dogs bristled,

growled low in his throat. I raised the whip, snarled a low-voiced command. He subsided.

There was a bad moment when I thought the other sled had stopped, but my imagination must have been playing tricks on me. I heard a shout and the crack of a whip. This time the sounds were from downriver, on past the mouth of the creek.

I followed my back trail, leaving the dogs where they were, and went out onto the river again. Away downstream I saw the other outfit, heading steadily north.

My little ruse, a forlorn hope, had worked. Paget was following Blaze Barker's trail now and thinking it mine. A moment later dogs and sled disappeared around the next bend.

I stood there wondering just what to do. Whether to give the dogs a rest or to take to the trail again immediately. The danger of following Paget too closely lay in the fact that he might decide to make camp—

A rifle shot, clear and distinct in the frosty night, interrupted my thoughts.

It came from downriver. It was followed instantly by two more shots in quick succession. The crash of gunfire echoed from the wooded slopes, rolled and boomed through the gloom like distant thunder. A brief interval. Then a single shot. A pause. Swiftly, then, the coughing roar of three more, mingled with the wild barking of dogs in which I could distinguish the death howl of at least one animal.

I stood there, quite motionless, my ears echoing with the crashing sounds that had shattered the silence of the wilderness night. There were no more shots, but the clamor of the dogs continued. My own dogs now added to the racket, setting up a frenzied yelping and howling from their hiding place up the creek.

My heart was thumping as I wheeled and ran back to my sled. I could guess readily enough what had happened. Paget had driven straight into an ambush meant for me.

Blaze Barker and Nig, doubtless camped with no suspicion that they had been trailed, had heard the barking of Paget's dogs. And they had waited with rifles ready. If I hadn't switched off into that little creek I would have coursed directly into the trap.

I silenced the dogs and got them headed back toward the river. They growled and snarled angrily, preferring to rest, and the lead dog snapped viciously at me. I cracked him over the head with the butt of the whip and it knocked some of the nonsense out of him. He tugged at the traces willingly enough after that and we whipped off down the creek and out onto the river trail again without delay.

At the bend I left the dogs and went ahead on foot, keeping well within the black shadows of the river bank. I wasn't taking any chances on being the second ambush victim.

Out in mid-river, out there on the trail I saw Paget's outfit. The sled was overturned, two dogs were lying dead in the snow, the other brutes were snarling and fighting furiously to free themselves from the harness that bound them to their dead companions. And beside the trail a human figure sprawled in the snow.

Far ahead I heard the ringing yelps of other dogs and I knew that Blaze Barker and Nig were fleeing the scene. So I came out of the shadows, plunged across to the wrecked outfit.

Paget was alive.

He groaned as I came up to him, stirred slightly and tried to raise himself on one elbow, then collapsed again. I knelt beside him. Blood was staining the snow.

I had to give Paget credit. Stupid he might be, but he had been brave enough to hit out onto that night trail and take that chance of a bullet from the dark. That he had been in no danger from his real quarry and that the bullets had been meant for me made no difference.

Paget opened his eyes as I lifted him up and propped him against the sled. Even in the dim light he recognized me.

"Got me—you polecat!" he muttered. "Hope—you swing for it!"

There was irony in that. Paget still thought I had shot him. What he thought when I stripped off his parka and located the wound in his chest, what he thought when I cut the dead dogs free of the harness, loaded him on his sled and brought him back to my outfit at the bend, I don't know.

He passed out on me eventually when I was washing the wound and doing a rough job of first aid. By the time I had him bandaged up he came back to his senses again. He was pretty weak from loss of blood, but he wasn't going to die.

A good two hours had gone before I got going again, putting two of my dogs in with Paget's team and turning the others loose to make their way home. Then, with Paget lying on the sled, I struck north once more.

VI.

I FOUND the remains of a camp fire on the shore about fifty yards ahead. This was where Blaze Barker and Nig had evidently been resting when they heard the telltale barking of the dogs that warned them of pursuit. After shooting down Paget they hadn't waited around. They had hitched up again and taken to the trail.

It was long after daylight when I reached a trapper's cabin on the river. He was a stout, mild, flaxen-haired Finn,

with a young wife and a couple of roly-poly youngsters. He didn't know much English, but he was willing enough to look after Paget, who was groaning and bellyaching so heartily by now that I knew he wasn't going to die, however sick he might be.

So I stopped long enough to give the dogs a rest and some food, with a bite of breakfast for myself. The trapper said two men had gone downriver ahead, but they hadn't stopped.

I didn't tell him anything. He would have volunteered to help, no doubt, but after all he had a wife and kids, there would likely be some shooting, and it was my job anyhow. So I went on alone.

Mile after mile went past. Mile after mile of silent bush. Mile after mile of white, winding river, and always that clear trail ahead. For all I knew it might be my last trail, a trail to death. Whatever was drawing Blaze Barker and the man named Nig to McLeod's place, the lure was a powerful one and they were letting no scruples of bloodshed stand in their way.

And all the time I was conscious that they had a long lead over me, that if danger threatened McLeod I might be too late to do anything about it. Certainly I was too late to warn him now. Nor could I travel at my best speed, for I had to go carefully, to reconnoiter at every bend in case my men might be camped beyond. But there were no camps. They were going straight through.

IT WAS early afternoon when the river widened out into Little Moose Lake and I drew my team to a stop while we were still in the river. I had made some inquiries of Lapierre, in Pine Post, before I left and I knew McLeod's post was on the eastern shore of the lake. It would be suicidal to risk a direct approach. If Blaze Barker and

Nig were at the post I would be a perfect target out there on the ice.

So I left the dogs on the river and took to the bush, struggling and scrambling through an infernal tangle of undergrowth until I hit a trap-line trail back among the timber. The trail was running parallel to the east shore. I figured it would bring me out somewhere near the trading post.

Half an hour of rough travel brought me within sight of McLeod's place. I glimpsed it through the trees—a rambling, whitewashed log building set back from the lake in a little bay where the trees and the slopes of the shore gave it ample protection from the wind.

Down at the edge of the ice lay half a dozen dogs, still in harness, with a sled. The dogs and the drifting curl of white smoke from the chimney of the trading post were the only signs of life in all that bleak, cold scene.

Fortunately the trees grew close to the back of the post. There would be little open ground to cross. If the dogs ever scented me they would be certain to set up a ruckus. The breeze was from the west, however, so I figured I was safe from that angle.

I worked my way down through the bush, down the slope, closer and closer to the trading post. Finally, at the very edge of the timber, I came to a halt and studied the layout. There was a window and a door at the back of the main building. I could see no sign of life or movement. A warehouse, a stable and a couple of sheds were probably empty. A long woodpile of birch and poplar ran from the back of the house part way up the slope.

The woodpile offered a certain amount of protection. I crouched, took a deep breath and ran for it, floundering in the deep snow. I stole along the side of the pile and gained the back of the big cabin in safety. Then I crept to the window.

There was a vague murmur of voices, but I could distinguish nothing. I worked my way around to the back door.

QUIETLY THEN, very quietly and slowly, I tried the latch. It moved. The door yielded.

I waited a second, thrust the door open a little farther, gripping my rifle in my free hand, ready for anything. I peeped inside. The door opened into a kitchen. It was deserted. I slipped silently inside.

Now the voices were clearer. There was some one in the front part of the trading post, out in the store. The living quarters were at the back. I heard Blaze Barker: "If you're lying to me, Nig, I'll kill you!"

And then, in the gruff, surly voice of his companion: "I ain't lying to you, Blaze? Why should I? Ain't we pals? They found those rocks, that's what's happened, either her or her old man. I told you where they were hid."

Then Blaze snarled: "Did you find them, girl? If you did, speak up, for that's what we came for and we won't leave here without them if we have to burn the damned house down."

Now I blinked with surprise. For a girl's voice answered—clear but tremulous:

"I don't know anything about them. If they were hidden, some one else must have taken them."

Blaze muttered: "Do you think Baldy Garrison——"

"He wouldn't, I tell you," stormed Nig. "He was searched to the skin. He didn't dare, no more than me."

I edged forward. Through a chink in the log partition I got a glimpse of the trading store out front.

Blaze Barker towered in the middle of the room, near the counter. His tufted red brows were knitted in a frown, his cruel mouth was twisted with

exasperation. He stood there with his hands on his hips, staring at a girl who sat in a big homemade chair over against the wall.

The girl was slender, white-faced, with great dark eyes and thick auburn hair. She was more than merely pretty; she was beautiful, and she sat there in a sort of frozen calm as if she were fighting for courage. Then I saw that she was bound to the chair hand and foot, her wrists and ankles tied to it by rawhide thongs.

Blaze Barker moved forward, gazing down at her, his green eyes icy with that malevolent glitter I knew so well.

"Listen!" he said. "Your father ought to be home any time now, if what you told us is true. How'd you like to see him knocked off by a bullet, just as he's coming up to the door?"

Terror leaped into the girl's eyes.

"You wouldn't! You can't! He doesn't know. I'm telling you the truth."

Then the other man moved into my range of vision. He was short, squat, with powerful shoulders. His bullet head was covered with coal-black, curly hair. His complexion was so swarthy that it was easily seen how he came by the nickname of Nig. And if ever rascality was written on a man's countenance it was written on that man's face. He would stop at nothing.

"You're lying!" he growled. "Nobody but us knew where they are hidden and it's been ten years since we had a chance to come for them. Come clean, damn you——"

He reached forward. A powerful hand gripped the girl's shoulder. She cringed under that vicious grasp. His powerful fingers dug into her flesh. She went white with the pain and finally a cry was wrung from her lips.

"Talk!" snarled Nig. "Speak up and tell us——"

I DECIDED that it was high time I took a hand in the game. The door into the front room was open. I raised the rifle, edged along the wall, then stepped swiftly into the doorway.

"Reach!" I said.

Neither man had seen me enter the room. Blaze Barker swung around as if he had been jabbed with a knife. His hand flashed to his side, but I drilled a bullet over his head and he changed his mind about going for his gun. His hands went up.

As for Nig, he had uttered a startled yelp, spun around and gaped at me incredulously, his arms half raised. When I fired he gave a howl of fear and shot his arms high over his head, babbling.

Blaze Barker's pallid face was ghastly. I'm sure he thought for a moment that I was my own ghost come back to haunt him. He licked his lips tigerishly, cast a longing eye at a gun that lay on the counter, and didn't move, didn't speak.

"Line up over there with your boy friend," I ordered Nig. "Over against the wall. Jump!"

He jumped. I sized Nig up quickly enough. He was a rascal, a brute, but yellow all through.

I moved over to the girl. I had heard, vaguely, that McLeod had a daughter, but somehow I had taken it for granted that she was just a youngster. With my left hand I whipped out my knife and slashed the thongs about her wrists, then gave her the knife so she could cut loose her ankles. She looked at the knife a minute, then worked quickly.

"My name is Sterling," I told her. "I'm with the Mounted, so it's O. K. What are these babies after?"

The girl had borne up pretty well through the ordeal of being in the hands of that pair of thugs, but as soon as she was free of the chair the reaction

set in and she broke down. She began to cry. For a while she couldn't say anything. Her whole body shuddered with sobs.

"All right, Blaze," I said. "Maybe you'd like to speak up. What brought you here?"

"Find out!" he snapped.

I shrugged.

"It's not bothering me very much. You're hooked. And this time, Blaze, you're going to swing. The old rope for you, Blaze, and a broken neck. Maybe you were trying to get me when you killed Baldy Garrison, but he's dead just the same, and you'll hang, Blaze, you'll hang!"

It didn't stir him. I didn't get a rise.

"What were they after, miss?" I asked the girl again.

Her answer nearly took the breath out of me. She choked back a sob and, rubbing her bruised shoulder, gasped, "Diamonds!"

VII.

I HAD racked my brains for a long time trying to guess just what had drawn those two scoundrels to McLeod's post, but my wildest speculations had never included diamonds. You don't hear much about diamonds in the snow country, and it's mighty seldom you ever see one. Around a fur-trading post they're as rare as palm trees, naturally.

"Did you say diamonds?"

"Yes," answered the girl. "That's what they said. They think I know where the diamonds are hidden—but I don't. I don't know anything about them. Why should there be diamonds here, in this place?"

"These men have been here before?"

That remark of Nig's—"it's been ten years since we had a chance to come for them"—stuck in my mind.

"I have never seen either of them un-

til to-day. Of course, ten years ago I wasn't here. I was away at school."

And ten years ago I wasn't with the Mounted. I had nothing to go on. But I hazarded a guess.

"Stolen rocks, eh?" I said to Blaze. "Somebody hid them here before he was caught and sent down. He took a ten-year stretch and went through with it thinking the diamonds would be waiting for him. Who was it? You, Nig? Or Baldy Garrison?"

They didn't answer me. The girl pointed to a place in the corner where a gap had been gouged out between the logs. The moss and plaster had been dug away.

"That's where they hunted for them," she said.

I tried to reconstruct. There seemed to be only one answer. Some thief or thieves had swung a diamond robbery in the south and headed north with the swag. They had been overtaken and arrested in this neighborhood, perhaps right at McLeod's post, perhaps captured by McLeod himself. There had been time enough to stuff the diamonds into a chink between the logs and cover them up. Then, steadfastly clinging to the secret through years of imprisonment, they had waited for their reward.

And the diamonds had disappeared.

"Can you find some good strong rope?" I asked the girl. "These two birds will be safer if they're tied up."

She hunted behind the counter. The shelves were lined with bolts of cloth, all kinds of trinkets and trade goods. An old-fashioned clock ticked solemnly. From the wall a great moose head stared majestically into space. There were coal-oil lamps in brackets, a little show case with tins of tobacco, hunting knives, fishing tackle, some cheap watches.

"You'll never get me back to Pine Post, Sterling," mouthed Blaze Barker, his green eyes glaring. "I'm telling you.

It takes a bigger man than you to send us back to Stony Mountain."

"You're not going to Stony Mountain. You're going to the gallows."

Nig cast him an uneasy glance. Which of the pair had killed Baldy Garrison I didn't know, but of one thing I was certain—that there is no honor among thieves. Each of those thugs would double-cross the other in a split second to save his own hide.

The girl was just coming out from behind the counter with a coil of rope when the dogs outside began to bark. They set up a great racket, and the racket was answered by another uproar out on the lake.

"Dad!" cried the girl. "It's dad!"

SHE dropped the rope, and before I could stop her she was running toward the door. I jumped forward, but it was too late. She had made the one bad move, the one move that gave Blaze Barker and Nig their chance: She got between us.

It all happened like chain lightning. Blaze Barker's arm swung out and he hooked the girl around the waist, flinging her back, drawing her against him so he was protected by her body.

I couldn't take a chance on shooting the girl, naturally, although I had been ready enough to drill lead through either Blaze or Nig at the first false play. I lunged in just as Nig dove behind his companion, just as Blaze Barker thrust the girl toward me. And still I couldn't get a clear shot.

I had a glimpse of Nig's arm swinging. He grabbed a lamp from a bracket and hurled it through the air. It crashed against my forehead with a shower of glass splinters; I went staggering back. Blaze Barker came in with a snarl of unholy joy and plunged for the rifle.

"Hold onto that girl!" he yelled at

Nig. "Don't let her get out! Keep her quiet!"

I was half groggy from the wicked impact of the lamp, and my face was already streaming blood from the glass cuts. I hung onto the gun like grim death, though, while Blaze tried to wrest it out of my hands. We swayed there and then he smashed a fist to my face. It sent me back, reeling. I lost my grip on the gun and crashed into the counter.

Blaze reversed the rifle and swung. I dodged, but the stock clipped me on the side of the head. My elbow went through the show case. I had a glimpse of Nig struggling with the girl, his hand clapped over her mouth; I heard broken glass tinkling on the floor; I saw Blaze drawing back the rifle for a second swing and I staggered forward, half-dazed, trying to get at him.

The rifle swished down. It cracked against my head with stunning, blinding force. My brain seemed to explode with a million lights—

The only reason why Blaze Barker didn't finish me with a bullet then and there as I lay unconscious at his feet was because he was afraid the shot might alarm McLeod, who was even then coming in from the lake with his dog team.

I wasn't out very long. I had managed to break the full force of the wallop with my arm—otherwise my skull would have been cracked like the proverbial eggshell.

When consciousness finally crept back and my eyes flickered open I had the world's record headache and an arm that flamed with pain from elbow to finger tips. I tried to move. Then I found that my wrists were tied behind my back. I was lying with my face to the counter base and I could hear voices:

"Yes, I remember you," some one was growling in deep, leavy tones. "A cowardly thief, with a heart as black as your hair. And if you've come back here



Everything
seemed as it
should be.
Then— Bam!
Bam!

to get even with me for handing you over to the police ten years ago, why get it over with, but leave my girl alone. You wouldn't be so brave if you didn't have me under the gun, I'm thinking."

I TWISTED AROUND. Standing with his back to the wall, beside the girl, was a rugged, leathery-faced old fellow with a mustache that stood out like white silver against his darkly tanned skin. He had white hair and shrewd blue eyes.

This was McLeod, the trader.

"I'm going to get even, don't worry about that," growled Nig, showing his gold teeth in a cruel grin. "Blaze has a little score to settle with the boy scout here"—he gestured toward me—"and I've waited ten years to square my little debt with you."

"But first of all," snapped Blaze Barker, "we want those diamonds!"

"But we don't know, I tell you!" flared the girl. She grasped her father's arm. "Dad, I've told them and told them we didn't find their old diamonds and they won't believe me—"

"All right, Margaret," said McLeod, quietly. "Let me handle it." Erect, straight, contemptuous, he looked at Blaze Barker and Nig.

"I remember the day you came here, black fellow," he said. "You and the other. Bald, he was—bald and thin. Garrison you called him. You came here with a cock-and-bull story about being on a prospecting trip. Prospectors! As if I hadn't lived up here long enough that I could tell with half an eye that you weren't prospectors.

"I sent one of the halfbreeds down to Pine Post and the police came and you were wanted, sure enough. There were diamonds mentioned; I remember that all right. You stole them from a diamond traveler in Winnipeg, and they were never found—fifty thousand dollars' worth of stones."

"They were found, don't worry about that!" growled Nig. "Baldy and me hid them in the wall when we saw the police coming and knew we were hooked. And that's where you found them and now me and my friend have come for them and we want them!"

It was all beginning to click into place. I knew now why Baldy Garrison had wanted to talk to me in Pine Post. He had planned a dandy little double cross on his companions, hoped to land them in jail while he went on to get the diamonds himself. Blaze Barker, learning the story when all three were in Stony Mountain, had declared himself in on the venture.

"You got the rocks!" snapped Blaze. "If you sold them, we want the dough. If you still have them, we want them. Get that?"

"You lie. I didn't find them and if I had, they'd have been given back to the man who owned them."

I lay there on my back, looking up at the shelves, the clock, the great moose head with its huge antlers, and although my brain was splitting it was capable of an idea. And suddenly I guessed—I knew what had happened to the diamonds.

It came to me in a flash of revelation. And with it came the knowledge that I was holding the winning hand—if I played it right.

"We ain't going to argue much about it," grunted Blaze Barker. And with one stride he was at the girl's side, grabbed her, dragged her across the room.

McLeod made an instinctive move, but Nig, covering him with a revolver, blazed a shot that sent splinters flying from the wall just above the old man's head. Blaze snatched up a length of rope, thrust the girl into a chair, strode back and swiftly bound McLeod's arms.

"You hurt my girl," gritted McLeod, "and I'll follow you to the edge of hell!"

"If you don't want your girl to be hurt," snarled Blaze, "get busy and do some talking! We want those rocks!"

He got behind Margaret McLeod, grabbed her arms and twisted them back.

She gasped with the pain, then set her teeth.

McLeod lunged forward, bound though he was, with a roar of fury.

"Leave her alone, damn you!" he roared. Nig stepped in and smashed him in the face. He knocked the old man back against the wall.

"I'll leave her alone when you tell me what you did with those rocks!" snarled Blaze. He forced the girl's arms back a little farther, his eyes fixed steadily on McLeod.

Margaret shut her eyes. She bit her lip and a thin stream of blood trickled down. But Blaze couldn't wring a cry from her.

Sweat was standing out on McLeod's face.

"I don't know! I never saw the diamonds!" he shouted. "Do what you like to me, but leave the girl alone."

Nig came in, fist cocked, and smashed him another. McLeod went down with a cut cheek.

"You'll talk!" declared Blaze. He twisted the girl's arms a little farther back. This time she moaned and the heels of her shoes beat a frantic tattoo against the floor.

I couldn't stand it. There was nothing else to be done.

"Lay off!" I said. "They didn't take the diamonds. They don't know where they are. But I know!"

VIII.

BLAZE BARKER released his grip on the girl's wrists and swung around quickly. Margaret fell back, limp and shuddering, into the chair.

"You're awake, eh?" he rasped. He strode over and dealt me a crushing kick

in the ribs. "You know? How did you find out? Where are they? Speak up before I kick you to death!"

So far as I was concerned I figured my number was up. There was no possible way in which I could exchange the secret of the hiding place of the diamonds for my own safety. Blaze Barker meant to kill me and as soon as he laid his hands on those precious stones he would go through with it. But I did see a way out for McLeod and the girl.

"Where are they?" demanded Blaze, drawing back his foot again.

"I'll tell you when I'm good and ready!" I snapped. "Baldy Garrison hid those rocks and he told me where he hid them."

"I knew it!" yelled Nig. "The dirty double crosser! He took them out of that hole in the wall just before we were taken south. That's what he did."

"Baldy Garrison did just what you'd have done if you had the chance," I said. "And he tried to double-cross the pair of you in Pine Post, because he knew you'd double-cross him in the long run. A fine pack, the three of you!"

Blaze Barker grabbed his revolver from the counter and aimed it at me.

"I'll give you three seconds, Sterling!" he rapped out. "Tell us! Three seconds——"

"I'm going to tell you," I answered. "But you're going to make a bargain first."

A cunning light flashed into Barker's eyes.

"You want to be sure you'll go clear afterward, eh? O. K., then. I'll lay off you."

I knew how much I could depend on that promise, and I said so.

"Your word isn't worth anything to me," I said. "But if Nig figures he's going to get even with McLeod for turning him over to the police ten years ago, he'd better get the idea out of his head. You don't get those rocks until

McLeod and his daughter are out of here."

Blaze looked down at me, frowning. It was plain that he suspected some sort of a trap. He simply couldn't credit a decent, human instinct.

"If you get those diamonds now," I said, "you'll wipe out the three of us and head south. Let McLeod and the girl go. Let them take their dogs and start north. Give them twenty minutes. Then I'll tell you where you can find the rocks. They're right here, right in this room."

There was just the barest chance that I was wrong, that I didn't know where the diamonds were hidden after all. But I knew I was in for it anyway and that I wouldn't have a dog's chance with Blaze Barker.

"They'll kill you anyway," said old McLeod. "Don't trust them. Don't tell them anything."

"Shut up!" snarled Blaze. "Can't you see he's giving you a break?" He exchanged a swift glance with Nig, then whipped out a knife and cut the ropes around McLeod's arms. "Get going!" Blaze ordered. "Take your girl and get out of here."

Margaret McLeod looked at me. Her chin was defiant.

"I won't go!" she said clearly. "It's murder."

"Lady," I said, "it's my job to take these chances. Maybe they'll think better of finishing me when they have those diamonds in their hands. Maybe they'll figure it won't be the smart thing to do, for if they wipe me out every Mountry in Canada will put their names right at the head of his list."

McLEOD and his daughter got out finally, but they didn't want to go. I had to do some arguing. At last they realized that they could do no good by staying and that they were only throwing away the chance I had given them for their lives. But Margaret McLeod

cried and knelt down beside me and kissed me before she left, and said a lot of things about sacrifice and suchlike. Sacrifice, my neck! It was just plain common sense. I had a secret that wouldn't save me, but could help them, so I had to play it for what it was worth.

So when they went down to the lake and their dog team hit out on the north trail, Blaze Barker and Nig sat down, Blaze with a gun in his hand, and looked at the clock.

"I gave my word!" muttered Blaze, as if he was proud of himself. "Twenty minutes' start they get. And if you've been running a bluff, Sterling, you won't die fast. Before we get through with you, why you'll be praying for a bullet to end it."

I had managed to sit up, with my back against the counter. And then, out of the corner of my eye, I saw something shining on the floor.

It was a piece of glass from the broken show case.

"I still can't figure how Baldy Garrison told you," mumbled Nig, staring at me. "Why, he didn't have time——"

"He told me just before he passed out. You were at the window, eh? You killed him."

Nig glowered. And I knew then that if Blaze Barker should have any miraculous feelings of mercy, Nig would make it his business to see that I didn't get out of there alive.

I wriggled, shifted along the floor, changing my cramped position a little. "You might untie me," I muttered "After all, I'm as good as handing you fifty thousand bucks' worth of diamonds."

"You're safer the way you are," growled Blaze.

That's what he thought. But that one casual movement had brought me right in front of that piece of glass. My hands were behind my back, of course, and when I stretched out my fingers I

felt the glass, cold and smooth against my finger tips.

I leaned back a little, and this brought my fingers to the floor. I got the bit of glass in my hand. I twisted it around and got the edge against one of the heavy strands of tight cord around my wrists. Then, keeping my body as motionless as possible, I began to saw at the cord.

The minutes went by. The clock ticked steadily. Nig shuffled uneasily.

"I don't like the idea of giving the old man and the girl a big lead," he grunted. "Maybe they'll meet somebody and come back here!"

Blaze got up and went over to the window.

"They're past the narrows by now. We can see any one coming a mile away."

"We cughta make this guy start talking right now," declared Nig stubbornly.

"Twenty minutes," I rapped out.

"A hot poker would make him think the twenty minutes were up mighty fast," Nig suggested.

I felt the strands beginning to weaken. The glass was sharp. I had to be careful, for if my arms moved they might get suspicious. So it had to be done slowly, with short, slow, rubbing strokes.

Blaze looked up at the clock again.

"Five minutes left," he said. "May as well let him have the full time."

I hacked away with the bit of glass. It cut into my fingers. The cords were tougher than I had expected. One strand was cut through, but it didn't loosen them all, for Blaze had knotted them twice.

THE CLOCK ticked on. Slowly the minute hand crept up. And when Blaze Barker finally came over to me and said: "Time's up! Out with it!" my wrists were still bound.

"Baldy Garrison was pretty smart," I said, stalling for time.

"Never mind Baldy Garrison!" he snapped. "Where are the rocks?"

"Try the moose head," I told him.

He stared at me incredulously for a moment, then looked up at the great stuffed head of the bull moose on the wall. Nig uttered an odd, strangled cry. Then, simultaneously, they rushed toward it.

"You'll find the diamonds in the nose, I guess."

Blaze leaped up onto the counter, reached, thrust his fingers up the great, gaping nostrils of the trophy.

"They're here!" he yelled, and from each cavity he snatched forth a small, chamois bag. I hacked feverishly at the cord, tugged, felt the strands give way, yanked my wrists free.

Blaze Barker was still standing on the counter, a bag of uncut diamonds in each hand, when I suddenly shot to my feet, swung around the counter and plunged at Nig. The dark fellow had been gaping up at his companion, his eyes gleaming, so entranced that I was upon him before he realized what was happening.

Blaze uttered a yell of warning. I crashed into Nig, yanked the revolver from his lax hand and sent him reeling against the shelves, from which a shower of canned goods and bottles came cascading down on him. I had the gun.

Then Blaze Barker leaped. I flung up the weapon and fired, but he came down on me with all his weight. I was borne to the floor with a bone-jarring impact, and then we were into it hammer and tongs. Blaze hadn't had time to draw his own gun and he was smashing terrific, savage blows into my face as I vainly tried to get my arm free and get the revolver into play.

Nig was screeching like a maniac. I had a glimpse of him tugging at his pocket. I got my left arm up and smashed my fist twice into Barker's face. My right arm and the gun were still pinned underneath me, but when he

sagged back I got my hand free, just in time to see Nig leveling a black revolver at the pair of us. I fired. Just then Blaze lashed out one arm frantically and knocked the gun spinning out of my hand. But I saw Nig lurch forward. He crashed to the floor.

With both hands free now I grabbed at Blaze Barker's throat, twisted him around, forced his head back. His big fists were smashing out blindly, raining punches. I took them all and hung on.

Suddenly he dove forward and butted me smash in the face. It nearly knocked me out. He broke my hold and swung violently away, arm out, reaching for the gun in Nig's dead hand.

Face bleeding, head swimming, I made a desperate effort to head him off. We sprawled there, panting. I clamped a grip on his wrist just as he got his hand on the revolver. I had his wrist pinned to the floor. He lashed out with his feet, gave me the knee in the stomach. The pain was sickening. He exerted all his strength to break my hold; his arm pulled away from the floor, my arm was forced back. The nose of the revolver was twisting, twisting—

I ducked and broke clear just as he fired. The flame almost seared my cheek. I heaved myself clear of him and dove for the other gun on the floor, snatched it up and rolled to the other side of the counter just as he flung him-

self around and drilled another shot. It was a close call.

He blazed two shots through the thin wood of the counter. It ripped and splintered. The bullets sang just above my head. I rolled away and got to my feet, crouching against the wall.

Perhaps he didn't know I had picked up the loose gun. Perhaps he thought those shots had finished me. But he came charging around the side of the counter, smoking revolver in hand. Our guns crashed out simultaneously. Blaze Barker seemed to trip over an invisible obstacle on the floor, for he plunged forward and lay there, twitching.

When I turned him over he was dead. I got to my feet and put the gun on the counter. Blaze Barker had come very close to his revenge. The little chamois bags had broken open and uncut diamonds were scattered all over the floor.

The three men from Stony Mountain had come to the end of the trail—Baldy Garrison by treachery, Nig and Blaze Barker by their own greed. The case was closed. The big bull moose stared out from the wall with sightless eyes, stared out in majestic indifference to the bodies on the floor. I went out, trudged down the trail to the lake, took the dog team and hit the northern trail to overtake McLeod and his daughter, free at last from the menace of the moosehead's secret.

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It Just Goes to Show

Charms ain't always music!

A BILDAD ROAD STORY

by William Merriam Rouse



"Hogs!" he groaned. "She dumped me here!"

LONESOME" DOGGINS felt miserable enough without being obliged to talk to "Hardscrabble" Barkman. But Hardscrabble had stopped in the road with determination. Lonesome groaned, pushed back his hat with a hand as big as a flapjack and four or five times as thick, and resigned himself.

Hardscrabble crossed from the opposite wheel track. There was a light in his little eyes, hard, piggish eyes which crowded hard to get together. He

halted so that Doggins could not get past him without going around, clicked his tongue in the roof of his mouth and shook his head.

"Lonesome," he said, "you look like a skunk that ain't wintered well, not meaning anything by that except you look bad—fit for the undertaker!"

"I be," replied Doggins. "My arms are open for the undertaker! I want to go just as soon as things are ready for me on the other side of Jordan."

"Good grief! What's the matter?"

"My luck's busted," replied Lonesome, bitterly. "Everything's against me! I can't do nothing without having it come out hindsides before! I learned that car I bought so she'd back, turn around, and stand without hitching. Then she tried to climb a tree with me. I let go of the wheel just a minute to light my pipe and darned if the critter didn't shy out of the road! I'm going to get rid of her!"

"A man as bad off as you are hadn't ought to risk his life driving a car!"

"I'm going to get rid of her," repeated Doggins.

The cunning brain of Hardscrabble Barkman was working at high speed, and Lonesome Doggins knew it. He had no illusions about Barkman. Hardscrabble wanted his car but Lonesome did not care about that. It wasn't safe for a man with his luck to trundle a wheelbarrow. His rawboned, sinewy frame was weary and his soul, or whatever, was plumb tuckered out.

"You say your luck's busted?" asked Hardscrabble.

"Not just busted! Curdled, too, like milk after a thunderstorm! It's full of mice nests and mildew!"

"If I was to tell you how to cure your luck would you give me that car?"

Lonesome Doggins regarded him with suspicion, as well he might. Every horse that Hardscrabble had ever traded had developed the heaves or the blind staggers, after it changed hands.

"She's worth a good hundred dollars," said Doggins, thoughtfully.

"Ain't good luck worth that much?" Hardscrabble looked injured.

"Hardscrabble, I'll call it a trade! You can take the car. But if I don't get my luck changed then there's going to be wailing and gnashing of teeth, as the preacher says, and you'll be the one that makes all the noise! Now, how am I going to get rid of the kind of luck I've got?"

"Have you heard tell anything about Abednego Lobdell?"

"Nothing but what everybody knows," answered Doggins. "He's a horse doctor with a middling-sized granddaughter, name of Annabel."

Barker thrust out his head as though he feared the very trees might hear.

"That ain't all! He's into a lot of different things. He's a herb doctor, too, and—they say he makes spells!"

"Huh?"

"He cured Henry Bullock's hired man of warts. He put something on them and gave him a piece of bone to wear on a string around his neck. They ain't come back, the warts ain't!"

"Well," said Lonesome, practically, "I ain't got no warts. What's that got to do with trading my car for a new kind of luck?"

"I was getting to that. If he can cure warts he can cure bad luck, too, can't he? I don't say herbs will cure warts nor bad luck, neither, but a spell had ought to, if it's any good!"

It made sense and it didn't make sense. Lonesome Doggins was doubtful about spells, although he carried a horse chestnut in his hip pocket to keep off rheumatism. And he had seen a sword swallower at the county fair. Which proved that the impossible could be done.

"I'll go and see Abednego," he said. "But on account of your health and his, I hope there won't be any skullduggery show up anywhere. I'm a mild and peaceable man, but my luck has rode me hard enough without having the human race try it."

ABEDNEGO LOBDELL was hanging spearmint up to dry behind the kitchen stove when Lonesome Doggins arrived. Abednego's granddaughter Annabel, a slim, quiet girl with glossy, brown hair, was making some of the best-looking doughnuts Lonesome

had ever seen come out of a kettle of hot grease.

Abednego was a fellow Bildad Roader whom Lonesome Doggins had never liked. His aura was that of a horse trader, but his whiskers were those of a patriarch, white but virile. Parts of him didn't match. He had the eye of the man who wore a sombrero and sold snake oil at the county fair.

"Brother Doggins," said Lobdell, "what can I do you for?"

"What you get out of me depends on what I get out of you!" replied Lonesome, grinning but firm. "I gave Hardscrabble Barker an automobile I wasn't going to keep any longer, for the idea of coming to consult you."

The ears of Abednego Lobdell seemed to lean forward. He left the spearmint and drew up a chair, and began to study his subject.

"Ten dollars is my consultation fee," he announced.

"Listen!" Lonesome lifted one of his maullike fists. "Ten dollars is money, but a car I got in a trade for a fish shanty, a load of hay and a silver watch is something else. You cure me and I'll give you ten dollars! No cure—no pay!"

"I see you ain't a sap—at least not very bad. What's your affliction, Brother Doggins?"

"It's my luck! The luck I got is like something that somebody forgot to bury. I want it changed!"

Abednego laid his finger on his nose, screwed up one eye, stared unseeingly at the shining brown head of Annabel.

"You married?" he asked, at length.

"Twice," answered Lonesome. "That's two times I was unlucky!"

"Matrimony didn't take," muttered Abednego. "What else is wrong?"

"Ain't that enough? My first wife ran off with a peddler, and the other one took my best horse when she lighted out. Last winter I busted a leg

loading logs, had two hogs die with the colic. There was something new every day. Last month I went out the back door at night and stepped on a skunk. This morning my dog bit me. I couldn't tell you all of it if I were to talk all day!"

"I had a case like that once," said Lobdell. "I can tell you what to do, but I can't make you do it. That other feller was cured quick!"

"I'll do it if I bust another leg," promised Doggins. "Can't be any worse off!"

"Well, my friend, in the unseen and invisible course of nature there are things we won't understand, but we can see the way they work, and stand flabbergasted. There's only one way a man can change his luck, either from good to bad or bad to good!"

"I'm waiting," announced Lonesome.

"Go get you a red-headed gal! I'll give you some herbs to take internally and a bone from a six-toed black cat to wear around your neck, but the red-head is what turns the luck!"

Lonesome Doggins grew white around the mouth. His hands trembled. Annabel giggled.

"There's only one red-headed woman on Bildad Road right now," he said. "Hetty Sims!"

"Let me see!" Lobdell pattered in a cupboard and ignored the reference to Hetty Sims. "Here's a bottle of tar syrup and here's the bone. Go to work right off and hunt up a redhead. The three different things ought to have a chance to take hold all at the same time!"

HETTY SIMS was mopping, and she did not like to mop. Hetty might not have been bad-looking ten years before, but now there was no way of proving it. In only one way had she improved: sawing and splitting her own firewood had given her an arm corded by ropes of muscle.



*Hetty might not have been
bad-looking ten years before,
but now——*

She looked up and saw a large human frame filling the doorway. It was a man, but that might not mean anything. Hetty was a suspicious soul.

"I don't want whatever you're selling!" she snapped. "So leg it out of here before I wind this mop around your head!"

"Why, Hetty!" exclaimed Lonesome Doggins. He stepped into the kitchen. "You and me used to go to school together!"

"I guess that's right," she agreed, relenting. "You were against the light and I didn't see your face. You're the boy that was always pulling my hair."

This was tough going. Lonesome sat down, brick-red but not discouraged.

"I thought I'd drop in a minute to see how you were getting along!"

Hetty's capable hands stopped wringing the mop. She straightened up and an emerald gleam came into her eyes.

"Lonesome," she said, "did Abednego Lobdell send you down here?"

"That's right, Hetty. But I don't know if he'd want me to tell of it!"

She wiped her hands and a slow grin took possession of her rugged features.

"Come on into the setting room, Lonesome. I just baked a cake, and I'll get you a piece. Let me take your hat!"

For some reason not exactly clear to

him cold terror laid hold upon Lonesome Doggins. His mouth became dry.

"Hetty!" he exclaimed hoarsely. "Did you know Lobdell was going to send me here?"

"Why, he's running a matrimony office ain't he? I joined and paid him five dollars. And you said he sent you. Drat your hide, didn't you just tell me that?"

"Now wait a minute' and take it easy." Lonesome dashed the perspiration from his brow. "I went to Abednego Lobdell for him to change my luck and he told me a red-headed woman would change my luck for certain—and—and——"

"And you came to trifle with me!" yelled Hetty Sims. She jerked the dripping mop out of the pail and leaped between Doggins and the door. "Why, there ain't a man on Bildad Road dares do what you've just gone and done, Lonesome Doggins! Have you got any folks you want to send word to?"

Doggins was a very able-bodied man, and he might have saved himself even then, but he made a tactical error! He tried to make a strategic retirement through a window instead of advancing for a frontal attack on the enemy. He tasted mop water as he was swept backward, half blinded. Before he had the mop more than half clawed away from his face he saw a stick of firewood descending upon his unprotected head, and remembered no more.

LONESOME DOGGINS came to himself slowly, with a headache. He was in a half light, lying on his back on some soft but damp couch. He sniffed the surrounding air, muttering blasphemously. Then a cold, moist nose was pressed against his own and he emitted a howl of misery.

"Hogs!" he groaned. "She dumped me into the hog pen!"

It took him only a few minutes to break out and start for home, but it

was two hours before he felt fit for human company again. Meanwhile his soul boiled up and over with desire for revenge. He started out to get it.

As Lonesome Doggins approached the house of Abednego Lobdell a sound met him. It had some of the qualities of a squeal, and it made him think of his recent companions. He shuddered. But this squeallike sound was no mere spontaneous expression of porcine ebullience. It had a little of the quality of that terror with which the pig meets the knife of the butcher. Otherwise there was a human quality, and a super-human quality. A squawk of human anguish mingled with the wail of a banshee.

Annabel came running from the Lobdell woodshed. Her cheeks were rose-pink and her hair sparkled in the sun. She saw Lonesome and flung herself at him.

"She's killing him!" she panted. "The old reprobate has got it coming to him but it ought to be a merciful death!"

"Who's killing who?" demanded Doggins. For the first time he really saw Annabel, and he was moved to lay his arm across her shoulders. "You tell me and I'll fix them!"

"Hetty Sims is killing grandpa, little by little with a mopstick!"

Lonesome halted in his tracks at the woodshed door. A wail of anguish came from the house.

"I ain't any lion tamer," he said. "He's got to die sometime anyway, and besides look what he did to me! Sent me like a lamb into her jaws!"

Suddenly then Lonesome Doggins' nose twitched. That member, so lately offended, expanded with delight. He stepped into the shed.

"Glory be!" he whispered. "Who made those apple pies?"

"Me!" sobbed Annabel. "Oh, I wish you'd stop her, Mr. Doggins, or get her to finish him off quick!"

"I will!" promised Lonesome. "Cross my heart and hope to die! For a gal that can make pies like those I'd do anything. You ain't married, be you?"

"No!" whispered Annabel.

"Then you and me better get married right off," Lonesome told her.

"You ain't got any more chance with grandpa than he has with Hetty Sims! He's said he'll never let a cook like me go out of the family."

"I got an idea," Doggins told her. "Let's go in."

ABEDNEGO LOBDELL was backed into a corner of the room with the expression, above his whiskers, of a small boy who has eaten too much cake and ice cream. In front of him stood Hetty Sims with a mopstick held like a bayoneted rifle. It pointed at Abednego's middle, at the tender spot just under the third button on a man's shirt.

"Five dollars!" hissed Miss Sims. "You got it, and I'm going to have it! Make a fool of me by sending that Lonesome Doggins to trifle away my affections! Him that's got hands so big he ought to go on all fours! Five dollars!"

She thrust, and Abednego Lobdell shrieked. He saw Annabel and Doggins.

"Save me!" he yelled. "Lonesome, save me! And I'll give you a charm that'll make your luck set up and bark every time you snap your fingers!"

"You double-crossed me and Hetty both," Doggins told him. "But I might make a bargain with you!"

"You better look out!" Hetty flung over her shoulder, and she jabbed again with the mopstick. Abednego wilted and sat down in the corner.

"Annabel," he moaned, "get five dollars out of the old teapot in the cupboard and give it to her! I can't stand

any more, not even long enough to make a bargain with Lonesome!"

Hetty Sims jerked the five-dollar bill viciously into the pocket of her apron. Then she spat on her hands, and just as Abednego was about to get up she poked him again.

"Stay there, you! I ain't through with you yet! Now, what about breach of promise? You agreed to get me a husband, didn't you? You ain't done it! I want a husband or else I'll go to law and sue you!"

The last thing Abednego Lobdell wanted to have anything to do with was the law. His distress was now mental, but this was even worse than the other.

"I can do it!" he cried. "I sent Doggins down there! I don't know what you did to him but it must have been plenty!"

"She fed me to the hogs!" said Lonesome.

"And the hogs were particular!" Hetty pushed back her sleeves. "Abednego, I get tired of doing my own chores and I'd rather have a whiskered old wart like you than nobody at all! You and me is going to see a justice of the peace!"

"No!" wailed Lobdell. "Let my declining years go down to the grave in peace! I don't want to get married!"

"Shucks!" snorted Hetty. "You've got more ginger now than most of the boys! Go wash your face and comb out that spinach on your chin and come along with me!"

"Lonesome!" moaned Abednego, as he got weakly to his feet. "Ain't you got any mercy nor compassion nor anything inside you but sawdust?"

"Yes, Abednego, I have!" Hetty's green gaze swung to him, but he went bravely on. "I'll save you, but you'll have to let me and Annabel get married! We fixed it up between us just now!"

"What?" roared Lobdell. "Marry me right out of house and home?"

"Come on!" ordered Hetty. "I'll tend to them after you and me get married! The gal will be a lot of help to me around the house! She ain't going to marry that horse-toothed freak!"

"Is it a bargain?" asked Doggin, ignoring Hetty.

"Look out Lonesome!" whispered Annabel. "She's getting a new grip on the mop handle!"

"I'll go you!" agreed Abednego, desperately. "If you work quick and save me you and the gal can get married!"

Hetty Sims picked up a flatiron from the stove. There was manslaughter in her eye.

"Now, Hetty!" Lonesome held up both hands, palm outward. "If I was to tell you how you could get revenge on the man that's made you all this trouble would you lay off Abednego long enough to go and attend to him?"

"He's got an almost new automobile that maybe you could get if you were to handle him right. I gave it to him for sending me to Abednego, on account of I thought I was going to get help to change my luck. Then Abednego was tempted to sin against you. But I was innocent, and the right of it is this feller is to blame for everything, even you using up a good mop!"

"Where is he?" hissed Hetty Sims. "And who is he?"

"Hardscrabble Barkman did it all," Doggins told her.

Hetty shook the mopstick under the nose of Abednego Lobdell.

"I'll come back if things don't work out all right," she promised. "'Specially if he ain't got an automobile!"

A HALF HOUR LATER Abednego Lobdell had recovered, with the aid of a drink every five minutes. He was even able to sit up at the table and eat a quarter of a pie with a steady knife hand.

"Now," said Doggins, "you're all right again and I calculate it's time for

me and Annabel to go and get married. You want to come along, or stay home and rest?"

"My boy," said Abednego, as he licked off his knife, "Annabel, my dear granddaughter, ain't going to get married for many a long year yet—not while I stay on top of the sod! I've got to have a cook!"

"What's that?" roared Doggins. "You promised!"

"Promises that're given when a feller is having the front of his belly punched in ain't holden in law," replied Lobdell. "Nope! You can come courting once a week, maybe, and saw and split some wood for me, but no getting married—not to Annabel!"

Annabel put her head down and began to cry. Lonesome Doggins rose in his wrath, but he was not sure just how far he could go.

"You ought to be sold for soap grease!" he growled.

Abednego chuckled and wiped his whiskers on his sleeve. But suddenly the mirth departed from him, and as he stared through the open doorway his eyes became glassy. He pushed his chair back from the table.

"Go get me the bottle again, Annabel!" he whispered. "I calculate I'm going to have a sinking spell!"

"I hope so," said Lonesome, bitterly, "and I hope you sink so far you never come back!"

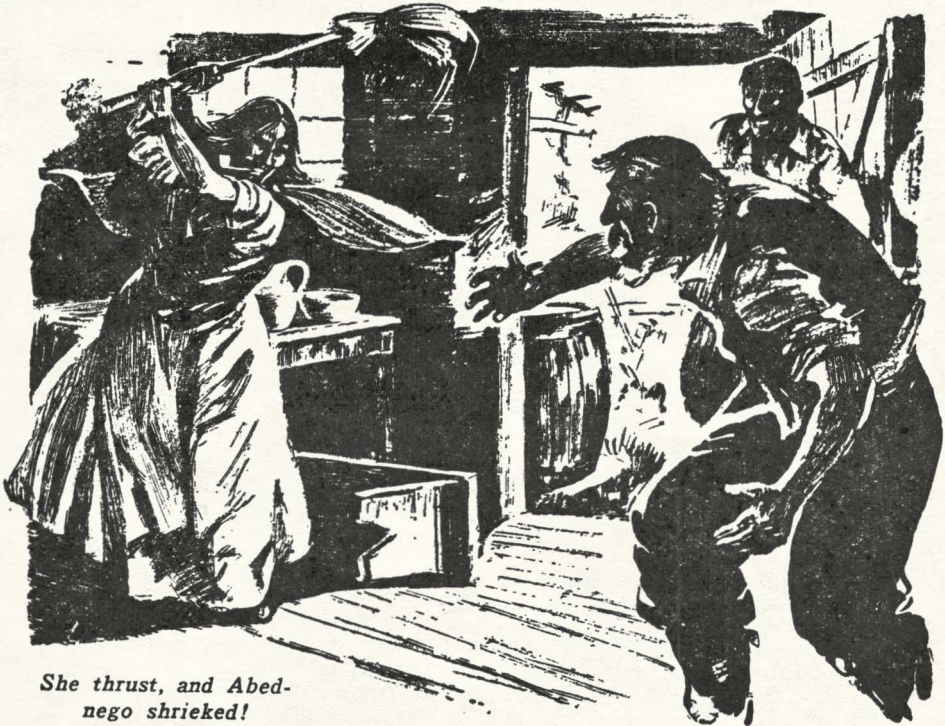
And then he saw what Abednego Lobdell had seen.

Hetty Sims and Hardscrabble Barkman were coming. Hetty had changed her mopstick for a wagon stake, and Hardscrabble carried a shotgun.

"Lonesome, my boy," murmured Abednego. "Save me!"

"Now," said Hardscrabble, as he and Miss Sims entered, "we're all here and we're going to get down to brass tacks!"

"You bet we are!" added Hetty.



She thrust, and Abednego shrieked!

Barkman threw his shotgun up and raised both hammers.

"Don't damage Abednego yet," ordered Hetty. "Not until I find out if he's my property or not!"

"Shut up!" Hardscrabble told her. "Abednego, this time you ain't going to wiggle out of anything! You gave me two dollars to steer Lonesome here so you could make something from him and Hetty! Ain't that right?"

"Business," said Lobdell, plaintively. "Just business! I've got to make a living, ain't I? Hetty's got back her five dollars and Lonesome ain't out nothing!"

"My feelings are out plenty," announced Hetty.

"Unless you marry her, Abednego, I'm going to be out a car!" barked Hardscrabble. "And I'm here to see you do! This here is going to be a shotgun wedding!"

Lonesome Doggins nudged Annabel and together they edged toward the door into the woodshed. In a moment they were outside with the apple pies, looking in, with the way for flight clear behind them.

"Which is it going to be, the car or Abednego?" demanded Hetty. "Make up your minds!"

"My grandson-in-law," cried Abednego, "can take that car back! Hardscrabble got it under false pretenses! He'd been paid once for his skullduggery! It ain't legal for a man to collect twice for the same crime!"

"Then who's car is it?" yelled Hetty. "I've been trifled around with long enough! I'll begin to work on both of you in a minute!"

"It belongs to my grandson-in-law, Lonesome Doggins!" Lobdell told her. "But I guess he'd rather give it to you than have you for a grandmother-in-law!"

Lonesome thrust his head inside.

"What's more," he said, "Hardscrabble ain't got any right to that car because Abednego didn't cure my luck! That's what it was to pay for!"

Hetty raised the wagon stake, and slowly lowered it.

"A car can't track mud into the house, nor get drunk, nor snore," she meditated aloud. "I'd rather have the car than a critter like Abednego, that would be a nuisance day and night!"

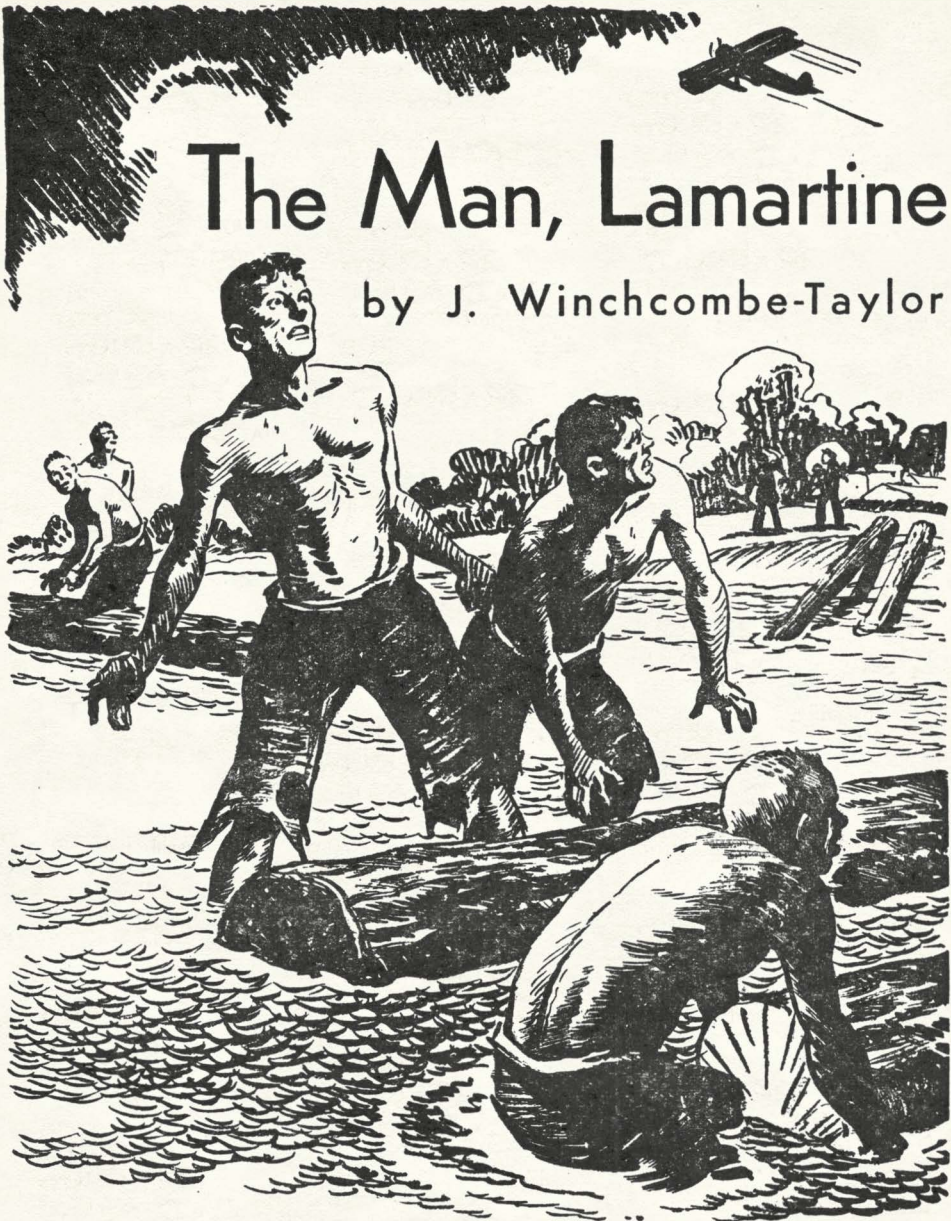
"Let's go and get married, quick, while grandpa is watching that shotgun," said Lonesome Doggins to Annabel. "I just noticed that there's a streak of red in your hair!"

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The Man, Lamartine

by J. Winchcombe-Taylor

ST. LAURENT, largest of the republic's convict settlements in French Guiana, brooded sullenly under the pitiless tropical sun. And locked in their dormitories for the noon rest hour, the *transportés* lay exhausted on their hard cots or gathered in small, apathetic groups.

Beady-eyed, stocky Pierre Monat, however, stood apart from the rest. Though sallow from many fevers and emaciated from endless toil, he yet retained that indefinable something that Paris confers upon her children.

"Yes, it is pretty, this gift from the skies," he mused judiciously, examining a

small snapshot, "but she is not French. English, perhaps, or American." Laboriously he spelled out the name written across its back. "HELEN KINGSLEY. Yes, most certainly she is a foreigner."

"Bah, but why should an airplane shower us with a woman's pictures?" a man growled. "I, too, picked up one. The machine came from the Dutch side and circled over the settlement while it dropped pictures like so many confetti. *Diable*, airplanes are as scarce here as women themselves! I repeat then: why did it come?"

"*Pests!* if Jacquot were not in hospital, he could tell us." Pierre shrugged. "He was a flier during the War—an ace."

"He's no ace now," the other mocked. "Bah, he was a hero then—a killer of Boches. But because he killed some worthless fellow after peace came, he's here *en perpétuité*—and lucky he didn't kiss Madame Guillotine instead."

The door was unlocked from the outside to admit a tall, gaunt man with pain-racked eyes and a hard, bitter mouth, his loose cotton blouse bearing the numerals 49,974. Crossing to a vacant cot near Pierre's, he flung his bundle of meager belongings upon it and sat down wordlessly.

"Ah, Jacquot, *mon vieux*, we were just speaking of you!" Pierre greeted volubly. "Did you see the airplane this morning? It flew over and showered us with pretty pictures. See, I have one here."

"No, I saw nothing—one can't in that cursed hospital." Jim Lamartine took the proffered snapshot listlessly. But then his eyes flamed, a tremor shook him and with a tigerish ferocity he sprang at Pierre and gripped his throat with lean, crushing fingers.

"Where did you get this? Quick, or I'll throttle you!"

"*Ma foi*, Jacquot! What ails you?" Pierre tore loose. "I just told you. An

airplane dropped it and many more like it. *Eh, là, là*, this is a poor way to return my welcome!"

Jim's sudden outburst evoked scarcely a ripple of interest from his roommates; for fights, duels, and assassinations were common in this community of doomed men. For a moment he stood irresolute, then sank back weakly on his cot.

Her photograph! It was incredible, fantastic. And fate had kept him in the hospital when it happened!

TEN GHASTLY YEARS had passed since that nightmare in Paris, when he had been condemned to this living death. And now from the air came a snapshot of the girl who had committed the crime for which he was chivalrously paying the price; the girl to whom he had been engaged.

An almost physical nausea gripped him. After so long, was it possible she was trying to make contact with him? Surely her picture could have no significance to any one here save himself!

The roll of a drum outside came to deaden his thoughts. Rest was over and the men got up, silent or cursing, to resume their toil in the searing heat.

"You are quite well again, *mon ami?*" Pierre queried softly, as they formed in line outside the building. "*Peste*, how I hate working by the river these days! I keep staring across to the Dutch side and yearning to escape."

"Escape!" A man behind them spat contemptuously. "We all know escape's easy enough. Sometimes I think they encourage us to try, to save the expense of our burial. But what then? I, myself, was once free in the jungle for a week; until I was so starved and exhausted I was thankful when some Negroes earned their ten francs by recapturing me and bringing me back—to this!"

Jim nodded somberly. All dreamed of escape, many attempted it. Yet how

few got clear away! The impossibility of adequate preparation or equipment, the jungles, and the sea were far more effective guardians than the armed human keepers.

A curt command from their guard and Jim's squad marched back to the Maroni River, which separates French Guiana from Dutch Guiana.

Here the men resumed their endless task of hauling great logs from the turbid, amber waters, so that the chained oxen could drag them to the flat cars of the miniature railroad.

Waist high in the water, naked save for his ragged cotton trousers, Jim worked with savage intensity, his mind awl with hope. Though still weak from fever and the confining atmosphere of the prison hospital, he gritted his teeth and kept on. Now, of all times, he dared not risk a reprimand from the keeper.

A faint, distant drone soon made him stare upward swiftly. A plane was coming across from the Dutch side and when it came closer he gasped incredulously. It was a replica of his own design—of his Lamartine Amphibian! His brain reeled. Every feature was identical with the model he had completed just before his trial and condemnation.

Voilà! Pierre, beside him, gestured excitedly. Every one, even the umbrella-shielded guard on the bank, was gazing skyward, for aircraft was virtually unknown in St. Laurent.

The machine began circling above the settlement buildings, tiny white objects fluttering earthward from it. More snapshots? Despite the guard, Jim ached to speed away and retrieve one of those tiny white squares.

But then came a second drone and he saw a small seaplane speeding westward from the direction of the coast. At once the amphibian banked to the southwest, followed the tortuous line of the

river, as though bent upon escape. The seaplane followed at a greater height, until it resembled some fierce hawk pursuing its victim.

But, though many eyes were watching the unusual spectacle, only Jim's experienced and now supersensitized ears recognized the barely audible sound that followed—the unmistakable chatter of a machine gun!

HE WAS STUNNED. By grapevine route all news regarding the settlements reached the convicts in time, but no word had come of warplanes being stationed in the colony. Yet clearly the seaplane was attacking the amphibian. Why?

He was in an agony of frustration as the keeper ordered work resumed. With straining ears he obeyed, cursing the swishing waters that deadened the sounds he ached to hear.

Both ships had become obscured by the jungles, but soon the seaplane reappeared, heading back whence it had come. Of the amphibian there was no sign.

Then Jim's brain cooled and he knew what he must do: He must escape and find the amphibian, must learn its mystery. He would take Pierre—they were friends and for years had been saving their tiny pay toward a joint attempt for freedom—and work upstream somehow to find the plane—his plane! Unless its occupants had been shot down, it could only have landed upon the Maroni. What followed then must rest with fate; but death itself would be preferable to this intolerable uncertainty.

Darkness came at last and, scrambling shoreward, the weary men began forming up for the march back. Jim, however, remained in the water as if busy hauling one more log toward the bank, and called for Pierre to help him. The guard, eager to get back to his comfortable quarters, shouted for them to follow and marched the party away.

"We're going to escape and find that plane," Jim whispered tensely. "I've got to know why it came. How much have you in your plan?"

"Three hundred francs," his friend answered promptly. "But what madness is this? We have no time to arrange anything. Besides, how can this machine concern us?"

"It must!" Jim shot feverishly. "I have three hundred francs, too. Lord, how glad I am we scrimped and saved, centime by centime, for this moment!"

But then his tone changed. "I was wrong, old friend. It's not fair to ask you to risk this with me. I'm not hoping to get clear away but only to find out why that ship is here."

"Are we not friends, *mon vieux?*" Pierre said simply. "I go with you. *En avant!*"

Stealing along under the bank to the shelter of a canebrake, from their very bodies—the convicts' only secure hiding place in this hell of theft, brutality and murder—they brought out the small metal capsules, known as plans, that held their ten-year accumulation of savings.

Lights were already twinkling in the settlement buildings and soon their absence from roll call would be discovered. But they knew that pursuit tonight was unlikely and, secure in this grace, they sought out some bush Negroes who were sleeping in their moored canoes.

THESE half-civilized natives made small fortunes by selling their clumsy dugouts and minor articles to escaping *transportés*; cynically aware that the inexperienced, desperate white men had no real chance and would die in the jungles or river. Or, if they attempted the sea route, would probably overturn in the breakers at the Maroni's mouth and make food for the sharks, or else be forced by hunger and terror to return to their endless captivity.

Jim knew the greed and frequent treachery of these natives. He knew the certain terrors and the grim punishment recapture entailed. Yet a blind hope drove him on, and he dominated the pliable Pierre by his sheer vehemence.

He bargained, this white slave, with the free black men; but not until his offer reached five hundred francs did one agree to sell his canoe, together with some breadfruit and two heavy machetes.

Then the two friends were paddling the awkward craft upstream against the sluggish current, and Jim prayed that the amphibian had managed to land on the river, instead of crashing into the impenetrable jungle; prayed, too, he would not pass it unaware in the darkness.

Though still grumbling his doubts about this unprepared-for attempt, Pierre wielded his paddle vigorously. Jacquot had decided. *Eh, bien!* Jacquot must know. With bared torsos and muscles already strained by the day's work, they continued on through the tropical night.

Jim's thoughts began straying back to the tragedy that had brought him among the "Legion of the Damned": Helen quarreling with him over Jeanette Poiron, not understanding it was his Uncle Morton La Poiron was interested in; Morton phoning that night from Jeanette's apartment that she'd been murdered, obviously by Helen in a fit of jealous rage; himself, stunned, going there to join Morton and Paul Kléber; deciding to surrender himself as the murderer to protect Helen, while Morton smuggled her out of the city; the trial, and his war record saving him from the guillotine—

It all seemed so dreamlike, so unreal. And now this plane and Helen's photographs! He groaned aloud. He could think no more, and knew only that, somehow, he must find that plane.

Only when dawn came did he pause. "It can't be far now," he panted, "and either my gamble wins or France saves the cost of my keep for good."

Pierre wiped the sweat from his face. "*Mon ami*, I think the fever has left you weak-headed. But we are comrades and I, too, will not permit the Negroes to earn a ten-franc reward by taking me back to that hole!"

Then they rounded a bend and Jim gave a hoarse cry. Ahead, resting against the bank, was the amphibian!

"Faster!" he urged, paddling desperately. "And if they're enemies aboard, we'll kill them with the machetes."

Then as they drew closer, the cabin door opened and a woman appeared—Helen herself!

"Who are you?" she challenged doubtfully, a small revolver in her hand. But a choked sob escaped her as she stared at the emaciated, unkempt Jim.

"Oh, thank Heaven you understand!" she cried hysterically. "Oh, you've come, you've come!" She burst into nerve-relieving tears that racked her slim body.

STRANGELY weak himself, Jim climbed aboard; Pierre waited only long enough to secure the canoe before following.

"Helen, why are you here?" Jim's tongue stumbled over the English he had not used for so long. A man's head showed above the left seat in the office, and he guessed it belonged to the pilot.

"There's no time to explain now," she answered urgently, her control regained. "We must get away, at once."

But, many conflicting emotions gripping him, he merely stared at her wan, luminous face as though she were not real.

Pierre broke the silence. "*Eh, là, là*, I have always wanted to fly! Most cer-

tainly this is escape de luxe. But how sad there are not a dozen machines, for then we could rescue many of our poor comrades back there!"

"Helen, this is my friend, Pierre Monat, *Transporté* 49,934," Jim introduced, relapsing into French. "His daring robberies were once the talk of Paris," he added, with a flash of sardonic humor and knew, by her expression, that his thrust had gone home. But why not? But for himself, her own crime would have brought its punishment. "Pierre, this is Mademoiselle Kingsley. Like myself, she is an American."

"You an American?" Pierre's eyes widened. "*Ma foi*, I never knew! *Diable*, but you have kept your secret well!"

"I became a French citizen by joining the army," Jim explained briefly, "and I hadn't resumed my American citizenship when I was convicted."

"Jim," Helen interrupted hesitantly, "my name isn't Kingsley any more. After your—your trouble, I was so stunned and Morton was so kind that—well—we were married."

"You married my uncle?" he breathed incredulously.

She nodded slowly. "He said you would wish it. Oh, Jim, I wanted to write often, but he would never let me. He said it would only make it harder for you. But he died last month and I felt free to make plans. I'd heard such ghastly things about this place that I couldn't bear to think of your staying here if I could save you."

Her news unsteadied him strangely. Helen the widow of Morton! "What happened when that seaplane chased you?" he demanded, fencing for time to think. "I heard firing."

"Yes." She pointed to the still figure in the seat and he understood why she had been so hysterical. She had spent the night on this mysterious, deserted

river with only a dead man for company!

"Tell me," he said, ordering Pierre to place the body on the floor and cover it. He saw now that there were several bullet holes through the office windows.

"He swore he'd stop us and he did!" Helen began bitterly. "Poor Dick Rodney was so brave, and when that awful ship drove us from St. Laurent and wounded him, he stayed at the controls until he could land here. Then he died."

"But who swore he'd stop you?" Jim puzzled.

"Paul Kléber, of course!"

"Paul! Why, that's crazy. He's my friend. He stood by me through everything!"

She shrugged wearily. "When Morton died, I told Kléber I intended rescuing you; but he said it was impossible and when I insisted, he threatened. Then Dick, who was one of the company's pilots, helped me and we got away before Kléber knew. But he found out and—and you know the rest."

She looked anxious. "Jim, I can pilot a little, but this is a hard spot to take off from. Do you think you could do it, after so long?"

"Yes." He was wondering why she doubted his ability to handle his own ship. "Where did you get this job, anyway? I didn't know my plans had been used."

"Your plans? Jim, what do you mean? Why, they're Kléber's! Morton financed him in New York and became president of the company—that's why the types are called Lamartines. They've both made millions out of it!"

SUDDENLY Jim gave a harsh, strangled laugh. His loyal friends! Morton, who had forbidden Helen to write; and Kléber, who had made millions by stealing his brains! No wonder the amphibian had been machine

gunned—the once penurious, sponging Kléber most certainly did not want him to escape and learn the truth.

"Help me, Pierre!" Jim said decisively and, though Helen winced at the necessity, they carried the pilot's body ashore and buried it.

Then Jim returned and switched on the engines. Swinging clear of the bank, he taxied upstream, then gave the ship the gun and lifted it from the water.

As he banked northeast, a heady intoxication gripped him. To be in the air again—to see the copper hued Maroni and the endless jungles spreading baffled below! This supreme moment almost compensated for all his years of living death.

"We're free!" he choked wildly. "Heaven bless you, Helen, we're free!"

Then he was calm again and stared around the machine that was his brain child. Though he had never seen a commercial model adapted from his designs, he knew its every strut and bolt, and thrilled at how it answered like a living thing to his touch.

In the river far below, two man-crowded launches were chugging upstream. He smiled derisively, knowing that they had been sent after Pierre and him. One of them turned back, and he could see its occupants firing upward at the speeding ship.

Then St. Laurent was ahead and he gazed at it with strange detachment. It held hundreds of lost souls: murderers, thieves, brutes—the scourgings of France. Yet many had been his comrades, had suffered and toiled with him.

His glance shifted across the prison-dotted jungles toward the sea. Far to the southeast, and shimmering like triple pearls in the azure Atlantic, lay Devil's Island and its companions, St. Joseph and Royale. Small wonder, he thought grimly, that "Devil's Island" was world famed and gave the popular

name to the entire colony. It was a fitting outpost to the Golgotha that was the mainland.

Pierre touched his arm. "You remember then?" he asked, indicating the islands. "Six months solitary on St. Joseph is not soon forgotten, eh?"

Jim's face became stony. Six months—4,378 hours—of devastating silence,

because of a short, mad burst of insubordination. Such punishment had killed many and driven more insane. Only the strong survived and they, like himself, were stamped everlastingly with the imprint of its horrors.

Suddenly he banked sharply northward. "There's the seaplane and she's after us!"



"Hurry! The confession!" the American gritted.

"Oh, what can we do?" Helen cried in panic.

"Head for Venezuela. We'd be extradited from Dutch or British Guiana."

"But I have money," she protested. "Couldn't I protect you if we had to land in either of them?"

He was watching the faster machine gaining upon them. "No," he said, "the Dutch and British are too smugly law-abiding. If they recaptured us, they'd hand us back to the Franch."

Aware of the low gas supply, he concentrated upon squeezing every ounce out of the ship. Should the seaplane force them to land, it must be, at least, upon Venezuelan soil.

"Is Kléber in that crate?" he demanded, but Helen did not know.

Jim hoped so. He and Kléber had served in the same *escadrille* during the war. Kléber had never been an aggressive pilot and once when two enemies had been on his tail Jim, already an ace, had saved him. Afterward, the Frenchman had insinuated himself into Jim's friendship until they were almost inseparables.

Jim smiled wryly, understanding now that Kléber was a jackal, following behind the strong and stealing their leavings. Yet he could not understand why Kléber should be so merciless in preventing his escape. He must know that Jim, as an escaped *transporté*, could not hope to force him to disgorge by law.

THEN the American was back in the grim present. Try as he would, he could not maintain his lead. Ten minutes more and he could see the faces of the pilot and the passenger behind the cowlings of their open cockpits. And the pilot was Kléber!

"Look out!" Helen screamed suddenly. "He's under our tail!"

Bullets ripped through the cabin and Pierre yelped and clutched an arm. But

simultaneously Jim had pulled the ship into a loop.

The years sloughed away and once more he was a war bird, avidly ready for battle. True, unarmed, piloting a slower job and hindered lest an unlucky burst kill Helen, the odds against him were terrific; yet his teeth bared in a savage, exultant grin.

He had timed the loop perfectly and it brought him out under the seaplane's rudder. A machine gun now and he would have had his enemy cold.

Pierre, his arm bleeding, showed him Helen's small revolver. "Madame gave me this. Is it of use, *mon vieux*?"

A toy against a machine gun!

Jim shrugged. "Perhaps. Be ready." The seaplane was trying to reverse things by looping in turn, but he foiled it swiftly, the big Lamartine answering as easily as a military scout machine.

For several minutes the adversaries maneuvered fruitlessly. Yet, despite the odds, Jim's smile had become more deadly. He knew intuitively that Kléber, too, was remembering their war days together, was remembering that he had never been the consummate air fighter that Jim had been.

More than once this realization was proved true by Kléber's blunders. He was worried, had become unsure of himself.

Then once more Jim was under his tail. "Now!" he shouted. "Shoot upward into it—toward the front!"

Though no bird man, Pierre could, at least, obey orders. Opening a window, he emptied the revolver into the enemy and, even before his last shot, something hurtled downward from it—its portable machine gun.

"Again!" Jim snarled, zooming above his opponent. "Shoot the pilot!"

"*Diable*, but there are no more shells!" Pierre groaned. He snatched up the two machetes. "Are these of use?"

Jim was staring down into the sea-

plane. The gunner, wounded, was trying frankly to twist a rag around his spurting leg and Kléber was gazing upward apprehensively.

"Helen, take over and maybe I can cripple him with the machetes!" Jim shouted.

Instantly she was beside him. "Tell me what to do."

Swiftly he explained; then, while Pierre leaned from the window and bluffed Kléber with the empty gun, Jim forced open the door and edged along the lower wing, both machetes in his waistband.

Kléber was shouting urgently to his gunner, but the latter was too busy bandaging himself to obey. Then Kléber recognized Jim and cringed lower in his seat.

REACHING the wing tip, the American waited until Helen had closed daringly with the seaplane. The risk was tremendous now, for her least miscalculation meant tearing the wing off against the enemy's nearer pontoon.

But during the brief moment she could hold position, he ripped great gashes in the pontoon with a machete. Kléber fired at him with an automatic and one bullet fanned his chest, but then the Frenchman had to return to his controls lest the ships collide.

But as he drew away, Jim flung the machete at him. It missed and flashed away into space. But like lightning, Jim flung the second. This missed Kléber's head by a hair's breadth, skittered along the engine cowling and struck the whirling propeller, which tossed it like a bullet into the void.

Instantly the seaplane lurched crazily, as part of the propeller snapped off and described a vast parabola after the machete that had struck it.

Jim shouted exultantly. He had made his enemy's landing hazardous by damaging the pontoon; now Kléber must cut

his engine or have the broken screw tear it from its bed.

"Oh, you've won!" Helen sobbed, as Jim regained the cabin. "Nothing can stop us now."

"Yes, this can." Grimly he indicated the fuel gauge. The fight had used so much gas that it was impossible now to reach Venezuela without a fill.

He looked overside. They were now over the Maroni's wide mouth and Kléber was gliding down toward the French side, aware that unless he could reach it, his damaged pontoon must sink him in the shark-infested waters.

"I'm going after him!" he snapped.

"No!" Helen pleaded. "He still has that pistol. Jim, don't!"

"We need gas," he retorted, and his tone made her protests die away into a frightened sob.

As he dived after the stricken ship, he saw that the launch which had turned back in pursuit of him was now speeding toward Kléber's rescue.

Kléber himself was nearing a sandy spit that jutted from the shore and which, though partly covered by the tide, would give him safety. Yet Jim did not hesitate. The launch could not arrive for some while and not only did he need Kléber's gas but also to feel the man's throat crushing under his fingers.

Its smashed pontoon making it tilt crazily, the seaplane had come to rest against the spit when Jim landed the Lamartine near by and taxied to a halt in two feet of water.

A bullet tore through the cabin walls. "Stay where you are!" came Kléber's snarl.

But, ignoring Helen's protest, Jim opened the door and dropped into the water, carrying the empty revolver. Pierre, despite his wound, following unquestioningly.

"Stop or I fire!" Kléber stood up in

the tilted plane, his automatic leveled. The wounded gunner was slumped in the rear cockpit, obviously *hors de combat*. The chugging launch was still a full three miles away.

HALTING with the gurgling shallows swishing around his knees, Jim stared at the man who had once been his friend. Years of prosperity had put much flesh upon Kléber—had made him handsomely impressive—and soft.

Sensing that, beaten in the air, Kléber was already half beaten on land, a demoniacal smile twisted Jim's lips.

"You've grown fat, Kléber—fat from exploiting my brains while I've starved in this hell!" he spat. "So now, my loyal friend, I'm coming to kill you!"

He took a stride forward. It was a gamble, bluffing with an empty gun, but—he knew Kléber.

Pierre advanced with him. "*Diable,*" he growled, "this charming friend of yours needs a few years in our old home to take the lard off him!"

Another stride, but still Kléber did not fire. His heavy features seemed a pasty, mottled hue.

"Well, why don't you shoot?" Jim jeered, his revolver pointed.

"Wait!" Kléber cried. "We must talk. I'm sorry for what's happened, but it won't help to fight now."

"Stalling until the launch arrives, eh?" Jim laughed harshly. He took another stride. "Well, talk."

Kléber tapped his breast pocket. "What would you give for a confession signed by that woman's murderer?"

Jim stiffened. "Stop bluffing, Kléber."

"I'm not! Oh, I admit it's been very useful to me all these years. In fact, I brought it with me now in case I caught up with the beautiful Helen. Had she seen it, I think she would not have rescued you." Kléber was becoming more confident. "If I give it to you, will you swear never to harm me?"

"I'll swear nothing!" Jim turned his head. "Is this true, Helen? Has he a confession of yours?"

"Mine!" came her gasp from the amphibian. Then she gave a horrified scream. "Jim, do you think I killed Jeanette?"

He turned to face her, and simultaneously Pierre shouted a warning. Then a bullet tore into his left shoulder, its force knocking him down in the water. A second slug plowed a watery trail past him as, dazed and sick, he regained his feet.

Pierre was charging toward the seaplane, flinging curses at Kléber, swearing to tear him to pieces. Two ineffective bullets brought derisive jeers from him; but when he was within two yards of his goal Kléber's third shot sent him down to stain the sea with his life's blood.

A terrible cry broke from Jim. Then he, too, had reached the seaplane. His right hand shot upward and gripped Kléber's throat, his left tore the gun from his enemy.

He heaved and Kléber fell headlong into the water beside him. Kléber threshed like a maniac to raise his head above the suffocating water; but not until the threshing had died into convulsive squirms did Jim release him.

"The confession!" the American gritted.

Eyes and tongue protruding, Kléber slobbered whines for mercy as he handed over a water-soaked paper.

The handwriting and signature upon it made Jim gasp incredulously. His uncle, kindly, elderly Morton Lamar-tine, had killed Jeanette Poiron!

THE MEANING of these pitiful lines came to him devastatingly. Lord, and all these years he had thought Helen guilty, had thought himself protecting her!

"Talk!" he snarled.

Trembling, Kléber obeyed. He was

present in Jeanette's apartment when Morton killed her in a drunken frenzy. Suddenly sobered, Morton begged his aid. At first, contemplating simple blackmail, he had forced this confession from Morton; but then he remembered Jim's unpatented blue prints for the amphibian.

His fertile brain had concocted the plan to tell Jim that Helen had done the killing through jealousy of Jeanette, and Morton, terrified, had hurried Helen away before she could learn anything.

After Jim's quixotic protection and his condemnation, Kléber admitted he had used the confession to bend Morton to his will, even as he had hoped to bend Helen in this rescue attempt.

When his miserable tale ended, Jim stared at him wordlessly, then signaled Helen to bring the Lamartine alongside the seaplane. Swiftly he transferred some of the fuel from the latter, until Helen warned him that the launch was close.

"Come," he told Kléber curtly. "I'm taking you with me."

The man's bloodshot eyes widened. "You—you won't kill me?" he gasped.

"Kill you? No!" Jim began tying his hands behind him with a strip of his own coat. "Death's too easy a punishment for you. This confession exon-

erates me, understand, but it means you'll face years of imprisonment—out here, if my request is granted. It won't be easy for you, Kléber, because in St. Laurent are many men who'll be eager to deal with the man who killed Pierre Monat and who tried to prevent our escape."

"Jim, hurry!" Helen urged, as some one aboard the launch began firing.

Jim gained the cabin doorway. His wounded shoulder was throbbing horribly, but he stretched out a hand to help Kléber up.

"By to-night you'll be telling your story to the French ambassador in Venezuela," he told him. "Probably he'll send you back here for trial."

He had dragged Kléber up into the doorway when a volley spat from the approaching launch. Kléber stiffened, gave a choked scream and toppled back limply in the water and was still.

Slowly, Jim closed the door and reached the seat beside Helen, as the ship prepared for the take-off.

"Jim," she said, when once they were safely in the air, "I'm glad you didn't have his blood on your soul."

Slowly he nodded and watched the Maroni dropping behind and the jungles of Dutch Guiana looming ahead. "Free!" he breathed.

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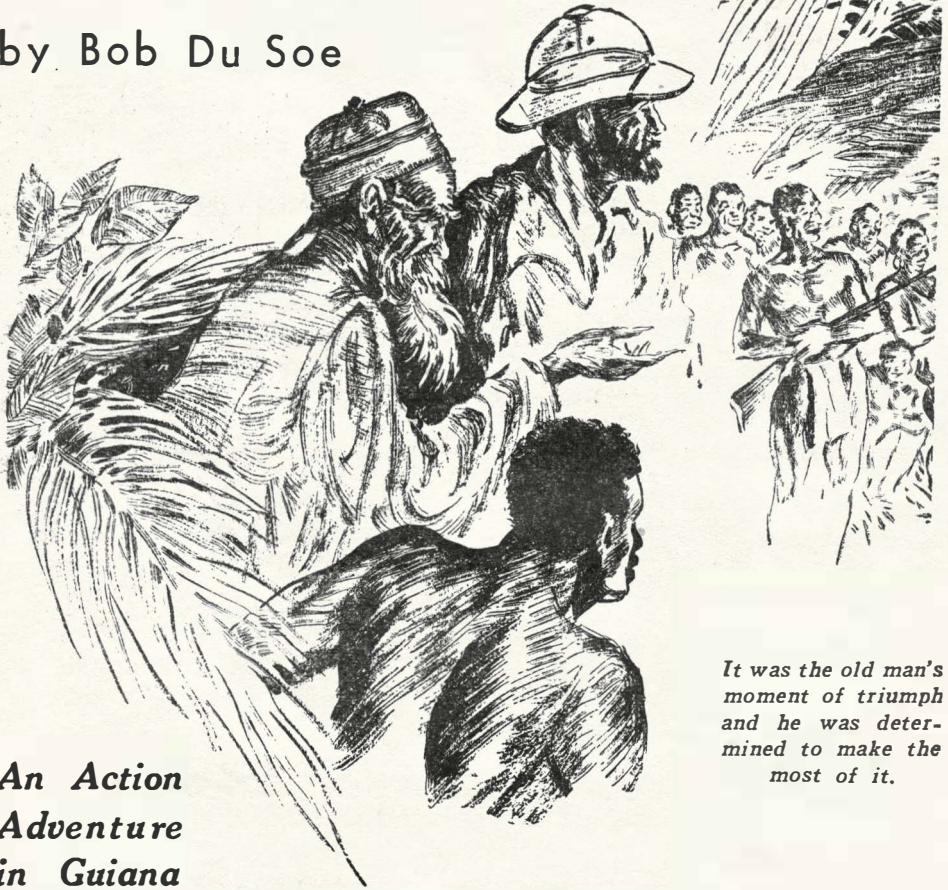
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ALWAYS a Chinaman

by Bob Du Soe



It was the old man's moment of triumph and he was determined to make the most of it.

An Action Adventure in Guiana

IT WAS cooler, healthier, more livable in the quiet, little village of Paramaribo than up the Maroni River in that steaming jungle. An occasional breeze found its way in from the sea, down there along the coast, and when it came it brought a change in the heavy, stifling air, a freshness that never reached the jungle.

There was the human contact to be

had there, too; the hearty greeting of a friend, or perhaps no more than the voice of some one who spoke a familiar tongue, but that was more than could be expected in the unbroken solitude of that treacherous, green expanse beyond the river.

Durand had discovered these advantages long since. He had that cool, cleaner breath from the sea to thank



for his being there, now, alive and well—that, and the kindness of old Lui Wang. The Caribs had found him and brought him down the river to Paramaribo that first time, starved and racked with fever.

Old Lui Wang had taken him in because of a scrap of paper the Indians had found in his belt. Durand still treasured that bit of paper—his passport, he called it—though he had no idea what the meaning of those half-dozen crisscross lines might be, and he was satisfied to remain in ignorance. It was enough that the somewhat inclement Wing, across the river in St. Laurent, had written them and that old Lui Wang had read them and understood.

Yes, Durand had been fortunate on that first visit to Paramaribo and he knew it. A man who bore the stamp

of those grim, prison walls in St. Laurent was seldom made welcome by the Dutch across the Maroni. In his case, though, the rest, the nourishing food, and the care he had received at the hands of old Wang had made it possible for him to regain his health and a semblance of his former strength.

And now he was back again with another season's bleeding of rubber with which he intended to reimburse old Wang for his trouble, for the food and clothing he had so freely given, at least. The other, the spirit that had prompted that generosity, was something that no man could repay except in kind.

Thin, and just a bit stooped, his dark, deep-set eyes striving to penetrate the darkness within, Durand stood a moment in the doorway of Lui Wang's cluttered, little warehouse on the edge of town, waiting for the old Chinese to recognize him. The familiar greeting was not forthcoming, however, and he saw then, as his gaze grew accustomed to the dimmer light, that the man who sat at the desk beyond the counter was not Lui Wang.

DURAND advanced to the counter and the fat, florid man at the desk twisted his bulk in the chair to stare at him with a frown, then a query: "You want something?"

Durand remembered him then, one of the Dutch merchants from whom old Wang obtained his trade goods. "Hello, Groder," he said. "Yes, I'm looking for Lui Wang."

"Durand!" The big man peered at him more sharply. "I did not know you—that beard."

Durand nodded without replying. One hand rose aimlessly to finger the growth on his lean, weathered cheeks while his glance shifted inquiringly about him. He missed the cups and the pot of tea that had always stood there on a corner of the battered desk. And the haze of tobacco smoke that hung motionless overhead was not of the variety that would ever satisfy the exotic taste of Lui Wang.

There was something different in the atmosphere; something that convinced him the Chinaman's absence was more than temporary and the disappointing discovery left him a little dazed.

"You look for Lui, eh?" Groder declared. "Well, you've got a long look. Maybe you try China heaven—wherever that is. I've looked everywhere else."

"You—you mean he's gone—he has disappeared?"

"Yeah, both. He went up the river

more than two months ago, now, to that damn Lava country, and he did not come back."

"The Lava country," Durand repeated. "What could he have wanted up there?"

"Gold! What else?" The big man hunched his heavy, sloping shoulders and let them sag again. "Where there is gold there is always a Chinaman. You know that, don't you? They can't stay away from it."

"But the Negroes! And he was getting most of the gold that came down the river, anyway."

Groder shook his head. "No, that was the trouble. The last load went to the French across the river."

"The fools, Lui always traded square with them. Why did they quit him?"

"That's what Lui went to find out. He was the only one who could go. You know they don't like white men. And now——" Groder spread his fat, pink palms. "I don't know. It looks like maybe they don't like Lui either."

"You have had no word from him at all?"

"Nothing. And to-morrow he will be gone two months and two weeks. That's too long."

"How did he go, with the Caribs or the Negroes?"

"With the Caribs. There has not been a bush Negro from the Lava country this side of the Maroni in months. Yeah, I think old Lui is done for. Too bad, but maybe that's all right by you, eh? I guess you owe him pretty good stake."

Durand met the Dutchman's crafty glance with a frown. "I know what I owe," he said, "and I'll pay it."

"Sure, pay it. But it makes no difference to me," Groder shrugged. "There is no account of it on the books."

"That's like him. He's left the business with you, has he, until he returns?"

"That's right. We had to do something. Old Lui got most of the gold but the goods he traded he bought from us so it was better we work together."

"Yes, of course," Durand replied. There was nothing else he could say whether he agreed or not.

"You have had good luck this time?" the Dutchman asked.

"Yes. Fair."

"That's good. There is no money in rubber, now. But you bring it up and we'll weigh it. It's better to sell it now than wait and get nothing."

"I'll bring it up," Durand agreed, but there was no enthusiasm in his reply, and when he had retraced his steps to the river he sat down on the bow of his heavily laden dugout to ponder at length over Groder's explanation of old Wang's absence.

He was suspicious in the first place of the Dutchman's seeming friendliness. He knew that distrust of any one who came from across the river, whether justified or not, and there were no exceptions.

He knew, too, that the other traders had never felt over kindly toward Wang. They resented his monopoly of the gold trade and the honest dealing that had gained it for him. If Wang had lost that trade Durand was confident it had not been through any fault of his own.

It was strange that the old Chinaman had not returned. There was good reason to believe that something had happened to him in that time, but it puzzled Durand that Groder had seemed so sure of treachery on the part of the blacks. The Lava country was theirs and they guarded it zealously against any invasion of the whites, but that should not have included Wang. They had known him and had traded with him for years and if they could ever trust any one surely it was Lui Wang.

Possibly it was intuition; his deduc-

tions certainly proved nothing definite, but the feeling that something was not as it should be continued to plague him and shouldering a load of the bulky, raw rubber from the dugout Durand went back to the warehouse to weigh it in and question the Dutchman more closely.

II.

GRODER pried himself from the chair at the desk and came ponderously out from behind the counter to the scales. He weighed the rubber and left Durand to roll it aside while he went back to the desk to make note of the pounds.

"This time you leave Guiana for good, eh?" he remarked. "This time you are good and strong and you have plenty money."

Durand shook his head. "It will take another season before I can do that. By the time I pay Wang what I owe him there will not be much left."

"But why pay when he is not here and there is nothing against you? Bah, that is foolish."

"It would be if I was sure he was not coming back, but I think he is."

"Why do you think that?" Groder questioned sharply.

"Because I don't think the bush Negroes would ever kill Lui Wang, and he knows the Guianas too well for anything else to happen to him."

Groder shrugged and turned again to the desk. "Maybe you are right, but I don't think so. He has been gone too long."

Durand did not argue. He left the warehouse and headed thoughtfully back to his dugout for another load of rubber. He had learned nothing new except that he was satisfied now that the Dutchman wanted to get rid of him.

Another canoe came easing in toward the bank as he neared his own and he recognized the occupants at once as

bush Negroes from up the river. There were five of them, big powerful men, all except one, and it was evident from his age and the deference shown him by the others that he was either their *jumbe* man or their chief.

As the prow of the dugout grounded on the shore Durand saw that the elderly black clutched a rifle and the sight of it gave him considerable surprise. It was an ancient piece; he could not be sure of the make or model at a distance, but it was a rifle, nevertheless, and the government had decreed that the natives were not to be allowed the possession of firearms.

They climbed out on the bank, one of them lifting with evident effort the bottom half of a five-gallon oil tin, the old man still clinging to his rifle, and started off at once in the direction of Lui Wang's little warehouse.

Durand knew there was gold in that oil tin, and, from the weight of it, manifest by the straining black, he doubted if there had been any trading across the river or anywhere else in some time. He went over and examined their dugout, then shouldered another load of his rubber and followed them up to the warehouse.

Groder was talking with the chief when Durand walked in and dumped his load on the scales. The discussion, he was sure, had pertained to himself, but it ended abruptly and, after an awkward pause, the Dutchman launched into a heated censure of the chief for having brought the gun.

The old man had brought the weapon, as he explained, to have it filled again with the white-man magic that killed, but Groder insisted impatiently that the magic he sought was most difficult to obtain and that he had none.

"Take the damn thing out of here," Groder ordered with evident uneasiness. "Take it back to your dugout and leave it there."

THE CHIEF was annoyed and by no means convinced. He failed to understand why other white men always seemed to have plenty of magic for their guns and Groder didn't. He did not argue, however; he gave the weapon to one of the others and sent him back to the canoe with it as the Dutchman had ordered.

The Negro with the gold lowered the heavy tin from his head, then, and set it down on the counter where Groder could examine it. His small, gray eyes grew wide; the effort to conceal his eagerness brought the perspiration in great, round drops across his narrow brow.

Durand went over to stand beside the sphinx-faced, old chief and gaze on the treasure with the others. The Bushmen had not the least idea of its actual value. To them the gold was something to trade for trinkets, fish hooks, and strips of gaudy, colored cotton that was infinitely more desirable than a scoopful of paltry, yellow pebbles.

"It looks as if Wang had talked some sense into them," Durand broke the silence. "Do they know anything about him?"

Groder gave a shake of his head. "No. I asked them."

"They haven't seen him? They know nothing at all?"

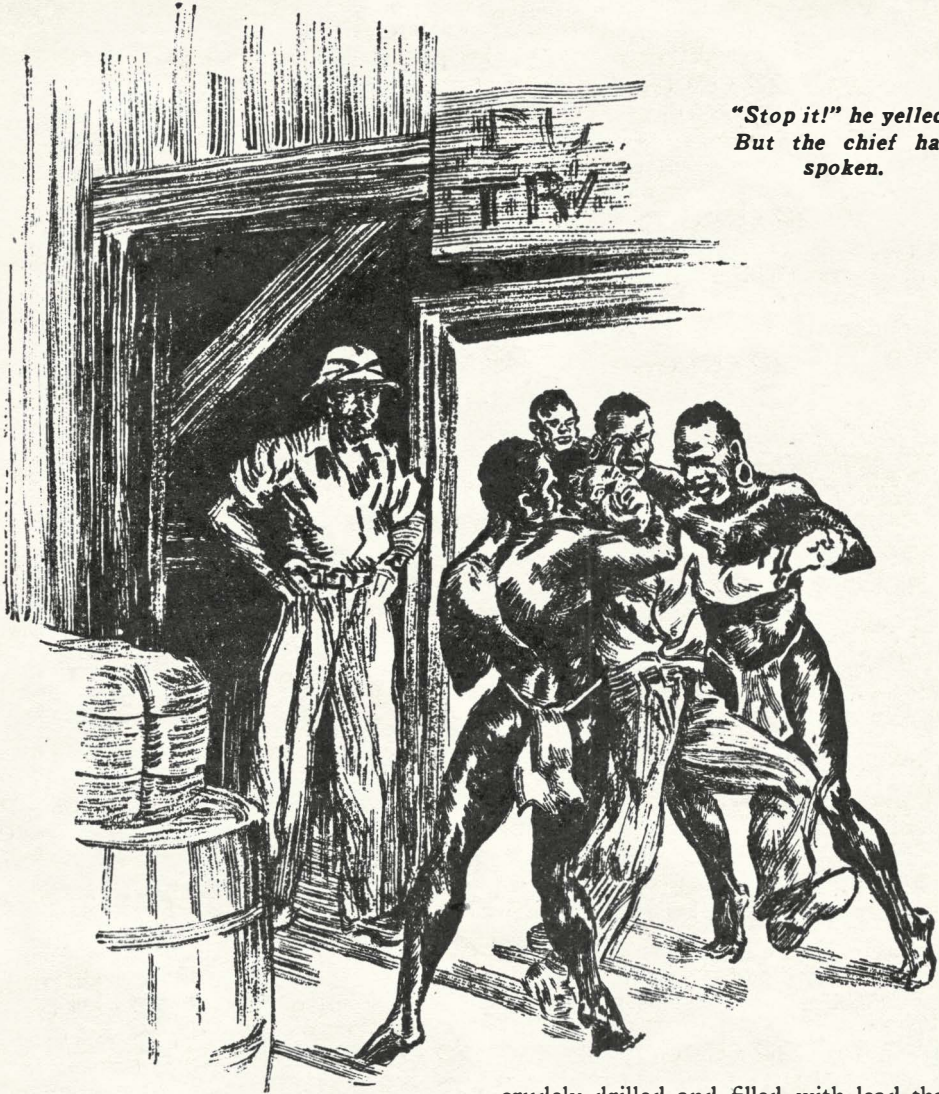
"No, nothing," the Dutchman answered, then he frowned. "What about your rubber, have you got it all up?"

"Not yet."

"Well, you better get it up. When I am through with this I do no more trading to-day."

Durand raised his shoulders. "All right. I'm in no hurry."

Groder was not at all pleased, but he said nothing more. He took a small pair of scales from under the counter and set to weighing the gold. It was a long-drawn-out procedure for the Bushmen had no means of computing their wealth. They pointed to some-



*"Stop it!" he yelled.
But the chief had
spoken.*

thing they wanted; Groder weighed out the value he placed on the article in gold, and the Negro set his purchase aside to repeat the performance again and again.

The profit Groder derived from each trade was out of all reason. Durand was not surprised at that; old Wang had made his profits, too, but, at least, he had been honest in his scaling. The weight that Groder used had been so

crudely drilled and filled with lead that any one but the ignorant Bushmen would have detected the fraud in an instant.

Durand noticed something else as the trading went on. His interest was only mildly aroused when he noticed it first but when it occurred a second time and then a third he grew curious. The nuggets were all sizes, from tiny specks the size of a pinhead to flakes and lumps the size of his thumbnail and on three of the larger pieces he had

glimpsed a cluster of bright, new scratches. He kept an eye on the larger nuggets and when the next one turned up he casually reached across the counter and picked it off the scales.

Groder glared at him. "Keep your hands out of that," he ordered. "Put that back."

"You'll get it back," Durand assured him. But he delayed long enough to examine the nugget closely before he returned it to the scales. In that brief moment he made out the crisscross lines of a Chinese character. It was the same character that his friend Wing Lee across the river had inscribed on that bit of paper, the same scrap of paper that Lui Wang had seen and read when the Caribs had brought him in, starved and delirious from the jungle.

He could not be mistaken; those lines were etched at the back of his brain as permanently as if they had been drawn there by the hand that had scratched them on the nugget. Old Wang was alive but he was in trouble and that was his appeal for help.

GRODER noticed the scratches then, but he suspected no significance in them. He emptied the gold he had weighed into the leather sack at his elbow and went on with his trading. Durand waited until he had completed the next transaction then he turned indifferently away and moved across to the door. Once outside, however, his leisurely attitude changed abruptly.

He had arrived in Paramaribo that morning content with the idea of clean ducks, a shave, and days of nothing to do but revel in that fresh, healing air from the sea. It was hell in that fever-ridden jungle; he had left it with the feeling that another day there, another hour, and it would surely have beaten him, destroyed him, as it did all else and as it had nearly devoured him before.

But all that was forgotten, now. Old

Lui Wang, the one man whom he had to thank for his being there alive and well, was somewhere up the river in need of assistance and his only remaining thought was to find him and bring him back.

He carried another load of rubber from the shore up to the warehouse, weighed it himself, and hurried back for another. He knew the Negroes would be heading up the river again as soon as they had finished with their trading and he was determined to follow them. However, he must dispose of his rubber first, replenish his meager supply of food, and above all Groder must not learn of his intentions.

The dugout was emptied at last and as Durand stood totaling his weights in the cooler draft by the door the Bushmen made their final trade. They began gathering up their newly acquired possessions immediately then, and while the chief kept watch the others moved the strange assortment of finery and trinkets down to the river.

"There are the weights." Durand shoved his figures across the counter to Groder. "I hope you haven't been tampering with those scales, too."

The accusation brought nothing but a satisfied grin. "For a few pounds of worthless rubber? Bah," the Dutchman scoffed. "Bring your figures to-morrow. I have no more time for that stuff to-day."

"But I've got to have food," protested Durand. "I can't get it anywhere else. I've got no money."

"Take what you need, then," Groder said. "You can settle to-morrow." His fat, red hand gripped the bag of gold; he had no thought but contempt for anything else.

Durand took an empty gunny from a pile near the counter and made a hasty selection from the half-dozen shelves along the wall. He hoped that Groder would not notice the amount he took. Had there been any other way

he would have taken none at all, but there wasn't, and he had to have food.

He waited until the Bushmen returned for another load of their trade goods, hoping to get away then unnoticed, but Groder saw the half-filled sack as he moved toward the door and his suspicions were aroused in spite of his consuming interest in the gold.

"Hey, you!" he called. "What you got there?"

Durand stopped inquiringly. "Food. Why, what's the matter?"

"You going to eat all that to-night? Let me see what you got."

"What do you care what I've got?" Durand demanded. "I'll not lie about it, and you've got the rubber."

"That doesn't make any difference." Groder came lumbering from behind the counter, alert and determined. "You don't need all that grub for one night. What are you going to do with it, eh? Where you going?"

DURAND knew his intentions were known, now. There was nothing to be gained in denying it. "I'm going to find old Lui Wang," he declared, moving on through the door, "and when I do I'm bringing him back."

"You damn fool! Stop it!" shouted Groder. "Come back here!"

Durand paid no attention. He was halfway to the river by the time Groder reached the door and the next minute he was shoving the heavy canoe out into the stream. When it floated free he climbed in and took up the paddle. Groder could not stop him, now, but as Durand glanced back at the receding shore and the warehouse he saw the Dutchman and the decrepit, old chief standing together in the doorway and he knew their conversation undoubtedly concerned himself.

He had wanted the Negroes to get away ahead of him so that he could follow them, if possible, unobserved, but that was out of the question, now.

They would be watching him; there was nothing he could do but trail them openly and trust that they did not turn on him, at least until they were ready to leave the river.

Keeping in toward the bank where there was less resistance from the swirling water beneath him Durand headed into the current to wait for the Negroes somewhere up the stream. Their dugout was a large one, and heavily laden, but there would be four of them at the paddles. There was no doubt of them overtaking him.

He turned now and then to see if they had gotten under way but it was growing dark before he finally caught a glimpse of their steady, stroking paddles and he was just a little relieved. He kept on until he knew the darkness would conceal his movements then headed for the bank where he pulled the canoe in under a screen of overhanging branches and made it fast.

Later he heard the droning chant of the blacks as they passed him out on the river but he knew it would not be long until they put in somewhere for the night as he had done and then their positions would be reversed.

The jungle came to life at dawn with the screech of parrots and the chatter of monkeys, and Durand put out into the stream again to scan the river ahead of him and await the appearance of the Bushmen. Their dugout nosed into the stream not long after, a lot nearer than he had anticipated, and then suddenly there was the sharp crack of a rifle.

"The crazy, old ape!" Durand threw himself flat in the dugout. There was another report; the bullet sang high overhead, and then there was silence again. It was the aged chief who had fired; Durand was sure of that, but the chief had complained to Groder of having no ammunition and now he seemed to have plenty. There was only one answer to that: the Dutchman had given him a fresh supply with the un-

derstanding that the chief was to kill him.

When he ventured to peer out again the blacks had taken up their paddles and resumed their course. The chief must have known his shots hadn't found their mark, and yet he was satisfied to go on. Durand gave them time to increase the distance between them and then, swinging his own dugout into the current, he paddled after them.

III.

ALL THAT DAY he followed them, stopping when they did, then pushing on again until darkness forced them to cover. When daylight came he eased cautiously out from beneath the dense growth along the bank, unmindful of the morning previous, but this time the Bushmen were there ahead of him, waiting for him. The rifle barked; a bullet drilled into the thick hull of the dugout, and he dropped down out of sight.

Twice more the rifle spoke; one bullet chipped the branches overhead, the other churned the water, and then all was quiet again. Durand lay waiting, alert, half expecting the Negroes to come paddling alongside. He had no weapon; he wondered what he would do, but they did not appear and when he finally sat erect they were well on their way up the river.

Durand could not decide whether he had escaped because the chief had merely sought to warn him or because of his faulty aim, but it made no difference. As soon as they were out of range he paddled on in their wake. He followed them all that day, and when he put out onto the river again in the morning he was a lot more wary, but he need not have been for they had gone on without paying him the least attention.

It was a long, toilsome trip up the Maroni to the Lava country. There

were times when it seemed to Durand that the powerful blacks in the dugout ahead would surely leave him hopelessly behind. However, they finally turned from the main stream into one of the many tributaries that led away into the jungle and he knew it would not be far to the village after that.

He made no attempt to conceal himself. It would have been useless, now, to try. He followed them boldly up the smaller stream and when they nosed the big dugout into the bank at last and waded ashore he sent his own craft deliberately in among them.

His actions angered and amazed the crew of the dugout, as well as the forty-odd men, women and children who lined the bank. If the chief meant to kill him this was certainly his chance, but the rifle continued to hang, muzzle down, in his thin, bony arms and his only evident hostility was a glowering frown.

Their indecision, Durand realized, was due to the moment of his arrival. The entire village had gathered there, excited and expectant, to examine the treasure their chief had brought in exchange for the gold and, as much as they resented his intrusion they were still more interested in the contents of the heavily laden dugout.

The chief ordered the trade goods carried up to the village and then in the dialect of the bush he demanded of Durand what he wanted.

"I have come," Durand replied, "to take our very good friend Lui Wang back down the river to Paramaribo."

"No." The chief shook his head. He did not deny that the Chinaman was there. He simply stated that he would not be permitted to leave. "And," he added, "since you were so foolish as to follow him you will stay here, too."

"I expected that," Durand said unmoved, "but it is you who are foolish to prefer the double dealing of that

Dutchman, Groder, to the honest trading of Lui Wang."

"The Dutchman cheat; Wang cheat, too," retorted the chief.

"Wang does not cheat." Durand was emphatic. "Wang never gave you bad magic for your gun and expected you to kill somebody with it like the Dutchman did."

The toothless, old Negro stared at Durand, then the rifle, and frowned. He had not thought of that. The Dutchman had given him bad magic for his 'gun and had brought disgrace on him, failure in the presence of his four most stalwart fighting men.

He stood there a moment while the disquieting possibility filtered through his slow-functioning brain, then he trotted away on his spindly, bowed legs toward the village and left Durand to come trailing after him. He knew, and so did Durand, that a guard was unnecessary.

OLD LUI WANG rose with a start from the ground in front of a tall, thatched hut as they entered the village and his homely, wrinkled face lighted up with an expression of delight. "Durand!" he exclaimed. "You saw, eh? You come!"

Durand wrung the Chinaman's withered, old hand with evident relief. "Sure I came. A smart trick, Wang—those scratches on the nuggets. But how did you know I'd see them?"

Wang shook his head. "I not know. I thought it was time for you to stop in Paramaribo, but if you hadn't seen, then I would have tried some more next time."

"You shouldn't have come here in the first place," Durand declared. "It was a trick, Wang—a trick to get rid of you. Don't you know that?"

"Yes, I know now. The Dutchmen do not like Lui Wang. They gave the black chief a gun and he promised not

to bring me any gold. They lied; they said bush Negro traded with French."

"And then they sent you up here to see about it and they knew all the time the Negroes were going to hold you here."

"Yes, he's no good, that man, Groder—always lying. I'll fix him. You see."

"We'll fix him all right," Durand agreed. "That is, if we ever get out of here."

"Yeah, if we get out. Do you think they'll try to keep us both—you, too?"

"I'm sure of it, if they can. The old devil took five shots at me coming up the river. Groder must have given him the shells and told him to do it."

"Groder," the Chinaman muttered. "Do you think that is all the shells he gave them—five?"

"I'm sure of it, now," Durand reasoned as he spoke. "I got a good look at the rifle. It's an old model and it uses a five-shell clip. Groder must have given him only the one clip; he used that up, and that's why he didn't fire any more."

"Five shots is not very much."

"No? Well, one would have been all he'd needed if he had known how to shoot."

"Yes, yes, but I mean five bullets only kill five Bushmen and that's not enough."

"What are you talking about?"

Wang peered sharply at the neighboring huts and grinned. "I took a clip from the chief the first day I came. He had only one. I buried it in the hut. If we could get a rifle, maybe we could go, eh?"

"Good work!" Durand exclaimed. "But how did you get it?"

"I took it from the gun in the chief's hut when he wasn't looking. He thinks *jumbe* man take him. Chief and *jumbe* man are always fighting. What do you think?"

Durand fingered his beard. "We'd

be taking a long chance but if we could get both the clip and the gun we might get away with it. That would be the end of your trading, though, Wang. They'd go to the French then, sure as the devil."

Wang shrugged resignedly. "Better lose trade than stay here."

"Yes, but we'll see first if we can't work something else. What about this *jumbe* man, is he any better than the chief?"

"Chief and *jumbe* man are the same—no good. The chief tries to be boss—*jumbe* man wants to be boss, too. He's mad because the chief has a gun and he hasn't. Here he comes now." Wang nodded toward a near-by hut. "*Jumbe* man."

Durand saw a dirty, knob-kneed old black coming toward them from the neighboring hut, an exact twin for the chief, and instinctively he breathed deep before the air had become too offensive.

"Are you sure you can get that clip?" he demanded hastily of Wang.

"Sure, I can get it."

"All right, then—get it. I've got an idea."

THE *jumbe* man indicated that he wanted to talk with Durand and the Chinaman and they sat down in a circle in front of the hut.

"It is your wish to return to Paramaribo, is it not?" the black inquired, or as near to that as his limited vocabulary would permit.

"Yes, very much," Durand replied.

"If it could be arranged"—the old fellow eyed them sharply—"would it be worth the exchange of a gun like the one they gave Chief Tom to keep you here?"

"No." Durand shook his head. "We would be better off to remain here in the jungle than to starve in the Dutchman's prison."

"But the man who gave Chief Tom his gun did not go to prison."

"The man who gave Chief Tom that gun is a devil, and devils do not go to prison. If they did there would be no need of the very wise *jumbe* men like yourself."

The Negro weighed the logic of this for several seconds, but he knew something about devils himself and he was not easily convinced.

"If that Dutchman was not a devil," Durand pressed his argument, "why did he give Chief Tom bad magic for his gun? You are smart *jumbe* man. You could give him better magic for his gun than that."

The Negro suspected ridicule at first; his wrinkled brow lowered angrily. And then he realized that the white man was serious and the possibility of creating the necessary magic to fire old Chief Tom's rifle so filled him with excitement he fairly trembled.

"You—you think I make white-man magic that will fire gun?" he inquired, incredulous.

"Of course, you can," Durand assured him. "If you don't know I will show you."

It was a tremendous concession for the old black to admit that this white man might prove a better conjurer than himself but the temptation to learn his secret was more than he could resist. "You show me how make white-man magic for that gun," he declared, "and you will be free to go when you please."

"Is that your word?" asked Durand.

"That is my word."

"All right, I'll tell you how it's done. Find a gourd, deep but not too big around, and fill it with dry seeds from the flame tree. To-night, when there is no moon, dig a hole in front of your hut and bury the gourd open end up and four fingers from the top of the ground. Let no one see you, and smooth the earth so that no one will suspect there is anything there."

The Negro nodded. "It has the sound of good magic."

"All right, then, as soon as it is daylight take a pot of water, a big one, and place it on the fire. Drop in the head of a snake, the tail of a rat, and the two feet of a bird. When the water boils pour it on top of the ground where you have buried the gourd. Not all at once; you must pour it on a little at a time, and when the sun has climbed two hands high above the jungle there will appear the white man's magic for the gun."

The *jumbe* man rose to his feet, eyes bulging, impatient to try the new magic. "Is that all?"

"All but this," Durand spoke impressively. "Be sure that Chief Tom is there and all the tribe. They must

see the great power of their *jumbe* man. And when you have produced this magic for the gun be sure you keep it. Don't give it to the chief. The gun is no good without the magic, and the magic is no good without the gun. Is that understood?"

"That is understood, also," the black was emphatic, and clutching the little bag of charms that hung from a string around his neck, he hurried off to his hut.

"And now"—Durand turned to Wang—"you've got to get that clip or we're sunk."

"I'll get the clip all right." The Chinaman grinned. "But why do you want the head of a snake, tail of a rat, and feet of a bird?"

"That makes better *jumbe*," Durand replied. "and we are going to need a lot of it. Tell me, Wang, how did you



As they paddled, he watched—a little fearful—a little surprised.

get hold of those nuggets to put those scratches on them?"

"There was no trouble about that. I dig the nuggets myself from river. I made the scratch before I gave them to the chief."

"So the devils have been making you dig their gold for them!"

"Sure, plenty of work—plenty of gold in that river, too."

"Yes, but nobody but a bush Negro could live here long enough to get it out."

"Bush Negro and Chinaman," Wang corrected. "There's no work to-day, though; everybody is taking time to see what Chief Tom brought from downriver."

Durand had surmised that already. The tribe had gathered in front of the chief's hut as soon as the dugout was unloaded and their screams of delight matched the screeching of the parrots overhead. They were still at it when night came on, and later they danced in the weaving light of the fires to the frenzied beat of drums.

"What about that clip?" Durand reminded Wang. "When are you going to get it?"

"I'll get it now," Wang replied, and rising he slipped away like one of the eerie, dancing shadows, in the direction of Chief Tom's hut beyond the fire. He was gone but a few minutes and when he returned he grinned and held out the clip.

Durand took it with considerable relief. "Good work, Wang," he said. "If our luck holds we'll get out of here yet."

"Are we all fixed, now?"

"Not quite, but pretty near."

IV.

WHEN the Bushmen had worn themselves out and the dancing was over one of the younger men came and ordered Durand and the Chinaman into

their hut. He sat down in the entrance, then, evidently on guard, but it was not long until he had sprawled out full length and was sleeping soundly.

Durand stepped cautiously over him when all was quiet and went over to crouch in the deepening shadow near the hut of the *jumbe* man. The old Negro came peering out after a while, and satisfied that there was no one about he went hurriedly to work preparing his magic. He was busy for some time but the hole was finally dug, the gourd with the seeds of the flame tree properly buried, and then he went back into his hut.

Durand waited patiently until there could be no doubt that he was asleep, then he moved around in front of the hut and uncovered the gourd. He took out a few of the seeds, placed a piece of bark he had brought on top of them and stood the clip, leads up, on top of the bark.

He refilled the hole then, packing the soft, sandy soil firmly around the clip, and leveled it off a half inch or so above the leads. When that had been done he slipped quietly back into the hut with Wang and went to sleep. The rest would depend on luck and the skill of the *jumbe* man.

It was well past daylight when he awoke. The guard was gone from in front of their hut and the women of the tribe were busy at the cooking pots. That is, the few who were not gathered around the *jumbe* man who appeared to have suddenly turned cook himself. He was a good actor. Each time he stirred the magic water in his pot he wailed at the top of his lungs and the rest of the time he moaned and groaned as if the miracle he was about to perform was born of his own meager flesh.

The water came to a boil as Durand stood watching the performance from a distance and with appropriate ceremony the pot was carried to the entrance of

the *jumbe* man's hut. He squatted down on the ground then, with his back to the hut and with the charms from the little bag at his throat spread out before him, and waited for the gathering of the tribe. When all were present, including Chief Tom with his gun, the old black began dipping water from the pot and pouring it out on the ground.

Wang came from the hut and stood with Durand. "We go look-see, now," he urged.

"You know what's going to happen?" Durand inquired.

"Sure, very old trick, this one."

"Yeah. Well, you know there is plenty of time then. The water will have to soak through to the gourd and there will be a lot of it that won't get to the seeds."

"But with hot water they swell more quickly."

"Come on, then," Durand gave in, and they joined the circle of curious Negroes to await the approaching miracle.

They had a long wait but the *jumbe* man did his utmost to hold their attention and at last the ground before him began to swell and crack, and like the first, vigorous sprouts from a seed the five, pointed leads broke through the dampened crust of earth and brought a gasp of awe from the astonished on-lookers.

THERE WERE certainly none of them more amazed than the wide-eyed, old *jumbe* man himself, though no one would have suspected it. It was his moment of triumph and he was determined to make the most of it. The clip rose higher, forced up by the swelling seeds in the gourd beneath and the old black wreathed and groaned until he was on the verge of collapse. When the clip finally toppled over in full view of all he nearly fell over on top of it in his eagerness to grasp it.

The chief was aware of the awe and respect the *jumbe* man's feat had aroused in the rest of the tribe but he had a suspicion that he had seen that clip somewhere before and he was not to be humbled without a struggle. With all the dignity and authority he could muster he held out his hand and demanded the clip.

"No," the *jumbe* man shook his head. He would retain the clip. Anything that had to do with magic was his affair. "And," he concluded, for the benefit of Durand, "I have proven I can produce the white man's magic for the gun so that in war we are now the intruder's equal. You will return to Paramaribo at once," he spoke directly to Durand and the Chinaman, "and tell all white men there what you have seen."

The rage that burst from the chief was virulent and awesome in itself but all the curses and threats he could make had no effect on the *jumbe* man. The tribe would not dare side against him after the miracle they had just witnessed; he was master, now, and he would have his way.

"Best we go now; what do you think?" Wang asked a little anxiously.

Durand agreed. "Yes, the sooner the better, but first I've got to see the chief."

"Why do you want to see the chief?"

"Never mind now," Durand avoided reply. "Get some fish and cassava and take it down to the dugout."

The *jumbe* man had retired in glory to his hut. The chief was pacing up and down in front of his own hut, still fuming with rage, and Durand hurried over to speak with him.

"What do you want?" the chief demanded.

"You want magic for that gun," Durand hastened to calm him, "you come downriver with us to Lui Wang's place and I think we can fix it for you."

"You have gun magic you will trade for gold?"

"No, not me. You won't have to trade for it either. Just bring that gun and come along."

The chief glared defiantly at the hut of the *jumbe* man and nodded assent. "I will come."

Wang was a very happy and grateful Chinaman when Durand nosed the dugout into the bank at Paramaribo after the long trip down the river. The presence of Chief Tom and his four stalwart fighting men in another canoe not far behind quite plainly puzzled him, but Wang had no reason to doubt the wisdom of one who had proven himself as had Durand.

THEY WAITED until the Bushmen had grounded their dugout alongside their own then proceeded up the bank to Wang's little warehouse. There was the sound of running feet and the bang of a door as they approached and a bewildered Carib came out to stare at them in evident wonder.

"Where is he? Where did he go?" demanded Durand.

The Carib pointed without speaking to the door at the rear of the warehouse.

"There goes your magic." Durand turned on the chief. "Go get him! Quick!"

The chief snapped an order and his four fighting men went out through the door at the rear on the run.

They were back in a very few minutes and with them came the angry, breathless Groder. The Dutchman's bloated face was an amazing red and the perspiration slid down his heavy jowls in a stream.

"You want I should call the police!" he stormed. "Why do you do this?"

"For the same reason you took to your heels," Durand promptly silenced him. "I told you I was going to find Lui Wang and here he is."

"Sure, that is good. But what——"

"Never mind that. I was able to bring him back only because you didn't figure the chief, here, was quite such a rotten shot. He needs a lot of practice but he's all out of magic for his gun, Groder, and you're going to supply it for him—if you can."

"What foolishness——"

"Yes, white man's magic, you know. You told him that and now you can show him how it's done. Take him!"—Durand turned to the chief—"up-river and keep him there until he makes good magic for you. Make him show you how it's done then you'll be as smart as the *jumbe* man."

"He make good magic for gun?"

"Sure, he made the other, didn't he? Well, make him do it again. Hurry up, now, before he makes too much noise."

"You damn fool!" Groder yelled. "Stop it! You can't——"

But the chief had spoken and the four big blacks had him out and down to the river before he could gain sufficient breath to shout his protest. Durand, old Wang, and the Carib watched them dump him into the dugout and a minute later they were headed back up the river.

"The devil now goes to live with devils," declared old Wang. "You have the wisdom of the ancients, Durand. But I wonder if he will profit while there as I did?"

"Profit? What do you mean?"

"In this way," Wang replied, and working a moment at the seam of his tattered jacket he brought out a bright, yellow nugget. A little farther along the seam he dug out another and still another.

Durand watched him, fascinated, and finally shook his head. "Groder had it wrong. He should have said that wherever there is a Chinaman you're sure to find gold."

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"It's a lie! I'm no spy; I'm an American citizen!"

night. He had selected his camp site carefully, deep in a barranco. After dark he stake-tied his pony and built a tiny fire, over which he cooked his last can of tomatoes. Later he extinguished the fire and threw himself down to sleep. Apparently some keen-scented Mexican, far to the windward, picked up the odor of smoke or had seen it rising wisplike against the star-strewn sky.

TN-6

FIGURES leaped suddenly out of the darkness, many black figures, sliding down the banks of the barranco, landing upon Dirk O'Day, pinning him to the ground. He struggled violently, desperately. His six feet of sinew writhed and twisted. He threw men from him, half rose. They were on him again; they bore him down by sheer weight of numbers, twisted his arms behind his

back and tied them viciously, thonged his ankles with rawhide lariats.

Resinous creosote was heaped high on the floor of the barranco and a match touched to it. Its orange light revealed his captors, at least twenty tatterdemalion soldiers in makeshift uniforms. One man, huge, beetle-browed, with black mustachios curling from his thin lips, leaned close.

"A gringo," he announced to his companions.

A black-faced little fellow caught the glint of firelight on Dirk O'Day's fine Spanish silver spurs. Cupidity creased his face. He leaned closer and studied the American's features. "Don Rafael!" he called. "This gringo is a spy for the insurrectos. I saw him before. He was with the insurrectos at the raid of the Hacienda del Rosa."

"Ah!" gloated the commander, readily accepting the lie. "A spy!"

Dirk O'Day's border knowledge of Mexican was sufficient to understand the conversation. He struggled with his bonds, sat up. "It's a lie! I'm no spy. I'm an American citizen who only crossed the border this morning."

"Bah!" spat the commander. "Gringo! *Bribon!* We have a way to treat spies in Mexico." Already his greedy hands were feeling over the body of the helpless Texan. They claimed the wallet in Dirk O'Day's breast pocket, jerked his two automatics from their holsters. The slight, dark man was already untaping the silver spurs from his Spanish boots. On second thought he pulled off the boots themselves.

"Shall we hang him here?" the little fellow demanded, and Dirk O'Day was dismayed by the eagerness in his voice.

The commander hesitated a moment. "But no!" he said. "We will march him back to the camp. Our comrades will enjoy watching the gringo's long legs dancing the traitor's hornpipe. They will be droll, so droll, dancing from the end of a rope!"

Dirk O'Day was forced to his feet. The thongs were removed from his ankles, but tightened again on his arms so that they cut deeply. The commander prodded him with the tip of his sword. "March!" he ordered.

Dirk O'Day whirled, attempted to resist. The sword prodded him again. A lariat was dropped over his neck, the other end fastened to the pommel of the commander's saddle. The leader mounted and nudged his horse forward.

Through the night moved the strange cavalcade. In the midst of it was dragged Dirk O'Day, his bootless feet torn and lacerated by stones and cactus, the thong on his neck choking him. He was as helpless as a steer being led to slaughter.

THE MOON had risen, casting its sulphurous light over the desert. The cavalcade moved more slowly. Dirk O'Day, barely able to keep his feet, sensed that his captors were advancing as quietly as possible, always with more caution. Occasionally they stopped for momentary consultations. His buzzing ears caught snatches of conversation: "Beware! El Lobo is near— It is the kind of night El Lobo is out— Careful."

At each mention of the words, "El Lobo," Dirk O'Day felt the furtive fear of his captors, saw them huddle closer together. Dumbly he wondered about this "El Lobo," this wolf whom these men feared so tremendously.

The cavalcade passed through a narrow defile between two ridges which rose like the teeth of some great giant. The federalists sensed peril and barely moved forward. A cry sounded in the darkness—"Viva El Lobo!"—followed instantly by orange streaks of fire and that peculiar *phwatt* of bullets striking flesh. A horse fell, wallowed and rolled. A man cried out in shrill agony.

"El Lobo!" bellowed the commander. "*Misericordia!*"

He wheeled his horse, jabbed his spurs. The thong around the neck of Dirk O'Day jerked tight. He was lifted from his feet, hurled through the air like a diver. He struck the ground again, was dragged. With his last ray of consciousness he realized that this was probably the end.

The commander, realizing that the drag on the lariat was delaying his flight, cut the thong and Dirk O'Day was left on the desert floor between two bunches of creosote. His face, turned toward the greenish-yellow disk of the moon, was a mask of death. Around him sounded the rasping of horses' hoofs in sand, gradually receding as the federalists fled. Another fusillade of shots from the defile and out swarmed a second band of soldiers—the bandits of El Lobo.

A flashlight glared full on the face of Dirk O'Day. His eyes flickered open, shut again instantly. The light was circled aside.

"El Lobo!" came the call. "We have found a ghost—an American ghost!"

A slight figure moved forward in the moonlight. Watching it, Dirk O'Day could half see, half imagine El Lobo. He would be a dark, sanguine Mexican with cruel eyes, thin lips, sharp features. Once again the flashlight played over the figure of the Texan.

"A ghost!" called El Lobo and chuckled. "A fine ghost! A ghost six feet long with red hair!"

By force of will Dirk O'Day strove to rise, but hands on his shoulders restrained him.

"You are an American?"

"Si," grunted Dirk O'Day. "I'm a damn good American."

"But not too good for the federalist army, maybe?"

"That gang captured me. I was just crossing over from Texas and——"

"The same story all gringos tell," scoffed El Lobo. "You were with the federalists. You pretend to be a cap-

tive and put a rope around your neck—a single rope. Your story is very poor, American, and your acting is worse."

"Shall we shoot the dog?" a man called.

El Lobo studied the captive. "No, Ramon," came the slow order. "He is not worth the bullet. We will only tie his own rope around his feet and leave him here. If the federalists want him they can come back and get their 'captive.' That's fair enough, is it not, American?"

Dirk O'Day swore, attempted to wrench his arms free. It was hopeless. He heard the men move to their horses, the creak of leather, the rasp of hoofs gradually fading into the night.

"A hell of a way to die," muttered the Texan through dry lips. "A hell of a way!"

SUDDENLY a dark shadow crossed his face and he looked up. El Lobo was standing over him—a clear, slender silhouette against the moon. Vaguely it reminded Dirk O'Day of the silhouette he had seen against the sky, high on the butte that afternoon. El Lobo hesitated a moment, then stooped over the tight thongs.

"I save your life, American," El Lobo said, low-voiced. "For the second time I spare you. You are too big and strong to die like this. Besides, you aren't a federalist, of course, and your face was so funny this afternoon when the water from your canteen showered over it."

Dirk O'Day blinked, too surprised to note that the Mexican was speaking good English. He was startled by the feminine quality of the voice. The fellow apparently had a heart after all. "Thanks," he said simply. "You're a hell of a good guy."

El Lobo leaned farther forward to untie the thongs at his feet. The broad sombrero which had shadowed the face tilted, fell to the ground. For the first

time Dirk O'Day saw the features of El Lobo, the wolf of the night, the bandit who struck terror to the hearts of the federalists.

"Lord!" he muttered shakily. "A woman! A girl!"

There could be no doubt of it. The bright moonlight revealed the features clearly: A finely modeled nose, slightly retroussé, broad white brow and straight eyebrows, under which large eyes glowed luminously, full lips curved in a smile of amusement. Closely bobbed black hair clung in tendrils over the forehead.

The girl grasped the sombrero quickly and thrust it over her head, but the Texan had found his voice again.

"I sure beg your pardon, miss, for speaking the way I did," he apologized lamely. "I thought you were a man."

The girl laughed, low-voiced. "Ah, it surprises you, Señor Redhead, to know that fierce El Lobo is a woman, eh? A soldier. There are many soldiers—girls who fight for liberty and reform—in Mexico to-day. Adios, señor! I advise you to go back to your Texas and keep away from the near town of Buena Vista. Bullets will fly fast there, Señor Redhead, and you are such a big target really——"

"Say," began the American, sitting up and rubbing his sore wrists and ankles, "say, cut out that phony name! And I'm not afraid of any——"

He stopped suddenly. El Lobo had left. Silently, mysteriously, the shadows of the desert had claimed her. Dirk O'Day, alone on the moon-bathed desert, fancied he heard low laughter sound back, and that obnoxious name: "Señor Redhead."

Dirk O'Day started to rise and found an oval can beside him—a canteen of water! The girl had meant it when she had said she would save his life. Beside the canteen lay a gun and a belt of shells. He grabbed the weapon, examined it in the moonlight. It was an automatic—

apparently one of the two which he ordinarily carried, now recaptured from the federalists.

The puffy, cracked lips of Dirk O'Day grinned. He raised the canteen to his lips. "Here's to you, El Lobo," he grunted. "You're a brick!"

The next hour he spent in removing cactus spines and binding his feet with pieces of his shirt, swathing them thickly until he could endure standing upon them. Gradually strength flowed back through his arms and legs. He rose to his feet, gun in hand and stood there, a tall, lone figure on the desert. For a long moment he hesitated. In back of him lay Texas. In front of him was the unknown town of Buena Vista—the town of which El Lobo had spoken, where "bullets would fly fast."

Dirk O'Day turned his face toward Texas, took a step or two, then stopped. Slowly he wheeled.

"You're a plain damn fool, Dirk O'Day," he told himself, "but that girl saved your life. Maybe you can help her." He saw her, in fancy, silhouetted slenderly against the moon, remembered her low laughter. "Yep, a damn fool," he repeated, "but El Lobo, here I come!"

AT DAWN Dirk O'Day, late of Texas, stopped at the top of a low adobe hill whose red clay was deeply etched by innumerable fresh hoofprints. In the east the sun was rising, a red ball striving to penetrate the ground fog. In front of him lay the little Mexican town of Buena Vista.

The buildings of the place were small, squalid, huddled together. Apparently the tiny stream which meandered through the center of the settlement was its only excuse for existence. Suddenly, to the Texan's ears came the sound of rapid crackling and then the metallic clank as if a tin can were being pounded. His eyes brightened with excitement.

"Machine guns, eh?" he muttered. "The fight that El Lobo told me about!"

Dirk O'Day, if you had any sense at all you'd sneak out of here pronto, but man, you haven't any sense—and besides, El Lobo might need one more good marksman."

Rifle fire rose and subsided in waves as he entered the scattering of mushroomlike hovels with adobe walls and and wooden shutters across the windows. thatched roofs, deserted, doors closed. A lone man lay in an angle of a hut. Dirk O'Day stopped only long enough to claim the poor fellow's boots and sombrero.

Motion caught his eye. A band of ragged soldiers was dodging among the hovels. The leader saw the American and advanced, rifle poised.

"*Insurrecto o federalista?*" he demanded.

"Insurrecto," Dirk O'Day answered quickly, gambling that he was right. "*Viva El Lobo!*"

"Ah, El Lobo!" the man panted. "*Misericordia!* The poor, brave wolf has been captured by the federalists. She is now being put before the wall of La Cuidadela and shot. It is too late. We must flee or we all will be shot like dogs." Suiting his actions to his words, the revolutionist took to flight, followed by his panic-stricken soldiers.

For a moment Dirk O'Day pondered the situation. Obviously El Lobo and her little band had been defeated, El Lobo herself captured. What could he, an American citizen, do in such a situation?

"Unless those federalists who captured me last night are in the gang," he told himself, "I ought to be fairly safe. I'll go down and cheer for the federalists and they probably won't set me against the wall beside little El Lobo."

He pushed into the revolution-rocked town. The plaza was situated at the very center of the settlement, a breathing space amid the dilapidated buildings, where a few palm trees rattled their drying fronds, and a rusty foun-



These people, brought up with guns, should appreciate such marksmanship!

tain-tilted perilously. On three sides of the public square were shops, heavily shuttered; on the fourth was La Cuidadela, an ornate, turreted structure of white stone surrounded by a high wall.

It was here the mob had gathered. Dirk O'Day, as he approached, saw the cluster of officials, the gleam of gold braid, the flash of carbines, all surrounded by a shouting crowd. In the center of that mob he saw the pale, desperate face of El Lobo. While he strode forward an official jerked the girl's sombrero from her head and her mass of curly hair showed, gleaming black in the sunlight.

The sight brought a roar of approval from the mob. "Let us see how the wolf meets death!" they shouted. "Place her against the wall!"

THE CROWD, intent on the execution of El Lobo, paid little attention to Dirk O'Day. He reached the center of the milling crowd and was among the officials who were pushing El Lobo toward the wall of the citadel. The girl's head was back regally, her slender figure straight as a major's and she gazed at her captors with contempt. Her face was white as marble, but there was no sign of fear upon it.

"Hands off, dogs!" she called once, in her low, imperious voice. "I'll march to the wall alone!" But officious federalists jostled her, gloated over her helplessness.

Dirk O'Day's mind raced. He must do something to delay the execution, forestall it. Create a diversion! On the littered ground of the disreputable plaza were many tin cans. The Texan quickly grabbed one. He shouted at the top of his voice, a stentorian bellow.

The mob turned and faced him with startled wonder. He threw the tin can high in the air and the muzzle of his automatic followed its flight. The automatic spit a sharp fusillade and the can bounced in the air as each succeeding

bullet hit it. For the full nine shots the Texan kept the can jumping in mid-air—a plainsman's trick, the acme of expert shooting.

For a moment after the exhibition there was utter silence, then a roar of approval. The lean brown face of Dirk O'Day split in a wide grin. These people, brought up with guns, appreciated such marksmanship. He nodded, picked up another can and repeated the exhibition. More cheers sounded and even the officials who were marching El Lobo toward the wall became interested. They stopped, watched the bouncing can in mid-air.

Dirk O'Day pointed to the top of one of the nearest shops where projected a weather vane in the form of a steel rooster. His automatic flashed up, spit a single bullet. There was a sharp tang of steel on steel and the rooster revolved furiously.

"Bravo! Bravo!" the crowd roared.

Dirk O'Day stacked five of the tin cans, one atop another and backed away a dozen paces. "I'll shoot out the bottom can," he called, "and pick off the others as they fall."

"*Como?*" came the question from the officials. Some one translated the little speech. The officials pushed closer, the crowd gathered in a semicircle behind the Texan. Five shots barked almost as one and the tin cans bounded away, each one ripped wide open.

"*Prodigioso!*" cried the officials.

The Texan turned toward them. In broken Mexican he asked for an interpreter. One was pushed forward.

"I heard in Texas of the great federalists," O'Day lied fluently. "I came to offer you my services, thinking perhaps you might make me a general in your army." He grinned with every appearance of sincerity.

General Chico, in command of the federalists, nodded vehemently. "You will be captain of my personal body-guard!" he announced.

The crowd, only momentarily diverted by the exhibition of marksmanship, was clamoring again for the execution of El Lobo. Dirk O'Day grabbed the interpreter by the arm.

"Tell the General that I perform executions in a most funny way," he said. "It will amuse him, the way I kill with bullets. He'll laugh. The people will enjoy it. It'll be the funniest thing General Chico has ever seen. Tell him pronto!"

The interpreter translated. General Chico frowned, shook his head. Executions were formal affairs in Mexico; they had to be done according to certain rites and ceremonies. El Lobo would stand against the wall; facing her would be a file of six soldiers. She would raise her hat from her head and shout "*Viva Mexico!*" The squad would fire. If the bullets hit her in the heart she would slump forward; if they hit her in the head or chest she would fall backward. Yes, that was the way of it. No mere American should interfere with such procedure.

"Tell him it's a new trick I've learned," pleaded Dirk O'Day. "Tell him the people of Mexico City, even the governor, think it's a knockout! After it, the people will cheer for General Chico, who arranged it."

Again the translator rendered the speech to Chico. The general hesitated; he turned to the mob and raised his voice. "The American promises us great amusement if we will let him execute El Lobo," he called. "He says it will be the funniest sight ever seen in Buena Vista."

Dirk O'Day nodded, bowed low. "It'll be a great sight," he promised.

The mob howled its approval. General Chico rubbed his fat hands together, smirked and grimaced. "Place her against the wall!" he ordered. "Pronto!"

The girl known as El Lobo had been watching Dirk O'Day, her black eyes flashing, her lips curled superciliously.

This, then, was gratitude! She glared at Dirk O'Day, but his face didn't change. She turned toward the wall.

"Come," she called. "I am ready."

EL LOBO stood stiffly against the stone wall of La Cuidadela, a white wall which was no whiter than the face of the girl. To be executed by that tall handsome American she had saved—that was irony. Ah, well, at least he would make quick work of it.

Dirk O'Day cleaned the automatic, tested its trigger, fighting for time. He threw himself to the ground, braced himself on his elbows. The crowd was breathless with anticipation. Here would be an execution about which they could tell their children and grandchildren—how an American sharpshooter had slowly picked to pieces the girl known as El Lobo.

The girl stood erect, her head back, her eyes shut. "*Viva Mexico!*" she called and raised her sombrero to greet death.

A single sharp, hysterical sob sounded from one of the soldiers, followed by a whispering as of dry leaves from the spectators. The finger of Dirk O'Day tightened on the trigger. Nine times his gun barked. On the tail of the fusillade, cries rose from the mob—disappointment and surprise. El Lobo still stood against the wall and the wall was not stained with blood.

Soldiers started forward, but Dirk O'Day waved them back. Again he loaded his automatic, steadied his hand and fired. A third, fourth and fifth time he repeated the fusillade. General Chico and his soldiers were too surprised to protest. All the time El Lobo stood against the wall, aloof, proud. Only she knew what was happening.

The long, brown Texan rose from the ground and moved forward, a pleased quirk to his wide mouth, an expression of satisfaction on his face. Beside El Lobo he stopped, faced General

Chico and bowed. He turned and took the white, proud girl gently by the shoulders and moved her a few feet closer to the gate of La Ciudadela. Once more he bowed to General Chico and the mob.

A shout tore the air, a great cheer led by Chico himself, for there on the white stone wall was a perfect silhouette of that proud bandit, El Lobo, a silhouette outlined by the bullets of Dirk O'Day. Straight legs, slender waist, wide sombrero—all were there.

"Bravo, bravo!" The cries rose to a roaring crescendo. This was indeed something to tell one's *minos* about, yes, and one's grandchildren—a tall, slow-speaking American who could draw the outline of a person with bullets and not injure the person, a sharpshooter who could keep tin cans bounding in the air, who played his gun as divinely as a prima donna sang or the greatest toreador of history played with death.

The shouts of acclaim ebbed; they rose again. Out of the castle piled the few remaining guards, too childishly curious to miss such an occasion. Their voices joined in the demand for another exhibition: "*Otra! Otra!*" Again! Again!

Under cover of the cheering, Dirk O'Day spoke rapidly, urgently, to the girl through set lips, his eyes fixed on the automatic he was reloading.

"Watch yourself, but listen! I've moved you close to the castle gate. Most of the guards—out here watching—"

He was interrupted by General Chico, who had come forward, the interpreter at his side. The latter spoke. "The General desires another exhibition," he purred. "The soldiers also demand it. It must be done quickly. And this time, señor, it must end in the glorious death of El Lobo. The General so orders it."

"Sure," Dirk O'Day agreed. "Just as you say. This will be the finest exhibition of all."

He picked a chip of the white stone from the ground and with it began to

draw a tiny heart on the jacket of El Lobo. Apparently it was difficult to make the stone leave its mark, for he progressed very slowly. General Chico sensed the idea. He smirked and bowed, then turned back to his soldiers. The lips of Dirk O'Day were close to the face of the girl; her eyes watched him, but her face showed none of the hope which surged within her.

"I'll whirl to walk away," he whispered. "At that second you leap—through the gate. I'll follow. We'll lock the gates—if we're lucky. Then—Heaven help us! At least—inside—best position. Understand?"

The girl flickered her eyelashes in response. Heaven, what a superb actress she was!

"All right! I'll keep—gun on Chico. Ready? One, two—"

WITH A SUDDEN ROAR, Dirk O'Day whirled. His automatic singled out General Chico. "One move and I'll bore you!"

Behind him the girl moved with the swiftness of a frightened rabbit. She reached the gate. Dirk O'Day turned and raced after her. General Chico and his soldiers recovered from their surprise. Oaths roared out, staccato orders; rifles emptied with a wild clatter; a few of the braver soldiers raced forward.

Dirk O'Day swung the heavy iron gates shut, barred them while poorly aimed bullets sang around him. Through the iron grille he trained his automatic on the nearest pursuers. As the gun barked the soldiers dodged, retreated precipitately, terrified by that artist among marksmen. The American fired two final shots; they bored the crown of General Chico's sombrero and that dignity dropped very suddenly to the ground and crawled away.

The drawl of Dirk O'Day sounded, loud and clear. "The first nine men to charge will be shot through the heart!

Tell them that, interpreter! From behind the wall I'll shoot them down!"

With the words, Dirk O'Day ducked behind the wall, where the girl was waiting. "Quick!" she called. "The stables in back! And there's a rear gate!"

Side by side the two raced around the old Ciudadela, across the ill-kept patio. Two prisoners were working among the horses, a single soldier guarding them. At sight of El Lobo and the tall red-haired Texan charging him, the soldier fired wildly, then fled around the corner of the stables. Inside Dirk O'Day with quick but expert judgment selected two horses. He threw himself on the bare back of one, while El Lobo mounted the other.

"Open the gate!" barked El Lobo to the prisoners and Dirk O'Day emphasized the order with the black bore of his automatic.

A clang of iron and the gates swung wide. Through them clattered the two horses. Behind sounded the roars of soldiers, a wild fusillade of shots.

"They'll never catch us now!" caroled El Lobo, a joyous lilt in her voice. "By the time they saddle and take our trail we'll be too far away!"

At dusk two sweating, froth-covered horses were pulled up at a faint trail which ran north and south through the creosote of the desert.

"That way," said El Lobo, pointing to the north, "lies your country, American. Good-by." She held out her slender white hand.

Dirk O'Day crushed it in his huge one until the girl pulled herself free.

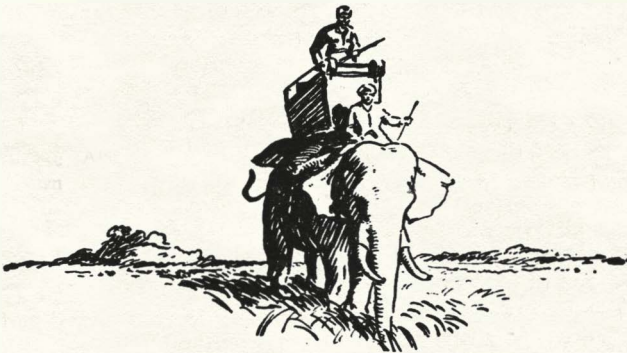
"Adios, señor! You are the bravest man who ever lived and I'll always love you." Her eyes were glistening, her little hand rose to her eyes as if she were brushing away cobwebs. Suddenly she wheeled her horse and rode southward. "Adios!"

Dirk O'Day stared after her, watched her little khaki-clad figure mount a hill. There she remained silhouetted against the sky—the slender, fine silhouette he had seen first against the sun and again against the moon far out on the desert—the slender, trim silhouette he had cut with bullets in the wall of the citadel.

The tall Texan muttered to himself. Northward lay the great American ranches, the comparative safety and ease of American life. Southward was Mexico, torn and bloody in its struggles, teeming with excitement and rare adventure. Southward was El Lobo and all she represented of youth and beauty and daring.

He wheeled.

"El Lobo, here I come!" he shouted and raced his horse southward.



The CASKET of

IT WAS against Bill Murray's creed to ignore a distress signal. He glanced reproachfully down at Partridge and waved a muscular arm toward the dinghy which rode to a sea anchor a cable's length away.

"It'd be plain murder to pass them up in this sea, old-timer," he argued.

The old skipper shrugged. "That's what I'm blooming well going to do, Yank," he drawled. "I got no use for chinks, anyway. If they're as bad off as they're pretending to be, let them make for Kooringa yonder."

"They'd be no better off there." Murray argued, fixing his blue eyes on the little bunch of greenery that rose above the sea rim ahead. "There's no water on Kooringa, and you know it. Hell! Let's take the poor devils aboard. There's only the two of them."

"Trouble with you, Yank," the skipper said, "is that you're too blooming soft-hearted. You ought to join the Bush Brotherhood and be saving poor sinners' souls, instead of wasting your life as mate of a pearling lugger. Well, I might as well let you have your way, because if I don't, you'll be bullyragging me the rest of the trip."

He turned and gave a curt order to the bushy-headed Trobriand boy at the wheel. The lugger came into the wind, fell off on the other tack and bore up toward the wallowing dinghy.

Murray's red, good-natured face widened in a grin as he watched the Chinamen hurriedly haul in the bundle of oars which they had been using for a sea anchor. Rowing in lubberly fashion, they came to meet the pearler. When their boat came alongside they sprang to the deck of the lugger, letting their craft go adrift. One of them, a bland-

facéd youth, faced aft and bowed deeply.

"Many thanks!" he droned. "Pretty soon boat go along bottom side."

"What name are you China boys slopping around out here?" Partridge inquired.

"Me Sing Foo—this fellow Soy Wong," the young Chinese introduced himself and his companion. "Plenty Chinese boys come from Broome, go China side along schooner. Schooner go along bottom side." He paused.

"And so, all the other fellows got drowned, eh?" the skipper prompted.

The Chinaman pointed toward the atoll. "Go on land. No savvy name belonging to this place. Six white fellow him stop. Plenty sick. No water. Very bad place. Me and this fellow"—he indicated his companion—"get boat, go look for ship."

"Well, now"—Partridge beamed approvingly—"that was a mighty spunky thing to do, me lad. What was the name of this schooner?"

"No savvy. Him stop along Broome side."

"Well," the skipper said, "if she comes from Broome she's bound to be one of my crowd." He turned to Murray. "Reckon it's up to us to take those blokes off, Yank."

"Sure," the other added. "We can run back to Darwin and unload them. It'll only lose us a couple of days."

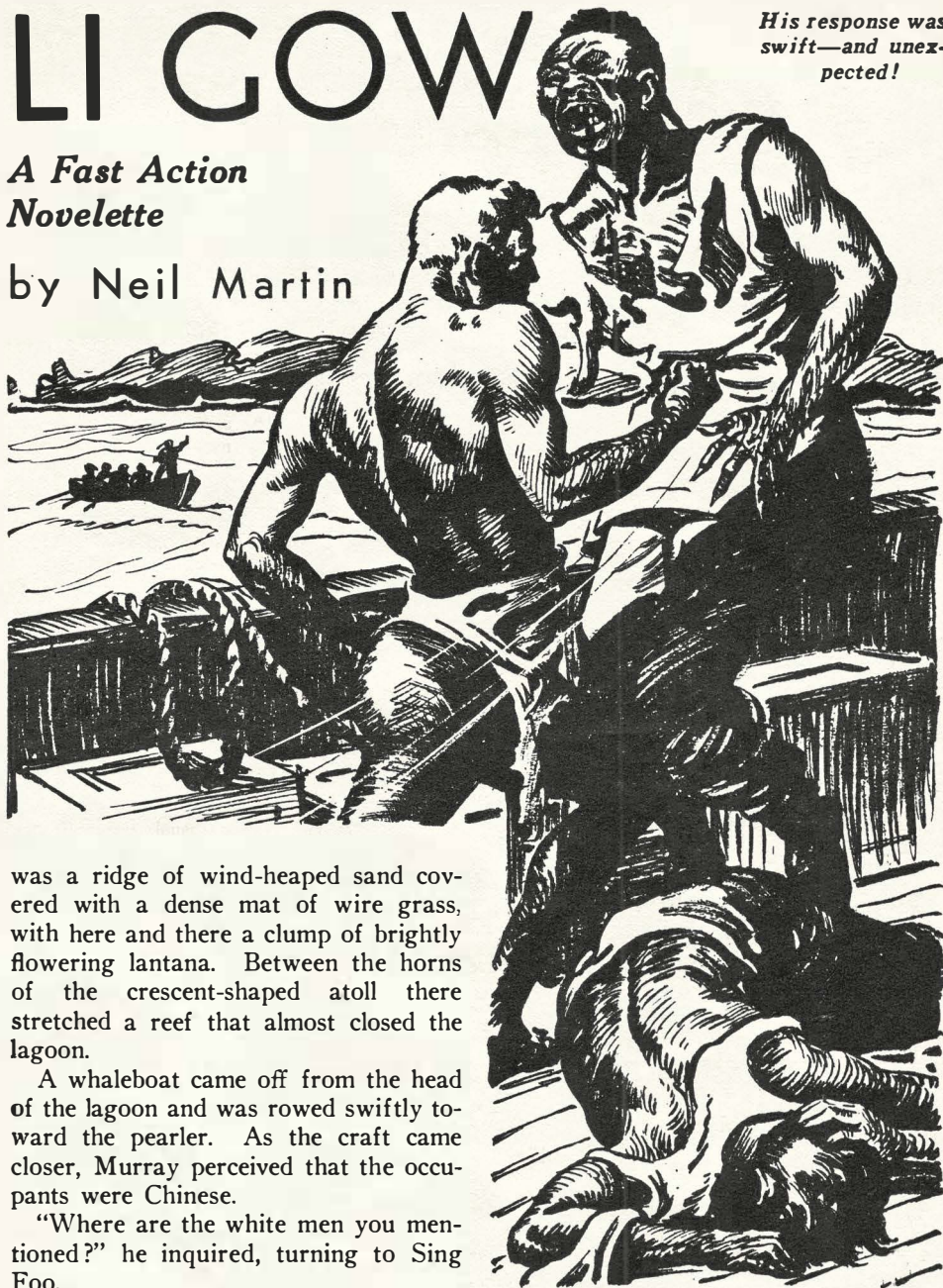
MURRAY stared shoreward. Kooringa was a mere girdle of coral set on the eastern edge of the vast Indian Ocean, surrounding a blue lagoon that was bordered by a scattering of nut palms and mop-headed pandanus. Along the middle of the semicircular island

LI GOW

*A Fast Action
Novelette*

by Neil Martin

*His response was
swift—and unex-
pected!*



was a ridge of wind-heaped sand covered with a dense mat of wire grass, with here and there a clump of brightly flowering lantana. Between the horns of the crescent-shaped atoll there stretched a reef that almost closed the lagoon.

A whaleboat came off from the head of the lagoon and was rowed swiftly toward the pearler. As the craft came closer, Murray perceived that the occupants were Chinese.

"Where are the white men you mentioned?" he inquired, turning to Sing Foo.

The latter smiled blandly. "I told a lie. No white fellows stopped along the schooner."

"Why did you tell a lie?" Murray frowned.

"I supposed if I told a lie about

white fellows, you would come along this place pretty quick," Sing Foo explained. "If I tell the truth, you say to hell with Chinese boys. I know."

Murray laughed at the other's naïve

excuse. At the same time he realized the correctness of the Chinaman's reasoning. If Partridge had been told at the first that only Chinese were cast away on the atoll, he would have gone on, reported the matter to the authorities and considered his conscience clear. In the meantime, the castaways might have perished from thirst.

"I ain't got any use for blasted liars, white or chink!" the old skipper growled. "I didn't bargain to clutter my ship up with a gang of lousy coolies."

"Plenty good for you," Sing Foo said. "Number One fellow would like to talk pidgin with you. You'll get plenty of money."

Partridge shrugged, glowering at the boat, which had now come alongside. A Chinaman scrambled to the deck of the lugger and made the painter fast. The others followed, preceded by one who towered a head and shoulders above his companions. Murray stared in amazement at the man. The fellow was the largest Chinaman he had ever seen, for he was fully half a head taller than the American, and a good fifty pounds heavier.

The big Chinaman paused amidships and looked about him, his wide, yellow face impassive as a block of wood, only his shoe-button eyes betraying any interest in his surroundings. Coming aft, he glanced alternately from Partridge to Murray, then turned his head and spoke in a monotone to Sing Foo.

"He's Number One fellow—name Yat Gow," the latter said, addressing himself to Partridge. "He'd like to talk pidgin."

"All right, if he wants to talk business, let's hear about it."

"He had a brother named Li Gow die along Broome side. He want you to take Li Gow to China side for to put in the ground." He pointed across the lagoon in the direction of the reef. "Li Gow along bottom side now. Yat Gow

wants to get brother on top side. He'll pay one hundred pounds."

"That ain't so dusty," Murray grinned at the skipper. "A hundred quid—five hundred dollars in white man's money—is pretty good for an hour's work."

"I don't give a hang if he's willing to pay a thousand quid—or a million!" Partridge flared. "I won't have any blinking coffin aboard my ship. What do you think I'm running, anyway—a blooming hearse?"

"Forget it!" Murray snapped, angered at the other's foolish superstition. "That big chink wants to bury his brother in China, according to their custom. It'll be no trouble to bring it up. And it won't take more than a couple of days to run them back down to Darwin——"

"I don't give a damn!" The skipper cut him off. "I'd never have another hour's luck if I let that blasted chink coffin as much as land on my deck. If these blighters want a passage to Darwin, I'm willing to lose a couple of days to land them. But no coffin—that's flat."

Sing Foo, who had been listening attentively, reported the conversation to Yat Gow. The latter's response was swift and unexpected. Catching the little skipper about the waist, he lifted him above his head and heaved him over the rail into the lagoon. Then he turned and nodded coolly at Murray.

"You big bum!" the latter growled. Launching himself at Yat Gow, he sent him reeling against the rail with a smashing right to the face. He followed with a left jab to the Chinaman's midship section, then stooped, caught him about the knees and heaved him after the skipper.

Murray swung on his heel, then paused. A few feet away Sing Foo was standing, a pistol in his hand trained upon the white man's belt buckle. Beyond him, the other Chinamen were

grouped in a semicircle. They, too, had drawn pistols from beneath their loose blouses and were now training the weapons upon the lone white man.

II.

FOUR SPLASHES sounded over-side as the four Trobriand blacks comprising the lugger's crew fled toward the beach. Murray backed against the rail and counted the Chinamen. Seven with guns against one unarmed man. Besides, there was Yat Gow over the side, and he was easily as good as two more men.

"Well?" Murray glowered at Sing Foo. "What's coming next?"

"If you don't make trouble, everything will be all right." The Chinaman smiled. "You talk pidgin with Yat Gow, get a huddled quid. If you no talk pidgin, Yat Gow says you and the other fellow get to hell along the beach. No water—very bad place."

"I get you." Murray shrugged. "If I bring up that coffin and agree to carry it to Darwin, we get a hundred pound. If I refuse, I get set down on the beach. That it?"

"You savvy plenty." The Chinaman grinned.

Murray stepped to the rail and looked over the side. Yat Gow was holding to the gunwale of the whaleboat with his right hand. His left was gripping Partridge's skinny neck. Catching the American's eye, the big Chinaman ducked the skipper under for a minute, then let him come up for air.

"Tell this big blighter to let me be," Partridge spluttered. "Tell him we'll give him and his blasted coffin a passage."

Sing Foo interpreted. Grinning, Yat Gow released his prisoner, pointed imperatively toward the beach, then gave Partridge a shove that sent him a foot under the surface.

"What's that for?" Murray de-

manded, as Partridge swam across the lagoon to join his black crew on the beach. "Running the skipper ashore ain't in the contract."

"Yat Gow says it's better for white fellow to wait along beach with black boys," Sing Foo droned. "You get Li Gow topside, everybody come back along ship, and we'll go to Darwin. Savvy?"

Murray shrugged; Yat Gow had commanded. And that, apparently, settled everything. He sank to a seat on the edge of the cabin skylight and watched the big Chinaman scramble through the gangway and stand, dripping, beside the galley.

Murray was somewhat angry at Partridge. In refusing to carry a coffin on board the lugger, the old man was making a mountain out of a mole hill.

Still, he was conscious of a growing feeling of uneasiness as his eyes rested upon Yat Gow, who stood beside the hatch, surrounded by his compatriots. They reminded him of a group of apostle birds, the way they stood there, with their heads together in a low-toned conversation. It began to draw upon Murray that there was something furtive in the slant-eyed glances that came his way.

He tried to convince himself that everything was all right. Hadn't Yat Gow given his promise to pay one hundred pounds for the recovery of his brother's body? And no Chinaman would dare back out of a contract once made, for fear of losing face with his ancestors.

Of course, he admitted reluctantly, there were crooked Chinamen, too, fellows who, apparently, didn't care a hoot, one way or another, about their ancestors. It might be that Yat Gow was one of the latter type. If that were so, Murray reasoned, he would, in attempting to salvage the coffin, be placing himself entirely at the mercy of the big Chinaman and his followers.

On the other hand, he himself had agreed to salvage the casket. He couldn't back out now. Sing Foo had intimated very plainly what would happen in the event of his refusal. He didn't believe that the Chinamen would shoot them all. But the result would be the same. If they set him ashore and cleared out in the lugger, he and his mates would die of thirst on this waterless atoll, for no one ever came to Kooringa.

SING FOO detached himself from the group and came aft. Halting before Murray, he asked: "You go bottom side pretty quick? Yat Gow wants to get his blother while it is still daylight."

"All right." Murray rose from his seat and turned to pass through the companionway. "Come below and help me get the gear on deck."

"No—you wait!" the Chinaman commanded, evidently unwilling that Murray should enter the cabin unguarded. "I'll get another fellow to help."

He called two of his confederates aft, and they followed Murray below. Sing Foo stood, pistol in hand, at the foot of the companionway and watched as Murray and the two Chinamen overhauled some diving gear. Presently the white man assembled the parts of a self-contained rig and ordered the others to carry it on deck.

As the Chinamen passed from the cabin, Sing Foo pointed toward an air pump that stood in one corner of the little compartment.

"Do you want the Chinese boy to come back for the pump?" he asked.

Murray shook his head. "No, I won't need a pump this trip. Besides, I ain't any too sure you chinks could tend hose and line for me. So I'm taking this rig—it's a chemical outfit."

"Chem— No savvy?" Sing Foo stared at Murray, apparently at a loss

for words. "How do you live along bottom side without a pump?"

"This rig makes its own air," Murray explained, adding mendaciously, "it's only good for about half an hour or so. But it won't take longer than that to sling the dear departed topside."

"Oh, yes—yes. I savvy now. Very good!" Sing Foo beamed; but there was a calculating gleam in his sloe-black eyes that Murray didn't like. Sing Foo followed the white man forward, where the other two Chinamen had laid the diving outfit on the hatch.

"Where's the wreck?" Murray inquired.

"Along that side." Sing Foo pointed toward the reef. "We go in boat."

Murray selected a coil of three-quarter-inch manila with a weighted end. This he planned to use as a descending line. He tossed it into the whaleboat, adding a coil of heaving line which he explained was to be used in raising the coffin. He ordered his copper helmet and weighted belt stowed in the stern, after which he slipped into the rubber suit and buckled the leaden-soled shoes on his feet. Then he assumed the tank pack, buckled the straps securely, and announced himself ready.

Sing Foo and three of the Chinamen helped him into the boat. As the yellow men took their places at the oars, Murray glanced up at the others on the deck of the lugger. Yat Gow held up a package of bank notes, riffled them with his left thumb and grinned. But there was something about that grin which made Murray curse under his breath.

As the boat was shoved off and rowed toward the reef, he congratulated himself upon the suspicion that had caused him to select the self-contained outfit, instead of trusting himself below in the old-fashioned pump-and-hose rig. To use this latter gear would only be putting himself at the mercy of the Chinamen.

Once the coffin was topside, a knife

drawn across the air hose would put him on a dead end—to perish miserably. With the self-contained rig he would have a fighting chance, in case the Chinamen were contemplating treachery. Equipped with a tank containing compressed oxygen, with a cylinder of caustic soda by means of which the breathed air was constantly regenerated, it was a handy rig, allowing for an average depth of thirty fathoms, and leaving him entirely unrestricted in his movements.

"The schooner stopped along here," Sing Foo announced presently.

Murray thrust a bucket with a glass bottom partly under the surface, covered his head and shoulders with a square of tarpaulin and peered downward through the water glass. Far below he caught a glimpse of the vessel's top-hamper. Laying the water glass aside, he ran out the descending line, watching the markers as it passed through his hands. The twenty-fathom marker was still above the surface when he felt the weighted end strike bottom.

Sing Foo and another placed the helmet over his head. After the young Chinese had screwed in the face plate, Murray gripped the respirator mouth-piece firmly between his teeth, adjusted his air flow and eased his body over the stern.

III.

HE SLID down the descending line and landed with a soft jar in the waist of the wreck. Looking about him in the green twilight, he perceived that the schooner lay broadside to the reef, which rose to starboard like the slope of a steep hill. The sails were set, the pressure of the current in her canvas making it appear as if the vessel were sailing close-hauled. Evidently, whoever commanded had been taken unawares.

The schooner had been smashed down on the reef by one sea, which had stove

in her bilge. A following comber had lifted her clear over the barrier into the lagoon, where she had sank like a stone. There was one detail missing, he thought, as he glanced over the deck. There was a certain neatness about the schooner that was anything but Chinese. The running gear was coiled neatly on the pins, and the deck showed the results of frequent holystoning. Yat Gow and his followers were not sailors. They were in no way responsible for the vessel's tidy appearance. Who, then, were the schooner's crew—and what had happened to them?

He glanced over the rail, peering downward at the rent in the vessel's starboard bilge. A number of bulging sacks had spilled from the opening and now lay on the bottom of the lagoon. Others were strewn over the slope of the reef, lying as they had fallen out of the sinking schooner. There was a familiar look about these bags that suggested an investigation of their contents. Of course, he admitted, they might contain copra, which would now be ruined by the salt water.

He lowered himself over the side above the rent and ran a tentative hand over the uneven surface of the nearest sack. It felt hard and unyielding to his touch. Drawing his knife, he split the bagging with a slash, his pulses racing when he saw that it was filled with huge shells, the smooth side of which glimmered in the green gloom with a soft iridescence.

Peering through the opening, he saw more bags, hundreds of them. He climbed back on deck, snatched an ax from its becket beside the galley door and knocked the batten wedges from the hatch. When he lifted off a hatch cover he saw that the bags rose clear to the coamings. He slashed open another, to assure himself that its contents were similar to those of the first bag he had examined. They were exactly the same.

His hand trembled as he drew one

of the huge shells from the bag and examined it minutely. Here, he told himself, was a case of finders being keepers. He had stumbled on to a fortune. Here was a schooner loaded to the hatch coamings with prime gold-lip shell that was worth all of a thousand dollars a ton on the dock in Singapore.

Involuntarily, he glanced toward the surface. Beside the shadow of the boat he saw a second shadow, which warned him that one of the Chinamen was watching him through the water glass. That reminded him of his predicament. Yet, he felt almost grateful to Yat Gow and his gang of highbinders.

Still a little dazed by the magnitude of his find, he lumbered aft. Crabs scuttled out of his path as he climbed to the short poop. Carrying the ax before him, he pushed through the companionway into the cabin, dislodging a school of tiny tazaar that flashed like a cloud of colored dragon flies toward the open skylight overhead.

SUDDENLY he drew back, thrusting with the ax at the nearest of a pair of huge, spotted moray that undulated upward from some object huddled on the deck. The huge eel clicked its needle-sharp teeth on the blade of the ax, then shot through the skylight after the school of tazaar. The other lunged at Murray and barged against him with the force of a battering ram. He struck wildly with his knife at the narrow, spotted head of the great eel, then tripped backward over something on the deck and went sprawling.

He landed on his tank pack, his helmet striking the edge of the cabin table with a force that made his eardrums rattle. Half stunned, he lay there for several seconds, his head buzzing, a red film wavering before his eyes. Instinctively, he lunged again with the ax, felt the tail of the moray smash against his chest as it went about and shot up through the skylight after its mate.

His vision cleared and he looked about him, relieved to find that the moray was gone. He feared the huge, spotted eel of the tropic seas even more than he feared shark. He groped about him for the knife which had fallen from his hand. His fingers came in contact with something, the feel of which sent a cold chill through his arm. Peering downward, he saw the body of a man lying underneath the cabin table.

His flesh crawled as he grasped an extended arm and dragged the body into the light. The face had been reduced, by the nibbling of the tazaar, to a formless blur, but the stocky frame and the stiff black hair of the scalp proclaimed the corpse to be that of a Japanese, whose hands and feet were firmly bound with a length of heaving line, and from whose chest there still protruded the haft of a knife.

Pushing the body back under the table, Murray began a search of the cabin. He jerked open the door of a stateroom, stepping quickly aside as a couple of bodies drifted past into the cabin. These, too, were Japanese. And their throats had been cut from ear to ear.

Almost dreading what he would discover next, he jerked open the door of a second stateroom. Here there were five more corpses, four of them Japanese, the fifth that of a Chinaman in whose forehead, squarely between the eyes, was a neat, round hole. Murray had always prided himself upon being rather hard boiled. But as he studied the knife wounds in the chests of the dead Japanese, he felt a cold perspiration breaking out all over his body.

"Lord!" he muttered, leaning against the doorframe. "This is enough to give a guy the creeps."

The identity of the schooner was now established in his mind. She was Japanese, one of those little craft that ply between Broome and Kobe, carrying pearl shell to the Japanese novelty fac-



He jerked, again and again, wildly. Then he knew!

tories. The Chinamen had taken passage on her from the west Australian port, and had butchered her skipper and crew—for what?

His eyes narrowed as they came to rest upon a sandalwood coffin lying in a bunk beyond the huddle of bodies. The casket, he decided, would furnish an answer to his question. Shouldering the corpse aside, he studied the coffin, which was fashioned from a single sandalwood log, its lid held down by plain brass screws. One of the screws was partly drawn, as if some one had attempted to open the box. In the bunk beside the coffin lay a large screw driver.

SNATCHING up the tool, Murray attacked the screws. These removed, he flung back the lid. The coffin contained no corpse, merely a collection of stones wedged in place with empty bags and old newspapers. Topping the pile were a pair of canvas sacks, each about the size of a child's football.

Here, at last, was the answer, Murray thought, as he carried the canvas bags into the cabin. His fingers trembled as he unfastened the cords with which the necks of the bags were secured. When they were open, he glanced at their contents. Pearls!

Upending one of the bags, he dribbled some of its contents into the cupped palm of his left hand. Pearls of varying shapes, sizes and colors were there. White pearls that shone with a silvery iridescence in the half light; pink pearls, glistening spheres and drops that glowed in ruddy contrast to their less colorful companions; black pearls, too, with the peculiar blue-black sheen so dear to the heart of the connoisseur. Even the little heap in the palm of his left hand represented a comfortable fortune. And there were two bags of such as these.

With the discovery of the gems, every detail of the tragedy stood out clearly in his mind. Sing Foo had admitted

that he and his compatriots had taken passage at Broome. This suggested to Murray that the pearls had been stolen from the stripping sheds of the pearling combine.

The Japanese skipper had suspected that the coffin contained something other than a corpse. Perhaps he had been a party to the steal, and had attempted to double-cross Yat Gow and his crowd.

The partly drawn screw, with the screw driver lying handy in the bunk, suggested that some one had made a furtive attempt to open the casket. Discovery of that attempt by some of the Chinamen had started a free-for-all, which had turned the schooner into a floating slaughterhouse. Having massacred the Japanese, the Chinamen had attempted to sail the schooner, doubtless intending to make for the China coast, and their clumsy handling had resulted in driving her to destruction on Kooringa Reef.

Few people ever concern themselves about the process of removing the pearl from its parent oyster. There are various ways of doing this, but the usual method is to let the oysters rot. The luggers of the regular pearling fleet bring the huge oysters into Broome, where they are spread on the tables in the stripping sheds and left to spit their pearls, after which the shell is cleaned of its smelly contents and packed in bags for shipment to the four quarters of the earth.

As no white man has yet been discovered who can stand the terrible atmosphere of the sheds, the work falls to Chinese, even the foremen being of that race. As a result, theft is easy, the master pearl-ers of Broome being robbed of thousands of pounds annually through the pilfering of pearls by their Chinese employees.

Knowing all this, Murray eyed the bags regretfully. He had found them, but they could never be his. True, his claim to them could never be contested.

But he knew that they had been stolen and, having definite ideas concerning the right and the wrong of things, he knew that he must surrender them to the combine and content himself with the fifty-per-cent reward.

He no longer had any illusions concerning Yat Gow. The fellow was a killer, and his men were killers. They had butchered the Japanese crew of the schooner to protect their loot. And they would kill him, knowing that he must discover the shambles in the cabin. Once the coffin was safely in their hands, they would be guided by the maxim that dead men tell no tales.

Murray retied the mouths of the bags and fastened them securely to his belt. He next replaced the lid of the coffin and drove home the screws, leaving the half-drawn screw exactly as he had found it. Going on deck, he took the end of the heaving line and passed it through the skylight into the cabin, after which he went below again, dragged the casket from the bunk and threw a timber hitch about it. Then he jerked the line as a signal to heave in.

The heaving line jerked taut, lifting the casket from the deck. Murray guided the coffin through the skylight, then followed it on deck and watched as it rose in a succession of quick jerks toward the surface. After it had merged with the shadow of the boat, he stepped over to the descending line and jerked it four times. Receiving no response, he jerked again. Suddenly the line went slack in his grasp. Looking upward, he saw it settling toward him in a wide loop.

The weighted line had served as an anchor, holding the whaleboat in place above the wreck. Now that the coffin was in the boat, Sing Foo had no further use for the anchor, and had flung the bight of the line overboard, leaving Murray on the dead end, twenty fathoms down.

IV.

MURRAY GRINNED, fighting back the feeling of panic that gripped him with the realization that he was now cut off from above. Sure of themselves, the Chinamen had done the very thing he had suspected they would do.

Evidently, Sing Foo had believed him when he had told the young Chinese that the self-contained outfit wasn't good for more than half an hour or so. Dropping the descending line evidently was all the Chinaman deemed necessary to complete the job. Murray grinned again as he visualized the disappointment that would be theirs when the casket was opened.

He picked up the ax and dropped over the side, glad to be out on the clean sea floor, where there was light instead of the gloom of that charnel house behind him. He moved slowly through the coral growth that lay between the wreck and the foot of the slope, keeping a wary lookout for moray. Schools of bright-hued fish flickered among the ghostly fronds of the coral. Whip eels undulated from his path, while giant clams nestled down among the coral trunks moved deadly lips at the shadow of his passing.

Reaching the farther side of the coral forest, he stood at the foot of the slope and looked upward. The ascent was steeper than he had imagined. From where he stood it looked like a wall somewhat out of plumb. There were projections here and there to aid his ascent. But even with the aid of these it looked like a tough job. He was considering his chances of walking across the bottom of the lagoon and emerging on the beach of the atoll when he made a discovery that sent an icy chill through his veins. His air was going bad.

He made an adjustment of the flow without getting any appreciable result. He had been bucking the twenty-fathom pressure for more than an hour, but he

knew it was not that which caused his limbs to tremble and his heart to pound like a trip hammer against the walls of his chest.

No, something had happened to his oxygen tank. Possibly the fall which he had sustained in the cabin of the wreck had something to do with it. At any rate, the air he breathed was no longer being regenerated. Perhaps the cylinder of caustic soda was leaking. If that were so, he would be breathing poison gas long before he could make the two-mile trek across the floor of the lagoon.

Gripping the mouthpiece between his teeth, he started to climb. The ascent was easier than it had seemed at first. Pressure of the water was holding him against the steep face of the rise. He guessed the tide was ebbing fast. While it helped him in his ascent, it made the two-hundred-and-fifty-pound drag of his diving rig all the more noticeable.

Once he thought of kicking off his weighted shoes, dropping his sausage belt and blowing himself to the surface. But he put the notion aside, knowing that a sudden lifting of the pressure might result in an attack of the bends, which would leave him completely at the mercy of the Chinamen.

He was halfway up the slope of the reef when he saw a cleft in the rock opening above his head. As he climbed into the narrow defile, a scampfish flashed its lights almost under his feet and went scurrying away along the sandy floor, which rose in a gentle slope toward the surface. Surmising that the gash extended to the offshore side of the reef, Murray trudged on in the direction taken by the electric ray, warned by the increasing foulness of the air he breathed that he could not exist under water for another half hour.

The going was easier now; it was like walking through a narrow lane. There was little light here, for the rise of the reef above flung a shadow on the sur-

face. Schools of fish were flashing past him in the gloom, leaving streaks of phosphorescence in their wake. From the fact that all the fish were headed in the same direction, he reasoned that the cleft was a tide cut, which would lead him to the offshore side of the reef.

Light showed ahead. Decreasing pressure warned him that he was close to the surface. Dropping on hands and knees, he crawled on for fifty yards more. Suddenly his helmet broke through.

Blinking in the glare of the afternoon sunlight, he turned cautiously about, his glance moving slowly over his surroundings. The reef rose behind him in a five-foot wall that stretched almost across the mouth of the lagoon, high and dry, the sands piled by the breakers against its offshore side now bared by the ebbing tide. Beyond the crest of the reef he could see the masts of the lugger etched in black against the sky.

SATISFIED that he was screened from the eyes of the Chinamen, he sat on the bottom with his head and shoulders above water and wrenched loose the faceplate of his helmet. He next unbuckled his shoes, then rose from the water and staggered out of the tide cut, which wound like a narrow river across the now dry sand. Dropping to a sitting posture, he propped his back against a rock and filled his lungs with clean sea air.

He felt himself drowsing. For the next half hour he sat there, his whole body relaxed. Suddenly he started, wide awake, as a splash of oars drifted to his ears. He drew his knife, ripped the diving suit down the front, then withdrew his head from the helmet and wriggled free of the encumbering gear. Crawling to the reef, he raised himself until he could peer across its jagged crest.

He had feared that the Chinamen had

discovered his escape and were coming after him. Now he saw that the whaleboat was headed up toward the bight of the lagoon. Four men were at the oars, a fifth lounged in the stern, the sixth, whom he recognized as Sing Foo, stood in the bows, holding a stick to which was fastened a strip of white rag.

Murray grinned, realizing that the Chinamen had given him up for dead. Now they were going ashore to parley with Partridge, hoping to induce the old skipper to dive for his body. He looked at the sun, which was dropping toward the western horizon. He grinned again as he thought of the Chinamen trying to run down Partridge and his four jungle-bred blacks in that waste of wire grass and lantana scrub.

His glance came back to the lugger and rested upon the two men who stood on the poop, watching the progress of the whaleboat. Until now, Murray had only a vague plan of escape from the atoll. In a hazy way he had thought of stealing the whaleboat after dark and with his mates making for the shipping lanes.

He had resigned himself to the loss of the *Bellona*, knowing that the Chinamen would clear out for the China coast as soon as they were convinced of the escape of the vessel's crew. But he and the old skipper would be repaid a thousandfold for their loss, for they would have the pearls—or their share of them. Not until he saw those two Chinamen on the lugger's deck did it occur to him that there was still a chance for her recovery.

It looked like a made-to-order situation, he told himself, as he peeled off trousers and singlet. Cutting the tough dungaree trousers into strips, he tied the bags of pearls together and slung them securely about his neck. Another strip of dungaree went about his waist to hold his knife. He then walked into the tide cut, waded along it until the water reached his shoulders and started

swimming until he had reached the inshore side of the reef, where he took off in a long dive that carried him well out into the lagoon.

He came up for air and lay on his back, paddling gently, while he watched the pair on the deck of the lugger, which was still a quarter of a mile away. Then he went on, his arms cleaving the water in long, silent strokes. He kept his eyes on the two Chinamen, ready to dive the instant one of them turned his head. But the pair seemed to have their whole attention fastened upon the whaleboat, which was drawing in toward the beach at the bight of the lagoon.

Presently he came in under the lugger's counter. Gripping the rudder pendant, he rested. A glance toward the head of the lagoon showed him the Chinamen hauling their craft out on the sands. As he watched, four of them, headed by Sing Foo and his flag of truce, marched inland, leaving the sixth man on guard.

Murray realized that he would have to work fast. Having witnessed the treachery of the Chinamen, Partridge would be in no mood to deal with them now, but would keep on the dodge until they abandoned their search. Murray realized that they would return soon. The sun would set inside of an hour, and he reasoned that the Chinamen would relinquish the hunt before dark. Once the whole gang returned to the lugger, Murray knew that he would have to forgo his attempt to recover the vessel.

V.

HE EMERGED silently from under the counter and swam along the lugger's side until he came below the open gangway. Here the freeboard was sufficiently low for him to reach the deck by stretching an arm above his head. Gripping the edge of the deck, he lifted himself from the water.

As he wriggled through the gang-

way and scuttled across the deck to the cover of the hatch coaming, he glanced aft and saw that the two Chinamen were still watching the boat. One of them was Yat Gow, who was sitting on one of the quarter bits, a position which brought his head level with the head of the man who stood at his side.

Murray slipped the bags of pearls from about his neck and thrust them out of sight under the winch at the foot of the foremast. Rising, he lifted a belaying pin from its socket. As his left hand moved to his waist he froze. His knife was gone, slipped from under his improvised belt while he was swimming the lagoon.

He shrugged, then lifted another belaying pin from the rail. Hefting the heavy greenheart pins, he moved silently aft, approaching the stern along the starboard side of the deck, his eyes fastened upon the backs of the two Chinamen beside the port rail. Suddenly the man beside Yat Gow turned his head and glanced forward.

For a full moment the Chinaman stared at the figure of the white man, his beady black eyes seeming about to pop from his head. Then a long-drawn wail of terror burst from his throat.

Yat Gow came to his feet like an uncoiled spring. His shoe-button eyes flitted over the figure of Murray, and his mouth fell open in a gape of amazement. Suddenly he grinned and lifted the edge of his loose blouse.

Murray hurled the belaying pin in his right hand straight toward the head of Yat Gow. The big Chinaman sprang aside, and the missile hurtled past and splashed over the side. The other Chinaman was now clawing for his gun. Before he could draw, Murray's second belaying pin crashed against his temple and he dropped to the deck like a pole-axed beef.

Without bothering further about plans, the American sprang across the intervening space. His right jerked up,

crashed against Yat Gow's jaw, while his left flashed out to grasp the barrel of the pistol which the Chinaman had drawn from under his blouse.

By all the laws of fisticuffs Yat Gow should have gone down for the count. But that smash in the jaw seemed to have had no more effect upon him than a tap with a feather duster. He made no attempt to jerk his gun from Murray's grasp. Instead, he pressed the trigger six times in quick succession, sending a stream of bullets through the air above the white man's head.

Murray drove his right to the stomach. Yat Gow countered by hooking the fingers of his left hand and raking his finger nails downward over the white man's face and chest. Murray paid him for that with a right to the head that almost unshipped the Chinaman's ear. Suddenly Yat Gow flung his left arm about Murray's neck, enveloping him in a bearlike hug. Almost in the same motion the Chinaman ducked, bringing the top of his skull thudding into the white man's face.

Blood spurted from Murray's nose. But he returned the compliment by planting another right on the Chinaman's chin. Rocked back on his heels by the force of that blow, Yat Gow kicked viciously at the white man's groin. Murray released his grip on the pistol barrel and sprang away, avoiding the Chinaman's swinging foot by a scant inch. Dancing in again, he planted a quick left and right to the face.

Yat Gow went suddenly berserk. Since the start of the fight he had scratched, kicked and butted with the air of a man who had a disagreeable task to perform and was trying to get it over with as quickly as possible. Now, with a screech, he hurled the empty pistol at Murray.

The American swerved. The missile whirled past him and clattered in the waist. A quick glance up the lagoon

showed him the Chinamen piling into the boat. Now he realized why Yat Gow hadn't tried to shoot him. Those six shots had simply been a warning to the others that their diver was back on board.

YAT GOW rushed in the wake of his hurled weapon. Gripping Murray by the shoulders, he sank his finger nails into the white man's flesh and tried to butt with his head. The American blocked the attempt with an upward jab to the face that flattened the Chinaman's nose. Yat Gow infolded the latter in another bearlike hug. They reeled across the poop, crashed into the rail and rebounded to fall to the deck, their straining bodies locked like the bodies of two fighting wolves.

Murray's hammering fists beat a tattoo upon the Chinaman's face. The American was beginning to feel a whole-hearted respect for his huge adversary. The Chinaman was strong as a horse, and his jaw seemed made of iron. His yellow face was streaked with blood, and his nose was smashed out of line; one eye was closed, his lips were split and he had lost most of his front teeth. But he was still far from being licked. In the meantime, the whaleboat was sweeping down toward the lugger, her rowers pulling like men possessed. A few minutes more and they would be piling over the rail.

Murray realized that he must bring the fight to a finish. Defeat meant death, not only for himself, but for Partridge and the four blacks. They would be left to die of thirst on Kooringa. Even if he surrendered the pearls, he knew that the Chinamen would not let him live. He knew too much for their safety.

Heedless of the blows which Murray was raining on his face, Yat Gow's cablelike arms remained locked about the white man's body. He lay on his back, holding the American tightly to

him, apparently content to absorb punishment until his compatriots could reach the lugger. Murray tried furiously to break the other's hold. He could hear the plash of oars which told him that the whaleboat was almost alongside.

He looked wildly about him, hope rising in his breast when he saw the belaying pin with which he had felled the little Chinaman lying a few feet away, but still far beyond his reach. Throwing fair play to the winds, he jerked his knee into Yat Gow's groin. Almost in the same motion he hooked the fingers of his left hand in the big fellow's stiff, black hair, forced the man's head far backward and then drove his right hard against Yat Gow's Adam's apple.

Yat Gow's arms relaxed. With a furious effort, Murray broke their hold. Snapping to his knees, he swept the belaying pin from the deck and brought it thudding down on the Chinaman's skull.

MURRAY didn't wait to observe the effect of the blow. There was no time for that. A glance showed him the whaleboat was almost alongside, with Sing Foo standing in the bow, a boat hook in his hand lifted toward the cap rail.

A quick step brought Murray to the recumbent form of the little Chinaman, who lay as he had fallen, beneath the impact of the belaying pin against his temple, his skinny yellow fingers still wrapped about the butt of the pistol thrust inside the waistband of his trousers. Snatching the weapon from the man's limp hand, Murray thumbed back the hammer, flung up the weapon and sent a bullet buzzing past Sing Foo's ear.

"All right, you guys," he barked, "beat it!" He continued, "If you boys come on board, I'll shoot hell out of Number One fellow." By way of em-

phasis, he stooped and placed the muzzle of the pistol against the forehead of the unconscious Yat Gow.

At a quavering command from Sing Foo, the rowers backed the boat away from the lugger's side. The rowers turned their heads and looked over their shoulders at Murray. None of them made a move to draw the pistols which he knew they carried beneath their blouses. Somehow, he realized that they would make no further trouble.

"Beat it!" he ordered.

"Me want to talk," Sing Foo quavered. "Want to know what you'll do to Number One fellow?"

"I'll blow his damn lights out if you guys don't get to hell ashore," Murray threatened. "I'll give you to the count of three. Then if you ain't back on the beach, it's curtains for his nibs. One!"

He looked down at Yat Gow, to find the big Chinaman's black eyes looking into the muzzle of the pistol. The gun was an old one, carrying a bullet a trifle smaller than a pigeon's egg. At any rate, it must have looked fully that large to the big fellow, for he closed his eyes again and emitted a wail of fear.

"Two!" Murray counted.

Yat Gow opened his eyes again and tried to sit up. Murray pushed him back on the deck and thumbed back the hammer of the pistol. Then the Chinaman's battered mouth opened and released a volley of Cantonese.

"Wait—don't shot!" Sing Foo yelled. "Numbah One fellow says to listen to you. Don't shot, we'll go to the beach."

"Let's see you go."

"We'll go, you let Numbah One fellow go?"

"When you guys hit the beach he can swim for it," Murray promised.

There was a further interchange between Yat Gow and Sing Foo. Then the boat was backed away from the lugger and headed back up the lagoon. Murray kept a sharp watch on the big Chinaman until he saw the others beach the whaleboat and pile out on the sand.

"All right, big boy." He motioned Yat Gow toward the gangway. "Scram!"

Yat Gow rose, limped to the waist and plunged over the side. Murray leaned on the rail and watched, as the Chinaman swam with long, powerful strokes toward the north beach of the lagoon.

Murray stooped, lifted the body of the little Chinaman and tossed it overboard. As he glanced toward the south beach of the lagoon he saw five heads bobbing on the surface. Four of them were black and bushy, while the fifth reflected the light of the setting sun like a sphere of polished ivory.

Murray waved encouragingly toward the swimmers. He looked as though he had been run over by a tractor. His right eye peered from a setting of puffed and blackened flesh like a sapphire twinkling from a bed of purple velvet. His nose resembled a badly used tomato, while his forehead, cheeks and chest were crisscrossed with red grooves. But the grin with which he greeted his old skipper, as the latter swam alongside, indicated that he was at peace with the world.



Missing Page

Missing Page

He didn't have any money; so me and Dutch dickered with him to let him have our boat for half, and he gave us this pearl as earnest money. Said he had about five tons piled up on one of those little islands. How much more he's got we don't know, but anyway we got this pearl before he drowned."

Tom's face was a mask of indifference as he glanced at Steve Cato.

"Drowned? What do you mean, drowned? What happened?"

Dutch Swartz broke in. "He went nuts and jumped overboard."

Cato nodded. "That's just what happened. You see, he was taking us to where this shell was piled. We were almost there when something went haywire with him. Too much sunshine, I guess. Anyway, he just began tearing at his hair and jumped overboard and went down like a rock."

Dutch nodded soberly. "Poor feller, I guess he couldn't swim."

"Oh!" Tom commented. "Who was this fellow?"

"You wouldn't know him," answered Cato. "Don't reckon he even gave Dutch and me his right name. He looked like that sort."

"Well, anyway, he left you a darn fine pearl. A few of them would fix a man up in a big way. But why are you telling me?"

"Listen"—Cato leaned close to Tom—"you know that country down there. Maybe you can help us find that pile of shell. From the looks of this pearl, no telling how many more like it we'll find in them."

Tom carelessly lighted a cigarette and blew the smoke through his nose.

"Not much to go on with no place to start. There are hundreds of little islands down there, and the shell might be on any one of them." He did not look at either of the men, but gazed into the mirror.

Dutch grinned furtively at Cato.

Cato reached into his coat pocket.

"Yes, we have some place to start. Before that guy went nuts he gave us a sort of map, but neither Dutch or me can make the darn thing out. You being familiar with those waters, we thought you might be able to understand it."

He spread a crude drawing on the counter.

While Tom turned the map about and examined it from all sides, Cato kept up a running talk.

"Now here's our proposition. How about you going with us and looking for this place? We'll supply the boat and we'll cut three ways, one third of the shell and one third of the pearls to each of us. How about it, Tom?"

Tom Denton did not answer immediately, but continued to turn the crude map about.

Presently he turned it over and looked at the back. For an instant he held his breath while he folded the map and struggled to keep his face expressionless.

"I'll have to think about it," he drawled at last. "Let me keep this map until to-morrow."

Without waiting for permission, he thrust it into his pocket.

Dutch looked surprised, but Cato spoke up. "Let him keep it. I've got a copy."

Tom slid off his stool. Dutch looked doubtful for a moment and then nodded.

"All right, keep it. That shell belongs to us, whoever finds it, because the bird that fished it out had an agreement with us. He still owes for the use of our boat. But how about coming in with us?"

"I'll let you know to-morrow," said Tom as he went out the door.

HE SAUNTERED down the narrow street toward the plaza. Though his actions were careless, he kept a wary lookout behind. When he reached the door

of Constabulary Headquarters, he dodged in.

The pudgy little lieutenant who held down the desk looked up with a friendly light in his eyes.

"Hello, Tom. Come in to give yourself up?" he greeted with a grin.

Tom returned the grin. "Nope, Lute; I haven't done anything yet. Give me time; I only got back from the States yesterday."

The lieutenant laughed as he extended his hand.

"Experience has taught me that you don't need much time to get mixed up in a disturbance. Set down and tell me about yourself."

Tom shook his head. "No time to visit now, Lute. I just wanted to ask if you knew anything about Verne Day. How long since you've seen him or heard anything about him?"

Lieutenant Walker looked thoughtful. "Verne Day?" he mused. "Why, he left here about two months ago. Bought a power schooner and said he was going pearl fishing down around Bulipongpong."

Tom nodded. "Yes, I know. I sent him the money to buy the schooner. Heard anything since?"

"No. Why? Anything wrong?"

Tom Denton's lips tightened. "Plenty, I'm afraid—though I've no real evidence."

Lieutenant Walker smiled quizzically. "Little thing like lack of evidence never seems to stop you, Tom. What do you suspect?"

"It's more than suspicion. Verne Day is in trouble—or worse. Know anything about two bozos from North Borneo by the name of Cato and Swartz?"

Walker shook his head. "Nothing except their schooner is anchored in the bay. What about them?"

Tom laid the crude map on the desk. "I got this from them a few moments ago."

Walker leaned over and looked at the map. "Well?" he asked.

Tom reached out and turned the map over. There was writing on the back.

"It's on the back of part of a letter I wrote Verne from the States. That's not all. They showed me a pearl which they claim some one gave them for the use of their boat. I know that pearl. It's Verne's, and I know that he never parted with it willingly. Matter of sentiment. It was a present from the sultan for saving his son from drowning."

Walker cleared his throat. "Does seem a bit odd. Day had a good boat. Why should he want to hire another?"

"I'll say it's odd. It's worse than that; it's scaly. They claim that the man who gave them the map and the pearl fell overboard and drowned. Verne Day never drowned. He was the best swimmer in these islands, natives included."

Walker stared at the map. Tom continued:

"They claim that the man who drew that map had several tons of shell rotting on an island somewhere between Siasa and Bulipongpong. They haven't been able to locate it, and they want me to go in with them and help find it. At first I thought that was odd, too, me being Verne's partner, but when I saw the scribbling on the back of that map it seemed natural enough. They knew that Verne had written me just where to find the shell and figured that it would be a simple matter to get rid of me after I located it for them."

Walker pursed his lips thoughtfully.

"Sounds reasonable. What do you want me to do about it?"

"Pinch Cato and Swartz until I can get down to Buli and look around for Verne."

Walker shook his head soberly. "Won't do. I can't take the chance. They're both British subjects; and, after all, we've nothing against them but suspicions."

Tom Denton banged his fist on the desk.

"Then fly me down there in the government plane. We can make it in three hours."

"Impossible. I've no authority to use the plane except in emergency. Good heavens, man, they'd hang me if I used that plane to chase down every wild rumor that comes in."

"All right. I've given the law a chance. There's something rotten about this deal and it's up to me."

"These men may have pulled a crooked deal of some kind on your friend, but I can't act on mere suspicion."

"I can." Tom's voice was tense. "And I'm going to! The least you can do is keep an eye on these birds after I'm gone. Maybe something might happen that'll convince you."

"I'll keep tabs on them," the lieutenant agreed.

TOM DENTON left Walker's office and headed back to Chino Charley's. Steve Cato and Dutch Swartz sat at a table in the corner, playing cards.

Cato looked up with a grin.

"Back already? What do you say?"

Tom thrust out his hand. "Let's see that pearl again, Cato—if you don't mind."

Cato missed the brittle tone in his voice.

"Why sure." He stood up and handed Tom the glittering bauble.

Tom's hand closed over it. He gave it a brief glance and dropped it into his pocket. Cato looked suspicious. Swartz stood up and pushed back his chair.

"What's the idea?" he growled.

"I've decided that I don't want any part of your proposition."

Cato's face twisted and he scowled at Tom.

"All right. Dutch and I just decided that we don't need you, anyway. Give me back that pearl."



The staring eyes in the gaunt face never wavered; their wild light did not change—

Tom grinned. "Try and get it."

Dutch Swartz circled.

"Hand it over!" he snarled.

Tom backed against the wall.

Chino Charley thrust a frightened face through the back-room door. "No fight; no fight!" he appealed. Charley had witnessed Tom Denton in action before.

Cato shuffled his feet and drove a straight right at Tom. Tom rolled his head and Cato's fist slipped by and thudded against the wall. Tom countered with an uppercut to the jaw that fairly lifted Cato from his feet and slammed him against the counter to slide to the floor midst a pile of jangling dishes.

Whereupon, Dutch Swartz stepped into the row. Tom found that he had considerably more fight on his hands than one man is supposed to handle. But he was used to unfavorable odds. He had bested these men once before in Siassi, but then they had been more or less drunk. Now, both were sober.

He knocked Swartz down with a gripping blow to the stomach while Steve Cato wiped the tomato catsup out of his eyes and then swapped blows with Tom. Cato was fast. He stung Tom several times, but the first wallop that Tom had landed on his jaw had taken the steam out of his punches. Tom had him groggy by the time Swartz regained his breath and returned to the fray.

Out of the corner of his eye Tom saw Swartz grab a butcher knife from the counter. He held Cato off with one hand, dodged beneath the knife, and planted a fist into Swartz's bread basket for the second time. Swartz folded up and took no more interest in the fight.

FREE from the menace of Swartz and the knife, he gave his full attention to Cato. Within half a minute he pounded him to his knees.

Tom stopped back.

"Still think you want that pearl?" he panted.

Cato blew blood from his nose. "It's mine," he mumbled.

"You're a liar! It never was yours."

Cato stumbled to his feet, but he kept well away.

"I'll get you for this some time," he snarled.

"Any time," Tom taunted. "I'm on my way to Bulipongpong. Maybe you'll come down there and get me. Maybe."

Tom strode out, licking his skinned knuckles. On the street he met Chino Charley and Lieutenant Walker.

The pudgy lieutenant grinned at sight of Tom's face.

"My gosh, Tom, can't you ever come to Zambo without getting into a row?"

"'Tain't me. When tough guys start rough-housing me, there's always a scrap whether it's in Zambo or any other place!" retorted Tom. "Listen, Lute, I'm heading south for Buli. If Cato and Swartz follow me in the next day or two, you'd better get permission to fly that crate of yours down there and look things over. You'll have more than supposition to work on; you'll be working on a murder case. The victim might be me or Verne Day or Cato and Swartz. If it's Verne, it's too late to prevent it, but if it's me or those other two bozos, you might get there in time. Savvy?"

"Did you get anything more out of them?"

Tom grinned. "Yeah. Besides a fine collection of bruises, I got Verne Day's pearl—but if you mean information, I didn't."

Walker's eyes opened wide and he whistled.

"Darn it, Tom, if they complain to me, you've got yourself in a mess. Don't you see, man, I'll have to arrest you for robbery?"

"And if they don't complain?"

"If they don't complain," the lieutenant repeated thoughtfully and stopped.

"Yeah! What then?" prompted Tom.

"Why, nothing, I guess. I'll just keep out of it."

Tom shrugged. "Lot of help I can expect from you, Lute. Never mind, though. I can handle this alone, but I'd much rather have the law back of me. If you can forget you're a policeman long enough to give your brains a chance, just hop in that plane of yours and come on down. I might be needing you mighty bad. So long."

Tom started away, then whirled and came back.

"I don't suppose you'd consider letting me have a gun, under the circumstances, Lute?"

Walker shook his head emphatically.

"Positively not. You know the law: guns are for officers only. I've no authority to make an exception. Sorry, Tom."

Tom shrugged. "O. K. It just makes it tougher because those birds are from British Borneo and they'll be sure to be armed, but never mind. I'll be seeing you—I hope."

Shoulders squared, back stiff and straight as a soldier's, Tom Denton wheeled and marched to the water front.

THE little power yawl that he had bought the day before was ready. The Moro boy, Jali, the one-man crew, lay asleep on the hatch. He awoke when Tom leaped from the wharf and landed in the bottom of the boat.

Tom took the wheel and headed straight south. It was not yet ten o'clock in the morning. With luck he could expect to reach his destination some time before noon the next day. Just what he expected to find he did not know, but he hoped to find Verne Day marooned on one of the islets, wounded or sick, perhaps, but still alive.

Failing that, he would search for evidence that would show what had happened to him. The least he could do

would be to find his partner's shell and see that it did not fall into the hands of Cato and Swartz.

He took out the pearl and looked at it, but he was not thinking of pearls or shell, but of a man—Verne Day—who had stood shoulder to shoulder with him in many a fight—not only battles against other men, but against the many hazards and pitfalls that beset the white man when he presumes to try to wrest a fortune from the islands and the waters of the South Seas. Some way he could not bring himself to believe that Verne was dead, but he did have a feeling, a hunch, that he was in dire straits and that he must find him as soon as possible.

Some time before midnight he gave the wheel over to Jali and turned in. It was probable that he would need all the sleep he could get.

The next morning when he awoke the mountains of the island of Jolo showed hazy blue over the stern. Ahead lay the long, low island of Bulipongpong. Far off to the west the towering peaks of the Island of Borneo floated like phantoms above the morning mists.

Tom took the wheel and told Jali to get breakfast. For an hour they pounded along rounding the end of Bulipongpong. It was to the south of the island on one of the dozens of unnamed rocks that Verne Day had written him he was piling his shell. It was tough going here for the little yawl at this time of day. The tide was turning and she made hard work of bucking a five-mile current.

Suddenly the motor began to miss. He caught the odor of overheated metal and hot oil. He swore under his breath and called Jali to take the wheel. Before he could get into the pit, the motor gave a final gasp and died. The swirling tide caught the little boat and whirled it like a chip.

Although he worked like a demon, it took two hours to dismantle the water pump and remove the starfish that

plugged it. When finally the motor took up its burden again they were ten miles out of their course.

TOM wiped the perspiration from his grease-smearred face and heaved a sigh of relief. Again he set his course to round the end of Bulipongpong and glanced back toward Jolo Island to verify it. His heart skipped a beat, and he caught his breath. His lips tightened and his fists clenched involuntarily. The thing he feared had come to pass. Cato and Swartz, their bigger and speedier boat now well above the horizon, were fast overhauling him.

He opened the motor wide and took the wheel. He jockeyed the little yawl to take advantage of the currents while he kept an eye on the enemy. In spite of all he could do, the gap slowly closed. When finally he rounded the point and came in sight of the little islets that were his destination, the pursuing boat was a scant mile behind.

On one of those dozens of craggy, barren rocks was Verne Day's pile of shell and perhaps a fortune in pearls. Possibly on one of the larger ones which supported vegetation was Verne Day himself. Tom knew exactly where to look for the shell, but he also knew that Verne Day could not be on that particular island, because there was no water. Only one of the group had fresh water. If Verne Day was still alive, he must be on that one.

Tom trained his glasses on the pursuing boat. It was now less than half a mile behind. Swartz was steering. Cato leaned against the hatchway with a rifle cradled in his arms. In another ten minutes he would be able to drop a bullet on the deck of Tom's yawl.

Tom spoke to the Moro boy.

"We haven't got a chance, Jali. We'll have to get ashore before he begins firing."

The boy was frankly frightened. The whites of his eyes rolled up, and he

gripped the rail until his knuckles showed white through his brown skin. He did not reply, but nodded dumbly. Jali would be of no help in the crisis. With a shrug of his shoulders he forgot the Moro. His eyes focused on the brush-clad slopes of the islet that was his goal.

Still a good twenty minutes from land Cato dropped the first bullet alongside the yawl. A spent bullet that ricocheted along the top of the water, it did no damage, but from then on Cato kept up a fire that grew increasingly more menacing as the gap between the boats decreased.

Ten minutes later Cato's bullets ripped splinters from the sides and deck of the yawl. One bullet struck the motor and sang away over Tom's head. He lay flat and steered with one arm thrust above his head. Jali hugged the side of the hatchway, gibbering with terror.

The next bullet tore a groove directly above the boy's head. He shrieked and stood up. Cato's next shot thudded dully and Tom turned his head in time to see the boy reel against the rail, where he tottered sickeningly for a moment and slid overboard with a splash. Then the firing ceased.

For a moment Tom wondered at this. Cautiously he raised his head. Cato was close now. Tom could see the evil grin on his swarthy face. Forty feet ahead was the cleft in the rocks for which Tom aimed.

Cato shouted, but the sputtering motors drowned the words. He signaled for Tom to shut down his motor.

Tom waved a derisive hand and braced himself for the shock when the yawl would strike.

"You can go to hell!" he shouted. "You can't use me dead, and you'll never get me alive."

The yawl struck with a sickening crunch. Tom sprang clear of the flying splinters and scrambled out of sight into the mouth of the narrow gorge. He



VERNE
DAY

heard Cato's motor stop. The chain rattled as the anchor dropped. In the sudden silence the waves that washed the mouth of the narrow ravine made little tinkling sounds as they rolled loose pebbles over the hard, rock bottom. Cato and Swartz were talking. Cato raised his voice.

"Come on out, Denton. We won't hurt you."

"Come and get me," Tom flung back and started climbing the narrow defile. It was tough going. The sharp stones cut his hands. Almost as steep as a stairway, the crevice was not the result of erosion, but a crack made in the iron-hard lava by the recent earthquake.

Some two hundred feet above the water he reached the top and flung himself, panting, on the level ground. He looked back the way he had come. Cato and Swartz were not yet in sight, but he could hear them talking as they climbed.

THEN he became conscious of a stealthy movement behind him, but before he could turn, something struck him on the back of the head. Crazy lights danced before his eyes. He fell forward on his face, completely out.

When he recovered, he was still lying on his face. Some one was straddling his back. He blinked his eyes to clear his brain and twisted his head. He could see one foot of the person who stood over him. It was an odd-looking foot—a terrible foot. Most of the toenails were gone and those that were left were horribly festered. The toes were swollen and bleeding raw. Tom, in his

dazed condition, wretched, sickened at the sight.

He closed his eyes with the pounding pain in his head, and the man reached down and flopped him over on his back. Tom slowly opened his eyes and stared up at the face above him, and immediately forgot the pain in his head.

"Verne! Verne, old boy, is it you?" He struggled to sit up.

The staring eyes in the gaunt face never wavered, and the wild, unseeing light in them did not change. There was a strange sinking feeling in the pit of Tom's stomach.

"Verne, old partner," he pleaded, "don't you know me? It's Tom. Tom Denton. Your old sidekick."

The madman's lips drew back in an animal snarl. The fierce light in the dark eyes leaped wildly, but no sound came from the cracked lips.

Except for the tattered remains of a pair of white duck trousers that hung from his waist, he was naked. His emaciated chest and arms were a mass of festering insect stings.

Tom tried a new angle.

"Verne, old chap," he said, "I've come to help you get your shell—and the pearls. You remember the pearls, don't you?"

There was no expression on the haggard face, no change in the glint of the wild eyes, no indication that Verne Day had heard. Yet Tom was sure he could hear; for he saw him turn his head and listen toward the narrow gorge up which Cato and Swartz were scrambling.

A loosened stone clattered down the narrow defile. At the sound, the mad Verne Day forgot Tom. He backed into the edge of the surrounding bushes and crouched, watching the chasm like a cat guarding a rat hole.

Tom scrambled to his feet, just as Cato's head lifted above the edge of the chasm. The mad Verne Day saw Cato at the same instant. He screamed

shrilly as though in mortal terror and fled, gibbering, into the brush.

CATO sprang out of the cleft, but before he could lift his gun, Tom was upon him. His left hand clutched the gun while his right found Cato's jaw. The blow was a little too high. Cato wrenched at the gun while he kicked savagely at Tom's groin. Tom caught Cato's foot and landed him on his back. The gun flew through the air and clattered down the steep ravine. Cato was up in an instant slugging away at Tom, while he called to Swartz to hurry.

Out of the corner of his eye Tom saw Swartz lay his rifle on the edge of the cliff and reach for a handhold. It was now or never. He tucked his chin down and stepped in close under Cato's flailing arms and landed a short jab to Cato's chin that lifted him clear of the ground. He did not pause to see Cato land on his back, but whirled to meet Swartz.

Through a red mist of blood that blinded him he saw the fat, chunky man standing on the lip of the crevice with his rifle partly raised.

Tom crouched to spring, though he feared the gun would roar before he could reach Swartz.

Suddenly Swartz shouted and lowered his gun a fraction. An unearthly scream like the cry of a jungle beast rang out. Swartz, his pale, watery eyes starting from his head, stared past Tom. Tom's head jerked around in time to see the demented Verne Day crash a huge boulder down on the unconscious Cato's head.

Swartz's gun jumped to his shoulder.

"Hold it, Swartz. Don't shoot! He's crazy," shouted Tom as he leaped at Swartz.

The gun roared harmlessly and the bullet plowed into the ground as Tom grappled. They staggered a moment on the edge of the chasm, swaying perilously. With a piercing scream Verne Day struck them both like a charging

caribou. Tom clutched desperately. His hand closed on a bony wrist and then he toppled backward.

Down the steep, jagged lava cliff he rolled. Vaguely, he knew that he was not alone. Several times he bumped into the fat Swartz and once he felt the almost naked body of Verne Day. Then his head struck something hard enough to knock him unconscious.

When he opened his eyes, he was almost at the bottom of the defile. He lay quiet for a moment while his head cleared. There was a loud humming in his ears that he laid to the blow on his head. The noise became louder as he lay on his back and stared into the sky. Then a shadow flitted across his face and he identified the sound just as Lieutenant Walker's plane swooped across the ravine and circled to land.

TOM scrambled up. A few feet away lay Swartz. His head was twisted grotesquely under his shoulder. Tom knew his neck was broken.

A little farther down he found Verne. There was a gash above one eye and he was unconscious, but his pulse was strong.

From the cove came the roar of the motor as Walker taxied in. Tom hurried down and met Walker as he waded ashore.

For once Tom Denton was not smiling.

"Glad you got here, Lute. How'd you happen to come?"

"That pearl you took from Cato. They didn't report it; so I knew they were afraid to. I cabled Sandakan and found they'd stolen the boat they were using, so I figured it was an emergency, and here I am. Did you find Day?"

Briefly Tom told what had happened.

"You say he's crazy?" asked Walker. "Is he violent?"

"Not now. Have you a stretcher with you?"

Walker nodded and shouted to the pilot to fetch it.

Tom led the way up the crevice. When they reached Verne Day, he was sitting up wiping the blood from his face. He looked up with a puzzled smile on his lean, scarred face.

"Hello, Tom. How'd you get here. And Walker, where'd you come from?" He staggered to rise, but sank back weakly.

"Take it easy, old man," advised Tom. "You've been knocked out and you're pretty weak. We heard you were in trouble; so we came to help you out."

Verne Day's face knotted in a puzzled frown as he looked down at his pitifully thin legs.

"I must have been sick to get in this shape. I don't remember."

"Don't you remember about the shell?" asked Walker.

A slight flush of anger marked Verne Day's hollow cheeks. His tired eyes blazed.

"Two men sunk my boat and killed my diver. Then they tied my hands and feet and drove splinters under my toenails trying to make me talk. I pretended to faint. When it got dark, I wriggled overboard. Some way I managed to float ashore. I remember getting the ropes off my hands and after a time my feet began to fester. Guess I got delirious because it seems like a dream. The last thing I remember is trying to climb the cliff in search of fresh water. I fell from a ledge. I remember falling—the sun on my bare head got me!"

"Would you know these two men if you saw them?" asked Walker.

"Yes. One was a big man—almost as tall as Tom, dark, with a small bullet head. The other was shorter and fat, with light hair and pale-blue eyes." Verne hesitated and put his hand to his head. "My head aches something fierce," he said, and fainted.

The pilot came with the stretcher and they carried Verne to the plane.

"Would you," asked Tom, "care to look at Cato and Swartz before we go?"

Walker shook his head. "They'll be there until we get back. It's important that we get Day to the hospital. He'll be O. K. in a few days."

"There's one more thing, lieutenant. What'll your report be?"

"Swartz and Cato died in an attempted robbery. There'll be no trouble."

"I thought you'd see it that way. Verne won't have to know, will he, until he's stronger?"

Walker shook his head. "Let's go. You and Day can be back after your shell in a few days. I'll commission you to pick up Cato's boat and bring it to Zambo.

The motor roared. The plane skimmed the water and rose over the rocky islet. Verne Day, on the stretcher, opened his eyes and grinned weakly.

"Good Lord, Tom, from the looks of your face you've been fighting again," he accused. "But I'm glad you showed up. I've got almost a quart of pearls to split with you."

Tom grinned. "Pearls, hell! I wasn't looking for pearls. I was looking for you."



Satan of Suchow

A Chinese Adventure

by ARTHUR J. BURKS

SYL BEST turned the knob of the door to the office they had told him would be his during the queerest—in prospect—job he had ever undertaken. He opened his mouth to greet a stenographer he had never seen before. The consulate had told him she would be there, ready for him. They did things carefully in Shanghai. They had promised the detective an office, complete, as part of his job.

The girl was present, all right, but he was never to hear her voice, never to dictate a letter to her, never to know whether her intellect matched the rare beauty of her face.

She was dead, slumped back in the small chair before a typewriter she hadn't had time to uncover. There was a silken cord about her neck. Best, holding his breath, shut the door, advanced to her side, looked down at her.

"Poor shaver," he said, "and I didn't even get a chance to meet you. A hell of a way to take a crack at me. And who's doing it? And why, when I don't even know myself what I've let myself in for?"

The girl's right hand was tightly closed. He pried it open. In the damp palm, above which he could almost still see the pulse of the murder victim, was a red stone, a pigeon-blood ruby. He stared at it; his lips puckered in a silent whistle, his eyes wide with startled amazement.

He darted back, locked the door. He had been told that a delegation would

wait on him this morning, to advise him of his duties, which he presumed would call upon his skill as a sleuth. He crinkled Chinese bills in his pocket, a thousand Mex as a retainer.

Last night's losses at roulette, at the famous "131," Bubbling Well Road, four doors from this very office, made the money many times welcome. And the mysterious task he planned on taking, sight unseen, promised plenty more. But he hadn't figured on murder, at least not so soon.

"Obviously my enemies, whoever they are," he told himself, "already know more about my job than I do myself. If this killing of an innocent girl, who couldn't possibly harm them but happens to be handy where I am sure to find her, isn't a Chinese warning, then I spent five years as a dick in Frisco's Chinatown for nothing."

He fingered the pigeon-blood ruby. His brows corrugated with thought. He dropped the stone in a drawer of his desk, stared at the stone as he slowly closed the drawer. Then he telephoned the American Consulate, made a careful report. The dead girl was an American, therefore of deep interest to the consulate.

"I'll need another girl," he said. "I think a Chinese girl would know better how to take care of herself against her own kind. Send me one— Oh, wait a minute! Somewhere in Shanghai is a girl named Ivy Li, a niece of a Chi-



Best was on the startled coolie before he could shout.

nese friend in San Francisco, a graduate of Wellesley. Get her if she's not working. Get her anyhow! And take care of the victim here as soon as the expected delegation has left."

Syl Best hung up. He hated this sparring in the dark, but when the dele-

gation came he would know more about what to expect. He gathered the dead girl in his arms, carried her to a back room, placed her on a couch. He looked at her still face, at the red line about her neck.

"Whoever they are," he apostrophized

her, "something will be done to pay them for this."

He heard the knock on his outer door, raced out to his desk, sat down, tried to appear composed.

"Come in!" he said.

THE DOOR OPENED. A dozen men came in. He looked them over. They were a sprinkling of French, British, Italian and American business men, by the look of them. Frederick Cargill, American, introduced himself, acted as spokesman:

"Syl Best?" Best took his feet off the desk.

"Yep," he said.

"I suppose you wonder how it happens that you have been installed here?"

"Well, sort of."

"We're here to tell you, Best. And you've taken on a job for yourself."

"So? Is it honest?"

"Quite. You're to make an end of the scavenger gang known to Shanghai simply as the Sons of Satan. They are led by a backsliding Christian convert known, and spoken of in whispers, as Suchow Satan. We don't know who he is. He may be a Number One boy, working for one of us. He may be anybody.

"We gather that he is a former convert simply because of the use of Satan in his picturesque nomenclature. The Suchow refers to Suchow Creek, believed to hide Satan's headquarters, like a needle in a haystack. Know where Suchow Creek is?"

"Yes. You locate it by the smell. You pass it coming into Bubbling Well Road from the Bund—in the heart of Shanghai. Every visitor knows it, can't miss it. It's a forest of sampans."

"Right. And it's full of murderers, robbers, kidnapers, thieves of all kinds. There are some queer angles. Suchow Satan always leaves a memento at the scene of his crime. If it's a robbery he leaves the symbol where it is sure

to be found. If it's a murder he leaves it in the closed palm of his victim."

"What's the symbol?" asked Best, his eyes glowing with interest.

"A pigeon-blood ruby, a real one, of great value. Maybe it's an attempt to show financial power. Maybe it's a bit of braggadocio. Maybe it's a sort of challenge to another bandit of South China known as Black Pearl Wong, who always left a black pearl, in the same fashion. Maybe——"

"Let's cut out the maybes," said Best shortly. "Any of you gentlemen have one of those rubies?"

The Frenchman, with an expressive grimace, dropped something that looked like a globule of blood on Best's desk. Best gasped as the morning sun caught the bauble, causing it to wink like a baleful, bloodshot eye.

He looked in question at the Frenchman, who spoke briefly in French to the American, who interpreted:

"His Number One boy was slain last night. This ruby was left in his hand. Jean Morin, this French gentleman, thinks that the boy, Sun Yat, somehow failed his master, that he was a member of the Sons of Satan——"

"And you want me to break up this gang?"

"Yes. There is plenty of money in it for you. Every month, by one means or another, Suchow Satan takes ten times as much money from us as we are paying you. You see, I am being frank. If you succeed in breaking up his mob, you get a fat bonus, and plenty of grateful thanks into the bargain."

"Sold," said Best. "Leave the ruby with me."

CARGILL dropped the ruby into Best's hand. Best dropped it carelessly into his pocket. The delegation left. The Chinese stenographer, a beauty, he thought, if you cared for slant eyes, reported calmly, sat down at the typewriter.

Best dictated some letters home, regarding conduct of his San Francisco office, using a racy slang he didn't think even Ivy Li could understand. But when he had finished she grinned at him.

"I have a swell education in American slang," she said. "But you need not worry. I am no accomplice of Suchow Satan. He killed a brother of mine. I shall be loyal, rooting for you to get the Sons."

"Thanks, Ivy," said Best, "and my apologies. I'm sort of new to this stuff. And look, Ivy, take care of yourself. If you know what I'm here for——"

"Everybody knows. There is no such thing as secrecy here. Consulate attachés—servants—they all talk, all listen. Suchow Satan knows this very minute, and is probably enjoying the prospect of outwitting you."



"Thanks again," said Syl Best ruefully. "Did Suchow Satan, when he killed your brother, leave one of these in his hand?"

Best delved into his pocket, brought forth the ruby. Then he stared in thunderstruck amazement at his open palm. There should have been one ruby there. Instead, there were *two!* There had been one in the beginning, he would have sworn to that. How did the other one happen at this moment to be in his pocket?

He glanced into his desk drawer. The

first ruby was still there. Nobody had come near him except Ivy Li. He had, of course, shaken hands with the delegation whose pay he was taking.

His eyes bulged. Sweat broke from his forehead. "Suchow Satan" was striking close to home. Ivy Li also stared at the rubies. Her face was a study.

"Yes, there was such a ruby," she said. "Here it is. I keep it by me to remember, so that I shall never cease to desire vengeance."

She brought forth a third ruby, gave it to Best.

"May I keep it?" he asked. "After all, I am working for your revenge, too."

She nodded.

The telephone rang. Surprised, Best took down the receiver. A cultured voice came over the wire.

"Mr. Syl Best?"

"Yes. Who's talking?"

"Suchow Satan. I trust our acquaintanceship will be mutually enjoyable. You are being well paid. I also offer a kind of payment."

"Yes?" said Best grimly. "What?"

"Retention of all the rubies you find. They will be worth more than your salary. And good luck to you. You'll need it if you dare to visit Suchow Creek."

No use trying to trace calls. It wasn't done in Shanghai.

But Best had plenty to think about. He decided, first of all, to have a look over the theater of operations. He trusted no one.

EERIE MOONLIGHT hung over the Bund, and over sullen, muddy, murderous Whangpoo River, when Best stepped from a ricksha beyond Suchow Creek, watched the ricksha coolie out of sight, and then turned back to Suchow Creek, vile smaller tributary of the Whangpoo.

His face was grim, hard. His eyes

missed nothing. His ears caught all alien sounds, his nostrils the odors of the sampan dwellers, those strange scavengers of the rivers who were born, lived and died on the sampans without ever leaving them.

Suchow Satan, whoever he might be, had apparently organized this mob into a murderous machine. Not knowing a word of Shanghai dialect, but believing he knew something of Chinese, Best was going after his men in the approved American method, with his hands and his guns.

He quitted the bow-shaped bridge, stepped down to the stinking creek's bank. It was packed solid with sampans, some of whose lateen sails slatted in the slight breeze. There were moving figures on most of the sampans. Smoke rose from braziers as coolie women cooked stuff that had been salvaged from garbage chutes of liners on the river. He saw padded gowns, dirty, evil, bare feet; seamed, scarred faces; muddy suspicion; a vague sort of terror.

Best felt that his white face must stand out like a rising moon among this squalor. He stepped onto a sampan. It teetered under his weight.

A young woman with a dirty face cursed him volubly, stamping her feet—at least, he supposed it was cursing. Men came running. Knives appeared in their hands.

Best didn't say anything. He merely snapped his automatics into his hands, stood his ground, with the sampans all teetering to the footfalls of their occupants. The natives formed a circle about him.

Best did an odd thing, on a hunch. He holstered one automatic, took out a ruby, held it in his left palm, so that it seemed to wink at the men with the knives. Their eyes widened. They chattered among themselves.

"I'm looking for more of these," said Best. They didn't understand his

words, of course, but they must have caught his meaning, for when he stepped forward they made a way for him. To his surprise, some of them were laughing.

He looked back when he stood at the black opening of a hatch. They were still grinning at him. There was hatred in their eyes, however, and the women and children had mysteriously made themselves scarce.

Best stepped into the hold, held his breath, went down. Nobody followed him. In the hold he lighted matches to look about him. Figures of Chinese rivers gods were here and there. Piles of stuff, hides, duffel scavenged from everywhere. Best wasn't, really, expecting to find anything. He was expecting action which might or might not be directed by Suchow Satan.

SOMETHING whizzed out of the dark, directly ahead. It struck him on the forehead. Best went down like a poled ox. When he regained consciousness he stared in amazement.

He seemed to be in a closed room, aboard some sort of vessel, because the room was swaying and dipping. But the blow on the head—he could see the swelling knob it had caused on his forehead—may have contributed to the swaying.

But that wasn't what amazed him.

It was the figure on the dais. A man dressed from head to foot in a red robe. Even his skull cap was red, and the button, or what should have been a button, atop it, was a pigeon-blood ruby. The man's face was covered from hair to chin by a red silk mask.

Best's arms were bound at his sides. His ankles were fastened together.

He noted the "Sons" of Satan. A score of men, as big as the man seated on the dais, dressed like him, except that their jackets were plum-colored, the buttons on their caps of red coral.

"Good evening, Mr. Best," said the masked figure.

Best grinned.

"We meet quickly," said Best.

"And part as quickly," said the masked one. "I have little patience with meddlers. I know you and your kind. I got my own education in Chicago, New York, San Francisco and Seattle. I am here in Shanghai, my native city, where I can best apply my knowledge, and no ordinary dick is going to cheat me of my due, understand?"

Best bowed.

"I suppose I'm in for the usual Oriental torture?" he asked.

"No. What use? No foreigner can stand the pain an Oriental can, and there is no satisfaction in hearing a white pig squeal. You get a short shrift.

"To-morrow morning one of my men will find your body somewhere around Tea or Saddle Islands, at the mouth of the Whangpoo. It will be a further warning to the tradesmen, pinch-penny exploiters of my people, that Suchow Satan cannot be stopped.

"Only, you will not be able to say that the humble sampan dweller who finds you is a Son of Satan. Deplorable, is it not? Not even your blood money will pay you for that."

"Boasting is easy, Satan," said Best, hoping that the sweat didn't show too plainly on his forehead, probing at the red mask in an endeavor to pierce the identity of the master of the Sons.

"When I am dead is the time to boast. How did you get the second ruby into my pocket? How did you know where to telephone me?"

"Ivy Li," said Satan succinctly.

"I don't believe it," snapped Best. "You killed her brother."

"She tell you that?" the black eyes behind the red mask narrowed.

"Yes." No use evading what Satan must already have known.

"She lied," said the masked one. "It was part of my scheme to bring you to me. American adventurers always follow the lure of the exotic, even in Chinese women! Take him out!"

The last three words, repeated immediately by Satan in Shanghai dialect, set the red-gowned ones into swift action. Best was flung flat, gathered into the arms of several of the men, blindfolded, taken to the outer air, whose breeze he could feel on his cheeks. He didn't offer any resistance. He knew what was coming. His heart hammered with excitement.

THE SAMPAN moved out of Suchow Creek, into the rolling evil waters of the Whangpoo. Best knew that it headed downstream. He tried to figure distance by guess. He knew, or thought he did, when they were opposite the Customs Jetty. He wondered if the Sons had changed their robes, or brazenly wore them on the bosom of the stream.

Finally, the craft slowed.

Heavy hands were laid on his legs. He knew that weights were being fastened to him. Weights heavy enough to hold him down, but not too heavy for the current's drag. They began to swing him.

Terror gripped him momentarily when he thought of the turgid, horrible river, in which dead animals and people, and the refuse of a mighty city, floated. He was hurled into space.

He struck, held his breath. But already he was bending, fighting at his bonds. A few kicks showed him he could not keep himself afloat without the use of his arms. He managed to free one hand. He tugged and pulled at his bonds, now being tightened by the water. Deeper, deeper he sank. Finally he broke the weights free.

Then the bonds on his ankles, the bonds on his left hand.

His automatics were gone.

He kicked savagely to the surface, coming up under the counter of a slowly cruising junk. Nobody apparently saw him. The lateness of the night perhaps, and the sluggishness of a watchman. He gasped great lungfuls of air into his chest. Then he started swimming. Crawling things rubbed against him. Slime oozed past him. He swam past the junk, riding so low in the water that its effluvium was horrible in his nostrils.

He saw a sampan putting slowly about, heading back for Suchow Creek. He paralleled its route at a distance, keeping it in sight, careful that he himself was not discovered. He was conscious, as he swam, that his right palm grasped something, something to which he had instinctively clung. He knew it for another ruby. He pushed it into his pocket, where two others rested. Suchow Satan, it seemed, disdained to take back that which he had given.

The sampan pulled into Suchow Creek. Best swam in, crawled over the side of another sampan, before the startled eyes of a dozing coolie, who jumped out, started to shout. But Best was atop him before he could utter a sound. His fist cracked to the man's jaw. The Chinese went down.

Best took his clothing. He bound the fellow, tossed him into his own hold. Best threw his own clothing over the side. He smeared his face with the muck of the sampan's deck. In the dark he might, just possibly, pass as a Chinese.

He watched the dirty white sails of the sampan he believed had taken him downstream. When he heard shouted, sing-song orders, he knew, for he had heard the voice before, giving the orders which had cast him over the side.

GRIMLY, purposefully, he started across the decks of the sampans, which were so close together their decks were almost a continuous board walk. He

came to the deck of the vessel which had taken him to his "death." He heard voices in the hold. He looked about him. He did not seem to be observed.

His face was a dirty mask as he stepped into the hatch, started down again, sure this time that he wouldn't be surprised and knocked out. Suchow Satan, it seemed, did know something of American strong-arm methods.

Sure of his death, the Sons were taken by surprise. But, unfortunately for Best, the masked one's dais was so situated that Satan's back was to Best. Best wasted no time.

He snapped: "Up, Satan! Look this way and let me see your face!"

For brief seconds, the red-garbed ones were frozen to immobility. Best saw their swart, savage faces. The man on the dais was like a statue. He moved, but did not turn his head. His mask had gone back over his face before Best could do anything about it. But no hands went up.

Satan, even as he slapped on his mask, dived, straight forward to the floor beyond his dais, bringing the dais between himself and Best. Best started forward. Guns appeared in the hands of Satan's minions. This time, if Best were caught, they'd kill him before throwing him into the river.

Men fell before his murderous charge like ripe wheat. He was hurling himself at the dais. Bullets singed his cheeks, snapped past his ears. He felt the hot wind of their passing. Four or five men were knocked down. Others began firing at the lights.

Best gained the dais, peered at the spot where Satan should have sprawled, saw only a black hole, with water at its bottom, knew how Satan had escaped. He had dived into the hole, under the boat, swimming strongly away, to come up wherever he elected between any two moored sampans. To find him would be to find a needle in a haystack.

Best whirled back to the steps by



*Men fell before
his murderous
charge like ripe
wheat.*

which he had entered the bizarre hold, intent on getting out before the stair should be blocked. Coolies in padded gowns blocked his path. His fists came into play, covering dirty faces with spurting blood. He cleared a way for himself, jumping from sampan to sampan.

He came to an open bit of water between sampans, held his breath, dived. He opened his eyes on Erebus. No chance, this way, of spotting the escaping Satan against streaks of light seeping down between the sampans. Which way had Satan gone? There was no way of telling. Best swam to the next opening, came up, crawled atop a sampan.

He stood up, peering this way and that. All sampans, now, seemed to be miraculously deserted. He knew why. Sampan dwellers, having failed to stop Best, were hiding from the wrath of the Sons. Panting, Best stood on the teetering deck, his eyes searching the gloom over Suchow, and the decks of her many sampans.

FINALLY, beyond the creek, opposite where he stood, screened by the high poop of one of the sampans, he saw a figure, dripping, emerge from the creek.

Best started along the decks, in silence. The red-robed figure darted up the bank. Rows of rickshas were vis-

ible beyond. Satan crawled into one. The curtain was drawn across its front. The ricksha darted away. Best crawled into another. The puller shook his head, his face white through the grime. He wouldn't budge. The other ricksha was getting away. But it was pulled by a running man, and a man without a ricksha should be able to keep pace with it. Best broke into a run.

Instantly a dozen rickshas, as though by accident, barred the way across Suchow Creek Bridge. Best wasted no time. He struck savagely at the polls of the ricksha pullers. They went down in silence, going into dreamland before his wallops with, perhaps, dreams of the money they would be paid by the Sons for trying to thwart pursuit. Best was through. The vanishing ricksha was turning a corner off the Bund. Best figured it was into Kiukiang Road.

He speeded up, taking a short cut, hoping that his hastily gained knowledge of the city would stand him in good stead, hoping to cut the retreat of Satan.

He reached Kiukiang by a side street, settled down to a walk, keeping to the shadows.

Presently, he shrank back. A leisurely moving ricksha appeared in the moonlight. The passenger was an obese man, wearing the conventional black, with black skull cap and red coral button. By no widest stretch of the imagination could it be the slender man Best thought of simply as Satan.

But—

The ricksha puller was the man Best had seen scurrying away with Satan. Keeping to the shadows, Best followed easily, keeping the ricksha in sight. He followed for fifteen minutes. Finally the obese one stepped out, waved a hand of dismissal at the ricksha puller, who drew away. Best followed the fat man to a compound gate, where Satan—if it were Satan—had utterly vanished.

Best whirled back, guessing that the man's disappearance into the compound had been a ruse to slip any possible shadower. Satan knew American methods, all right, but Best did not believe that he, Best, had been observed.

He followed the ricksha coolie, caught up with him, stepped calmly into the vehicle. The man whirled on him, protesting.

"Take me to Satan!" Best snapped, knowing that the one word, Satan, would be understood by the puller. The man screamed. Best stepped forward, struck him with hard knuckles. "Take me to Satan!" he repeated.

THE PULLER darted away, toward the Bund, turned into the foreign concessions, to Best's amazement. Finally, in the purlieu of Avenue Edward the Seventh, he stopped, pointed. Best looked at the man, his expression grim, put a finger to his lips for silence, entered the foyer of an apartment house. There were names on a door plate. They meant nothing to him, with one exception: Ivy Li.

There was a bell, a room number. Mystified, Best pressed the button. Far within the house he heard it jangle. The door clicked. He glanced again at the door plate to make sure of the number.

Ivy Li must be very foolish, to answer a summons as late at night as this, with one of those symbolical rubies recently in her possession to show what Satan would do by way of vengeance.

But he went up. The house was creepy with silence. He found the door. It was standing slightly ajar. He knocked. There was no answer.

He felt about for a light switch, found it.

There was a door leading into a bedroom. No sound of breathing came out. Ivy Li, it seemed, was not at home. He went into the bedroom, warm from recent human occupancy, thick

with Ivy's perfume, and found a light. He was wondering, with Ivy gone, who had answered his late summons. When the light came on he knew that Ivy Li had not done it, for she was dead.

Around her neck was the silken cord of the strangler.

In her right palm—she was lying on her back, with her arms flung wide and her black hair a cloud on the pillow—was a ruby. Satan had been and gone, then! Had it been Satan himself who had answered the summons? Where was he now?

Best stared at the Chinese murder victim on the bed. She was garbed in filmy negligee. She looked even more beautiful in death. Her face was a mask of terror. Best, automatically, took the ruby from her hand, whispered to the girl whose vengeance, when it came, would never be known to her this side the grave: "I'll pay up for you, kid, so help me!"

Then he whirled, went back out, down the stairs at breakneck speed. No use hunting the red-garbed one in the apartment house. There were too many hiding places. Satan had probably hidden in Ivy's front room, slipping out as Best entered the bedroom.

Outside, Best found the ricksha in which he had come to Ivy's quarters, which he had never before visited. He hadn't even known the girl's address. There was something strange about the ricksha, he noted on examining it, quite aside from the casket in which he found the red robe of Satan, for which the man had obviously exchanged the robes of the fat man, padding himself, doubtless, with pillows. He knew his ricksha pullers, it seemed. But this one would never serve him again.

HE WAS DEAD, crumpled in the seat of his own ricksha, with the curtain hiding him from the curious, save for his feet. Since ricksha pullers usually slept in their vehicles, not even po-

licemen would investigate before morning. The man had been stabbed. The knife, still in the wound, pierced a piece of paper on which was written:

"When I order men to dispose of meddlers I do not brook failure. Nor do I allow men to live who bring meddlers to me; this ricksha puller, for instance. Ivy Li died for wishing for vengeance. You are welcome to the ruby."



Best pried it from the hand of the dead ricksha puller.

He still had strings to his bow. Satan's Sons knew too much about everything. Best went now to the American Consulate, where a man was always on duty, at his instigation, against just this sort of need of him. He identified himself with some difficulty, garbed as a coolie as he was, and made his demands:

"I want the addresses and names of all the business men whose money I am taking, also the layouts of their compounds—and the promise of the consulate that I won't be prosecuted for breaking and entering."

It took half an hour to get detailed information.

Half an hour later, he broke and entered for the first time, the home of Cargill. He was silent as a ghost, and as efficient as a prowling cat. He had borrowed a tiny flashlight from the consulate.

He concentrated on the servants'

quarters, got into each one, flashed his light briefly on the face of the sleepers, picking the bedrooms of Number One boys by their size. He froze when the Number One boy of Cargill stirred in his sleep, sighed. He snapped out the light before the man could waken.

Next, the home of Carter Blas, a Frenchman. Again the swift, careful scrutiny of a yellow face—and a right hand. He was remembering something about a right hand, the right hand of a man who had worn a red mask.

Dawn was almost breaking, and it was time for servants to be stirring, when he had completed his series of breaking and entering.

Tired, he went to his office for a couple of hours of sleep, which he took in his chair, with his feet on the desk. The desk was shoved against the office door. The windows of the office were barricaded. If any one came in, things would fall and waken him.

He wakened at ten o'clock, when business men usually appeared, yawning, at their offices. Then he telephoned each foreigner in turn, gave strange instructions, sat back to await results. They, at least half of them, demanded explanations which he withheld, told him he was a fool, that Chinese servants couldn't be induced to talk, or even mention the name of Satan.

BUT at twelve o'clock sharp, fully a score of Chinese servants stood in his office. Most of them understood English, he knew, at least the pidgin. Behind the servants stood their masters. Best ignored the servants, spoke to their masters.

"Men were killed last night," he said, "also my secretary, Ivy Li. Satan—I believe it was Satan—killed a ricksha puller and Ivy Li. Now, I'm going to question your servants. They've got to tell me what they know about Satan and the Sons."

Black eyes looked at Best in sullen

defiance. White men shook their heads. Jean Morin spoke in French to Cargill, who interpreted: "They risk their lives if they speak!"

"Then they do know," said Best grimly. "If they do, I intend to find out."

He rose, stepped to the double ranks of servants, in which Number One boys stood proudly apart from Number Two boys and kitchen coolies. He looked at their right hands. They all seemed to be puzzled by his behavior. Finally he grabbed one man by the wrist, jerked him free of the others, whirled him about for them to see.

"Look!" he snapped. "Tell me if this is not the man you all know as Satan, leader of the Sons! No use lying. He wears the jade thumb ring I saw last night on the right thumb of the man garbed in red, wearing a red mask."

Knees trembled among the servants. They licked their lips. They looked down, but said nothing. Cargill exploded.

"That's my Number One boy," he snapped. "He's been with me for five years. I trust him with everything, even my bank accounts!"

"His fingerprints, dollars to doughnuts, will be found on this paper," said Best grimly, producing the piece of paper left with the dead ricksha puller. "We'll take his prints now."

Best, while the servants maintained a sullen silence, took the prints swiftly, compared them.

"They tally," he said grimly. "Now, Sung, spill the dirt!"

Sung said nothing. His eyes shifted slightly, looked askance at Cargill, then at another of the foreigners. Noting that glance, Best whirled, grabbed the wrists of Jean Morin, the Frenchman.

"A Chinese servant," said Best grimly, "is always loyal, even to death. Sung has been loyal to his master, Cargill, but that master is Jean Morin, who doesn't speak a word of English,

apparently, yet whose voice is that which came to me over the telephone yesterday immediately after I accepted this job, speaking perfect English——”

“Why, you lousy, lying——” burst from the lips of Jean Morin, who struggled in the grasp of Syl Best.

“See? Hear?” said Best. “Didn’t I tell you?”

When Morin and Sung were manacled together, Cargill asked: “How did you know?”

“THE VOICE, for one thing,” said Best. “The jade thumb ring for another, on Sung. The reported death of Morin’s Number One boy for another, to show that Morin had been badly treated by the Sons. And there was a bruise on Helen Carwood’s throat that Sung’s ring could have made.

“Then, one other thing: I was a dick in Frisco’s Chinatown. Six years ago, a wealthy Chinese merchant was robbed of one hundred well-matched, pigeon-blood rubies. The dragnet went out for an Eurasian known as Frenchie Jean, known to have operated in big cities having fairly extensive Chinatowns. He was never found. I almost dropped dead when I saw the first ruby and recognized it.”

“Eurasian?” gasped Cargill, staring at Jean Morin.

“Yes, about an eighth Chinese,” said Best grimly. “Look at him closely. Well, Frenchie, how about it?”

“Nuts!” said Jean Morin. “Sung is Satan. You’ve proved that, but——”

“But your Chinese blood will give Chinese authority jurisdiction,” said Best grimly, “which means decapitation. Take your choice between that and foreign justice. Confess and take life in a Chinese prison, or let me prove what I say and get the beheading knife——”

“I’ll take the knife,” said Morin, with

a visible shudder. “I know Chinese prisons. The *cangue*, that heavy wooden yoke about the neck, would drive me mad in a week. Too bad, though, Best, that a promise now has to be broken.”

“Promise?”

“Yes. I promised you the rubies. Now, being an honest man, you’ll have to take them back to Yat Low, the original owner.”

“All of which,” said Best, “amounts to a confession. Yat Low is dead. He left me the rubies, provided I could find them and punish the man who got them.

“Incidentally, Morin, how do you suppose Ivy Li happened to be hired by me? I’ll tell you. Yat Low was a maternal uncle. He didn’t know, of course, that she would die, nor that Ivy’s brother would be slain. The long arm of Chinese vengeance, Morin, reaches far, doesn’t it? It is as though Yat Low had reached back from the grave with my hands——”

“Frenchie Jean” shrugged, arched his brows. That gesture, especially the arching of the brows, markedly showing his Asiatic background, was eloquent; as was his Oriental, fatalistic acceptance of the approaching shadow of the knife.

“Satan, of course,” said Best, looking at Sung, “dies with you.”

Sung bowed low, spoke for the first time.

“There is still Chinese vengeance, Best,” he said, “and many Sons whom you have not slain. They will never forget, forgive, or cease to attempt vengeance for my fall. I lose face by dying. My successor will regain it.”

“We’ll see,” said Best grimly. “We’ll cut each head of the red hydra as it shows itself.”

“I really believe, Best,” said Cargill, “that we, meaning you, will do exactly that.”

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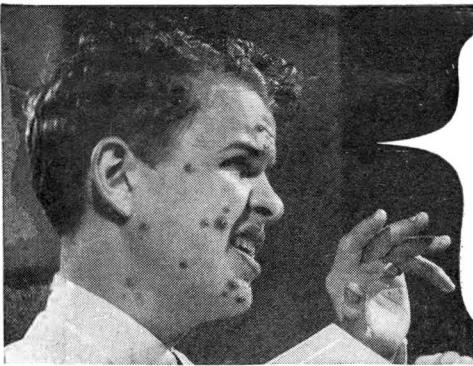
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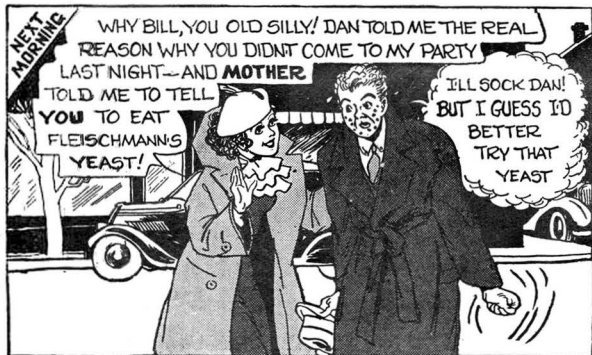
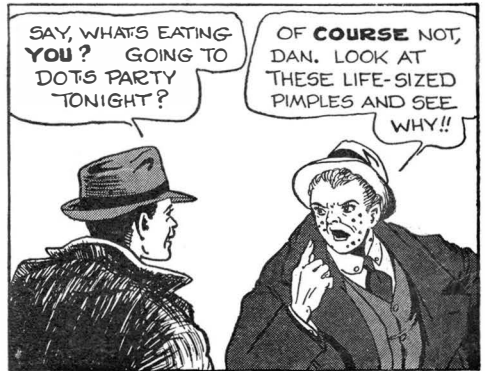
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