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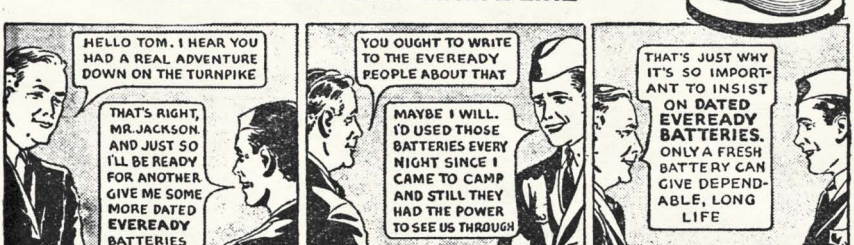

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A STREET & SMITH PUBLICATION

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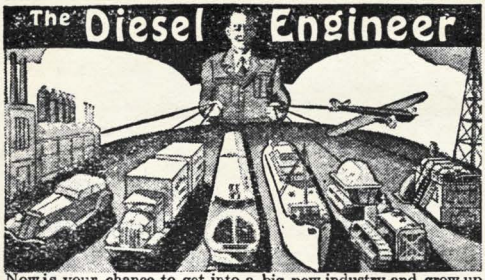

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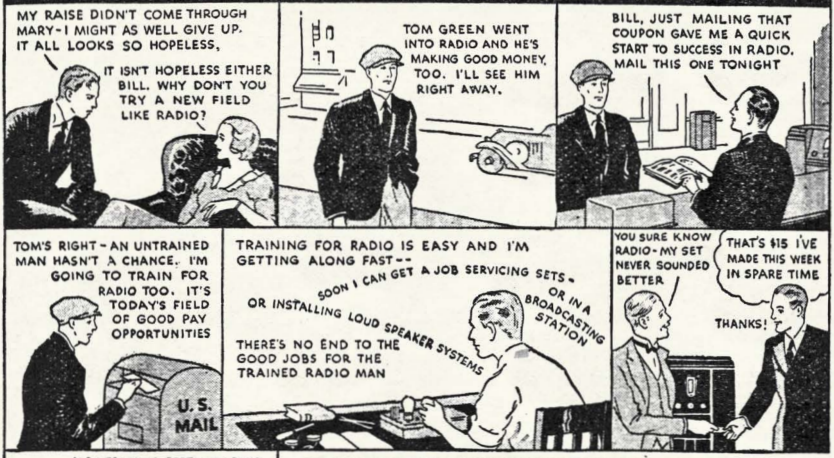

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A Spanish Foreign Legion Novel

TOUGH!

THE THING was there, a ghost shape rooted in the rocky slope ahead of him. Fred Ames snapped his rifle to ready, and spat out the challenge between his teeth: *"Centinela alerte!"*

Three months ago he'd known no Spanish. You learned things fast in the Foreign Legion. You learned fast or you learned too late!

Time hung back—slow seconds dragged themselves out into the tortured eternity of Moroccan night. Fred's finger stiffened on the trigger. Then—after eternity—came the answer.

"Alerte está! Hello, Ames—that you? By Jove, I thought it was one of those Riff cutthroats!"

Fred lowered his rifle, stepped forward with a grin.

"What's the matter, kid?"

Chadwick's face was a milk-white smear on the darkness.

"I—they—the devils got the lad on the next beat to mine! Got him in the throat."

"I know," Fred said. "I heard the shot. They're liable to get us all before morning. But it doesn't pay to get the jitters, kid. You got to go sometime."

They moved closer together. Bodies touching, they could almost see one another's faces.

"Hey," Fred said, low, "did you find out who our new striper is going to be?"

"Our rotten luck," Chadwick muttered, "they're giving us the worst bounder of the lot! It's Cabo Carlos!"

Fred said: "Phew!" For "Cabo" Carlos was famous in every *bandera* of

There were no rounds, no referee, no rest periods. It was slug, slug, slug——

by MIKE VALERA

the legion. He was the biggest, roughest, toughest hombre that the king ever shipped out to Africa. It was in one of the king's prisons that he had earned the name of Cabo, meaning trusty. It was in prison that he had learned about discipline. Now he was teaching it to the legionnaires—the discipline of hard labor and the whipping chain! To Fred Ames, the name of the new striper spelled a challenge.

"Tell you what, kid," he confided. "I *was* gonna pull my freight to-night. I didn't join this outfit to get in no marathon. I signed up to fight. But now I'm gonna wait. I want to get one look at this Cabo Carlos guy!"

Chadwick remained silent, trying to puzzle out the mystery of Fred's words.

"I just want one look at that guy," Fred repeated. "I want to see what a guy looks like that'll kill a soldier for

just fallin' outa line. Then I'm gonna take it on the lam."

"Not desert?" came the youngster's horrified whisper. "You'd only be throwing your life away. You know you couldn't reach the coast."

"Couldn't I?" Darkness hid Fred's smile, hid the set of his jaw. "Well, you watch me, kid! All I've ever done since I joined this outfit is to starve—and run. Especially run! I'm through, kid—washed up. I'm gonna make my break before some damn savage sticks me in the back——"

"Sh-h-h-h!" Chadwick's fingers clamped down on his arm. "What was that? Didn't you hear something?"

Fred Ames glued an ear to the darkness.

"Nope," he said, thinking of other things than lurking enemies. "Look, we're only two days' march from the coast right now. We might make it through the Riff lines with luck. We can always pick up a job on a ship. What'd you say we try it, kid?"

THE HAND that clutched his arm trembled.

"Ames," came Chadwick's agitated whisper, "there *is* somebody out there! It may be a raid. Shall I fire?"

Fred shook off the lad's hand in sudden irritation.

"Fire?" he snorted. "And get the whole camp out here? Hell, no. Keep your shirt on, kid. Maybe we'll have some fun!"

"Fun," gasped Chadwick. "Say——"

"Shut up," Fred snapped. "Listen. Heaven's sake," he added, disgusted, "the way your teeth are chattering they can hear you clear across the valley."

"I—I'd better give the alarm!"

Fred jerked the rifle from the boy's shaking hands.

"No you don't!" he said.

They stood silent, and the mumble of voices came to them like the murmur of a hidden stream.

"Hear it?"

"Shut up a minute, will you?"

There followed a moment of silence, that was deep as the boundless darkness that surrounded them. Then came another sound, closer to them this time. Something jarred loose a pebble and it went plunging down into the valley with a roar like a sudden burst from a machine gun. A jackal howled on the lower slope.

"Hear that!" Chadwick said. "That's no jackal. It's—it's one of their signals."

"Hold your horses," said Fred, listening, and then: "Here!" He shoved Chadwick's rifle into his hands. "Don't fire," he snapped, "not unless you hear something that sounds like a fight!"

Leaving the other, he melted into darkness. He went forward, step by step, straining to catch again that low mutter of voices. Then the distinct sound of a footfall sent a thrill dancing along his spine. Chadwick was right—he should have fired—but Fred Ames was disgusted with the legion and spoiling for a fight.

Another footstep—closer this time, and his legs flexed in a fighting crouch. His whole body ached for action, and he felt like hurling his rifle far out into the valley, to meet the oncoming enemy with his bare hands. But he remembered in time that he was a legionnaire and a sentry.

"Quién va?" his snapping Spanish challenge split the night.

For answer, he expected the slashing attack of the Riff horde, but there was no rush of sudden action out there in the dark.

Instead, a growling voice made reply: "Amigos!"

Fred's face split wide in a fighting grin. It was an old trick the Riffi used—to answer a sentry's challenge as though they were officers inspecting the lines. The "friend" would march up close while the sentry, peering through

the dark to make him out, never thought to look behind him.

"I'd like to see them try that one on me!"

A smoky shape loomed before him. It looked big, too big for a man. Fred frowned, puzzled. The big shape split up into two figures, one big and one much smaller.

Fred chuckled. He never measured odds when it came to a fight.

"Advance—friend!" he sang out.

THE TWO APPROACHED with confident strides. Behind them there might have been half a hundred more, but Fred only saw the two. Now he could descry the outlines of their uniforms—stolen Spanish uniforms!

Fred was tensed to send his bayonet streaking for the midsection of the closest one. That would be a good way to start things going! But, abruptly, his arms relaxed, and his jaw sagged with keen disappointment. They were not Riff after all!

If that wasn't just like this sucker war! Even in the gloom, Fred recognized the shorter of the two men. There could be no mistake about that dandified little figure, even though he could not see the waxed mustache and the malicious little eyes. Fred had seen him too often, swaggering about the streets of Sheshawan. It was Lieutenant Fulano, an officer in Fred's *bandera*. But the other he did not place at once.

Fred's gun snapped to present arms.

"You may pass, señores," he said.

But they did not pass.

Fred passed an uncomfortable second as the big fellow shouldered close to him. Could this be—— Then with no warning a knee came up and hit him in the stomach.

At the same moment his rifle was torn from his grasp.

Fred doubled up, gasping, then came up with his fists swinging. He ran straight into the steel-shod butt of his own gun. The big sergeant fell back with an ugly laugh.

The lieutenant joined in the merriment. The two of them had been celebrating.

Fred felt a light sweat break out on his body. His fists were bludgeons; his legs tensed to spring.

"Attention, you!" snapped the sergeant.

Fred remembered that they gave you six months in *pilleton* for beating up a striper.

"Very good, sergeant," said Fulano, and Fred could imagine his red little smile. "These *canalla* must be taught to be on the alert! I can see you have your own methods."

But the sergeant seemed not so well pleased.

"Canastos!" he thundered. "Is this the kind of men I am to take over? That one can take their guns out of their hands as if they were babies? *Caracoles!* I shall demand——"

"Basta," said the officer, "but *you* will soon educate them, sergeant. We shall have discipline—now."

Fred, who was only beginning to understand, stared hard at the striper. So this was the famous Cabo Carlos—and this was his idea of discipline! Well—Fred had a few ideas of his own about fair play, and at this moment they were a seething turmoil inside of him.

IT IS DOUBTFUL whether Carlos knew that there was a man left in the legion who would dare to face him in a fight. He decided at that moment to return the sentry's gun, and the way he did it carried Fred a step backward. The gun crashed across his chest with the force of a projectile. Fred had to catch it, and that kept him from using his hands long enough to remember again that, under the *pilleton* system of the legion, there was very little profit in beating up a striper.

"Attention, you!" thundered Carlos

again. "What kind of a soldier are you then, that you do not know enough to hold on to your gun? Maybe a dose of *pilleton* will teach you something, eh? Ten days for you, when we reach Sok el Arba!"

"Eso es!" said Fulano.

Fred could hardly believe his ears. After all, this was no drill ground; it was an exceedingly dangerous position in the heart of enemy territory, and they were likely to be attacked any minute.

"But, sergeant," he protested," in the darkness I could not——"

"Imbecile!" Carlos lopped off his protest. "Twenty days, then!"

Fred Ames blinked his eyes. He could feel the slow, burning rage lift the prickles on the back of his neck. The man before him was a good two inches taller than himself and the breadth of his shoulders and the depth of his great chest were such that they dwarfed even his six feet three.

Carlos was the toughest customer that the king ever sent down to tame the bantling legion, yet Fred would gladly have taken him apart on the spot and shipped him back for repairs. The scar of an old brawl had left a livid streak down the left side of Carlos' jaw. Fred's eyes fixed on that mark. It would make a beautiful target for a good, solid, right-hand smash.

But the three stripes of authority on Carlos' cuff made him pause—and besides, there was Fulano. Fred couldn't win.

"But, sergeant," he tried again, "naturally, when I recognized you——"

"Brain of a pig, of an ass!" snarled the giant. "Excuses, eh? I'll teach you to make excuses in the legion! Thirty days—and a month's pay suspended!"

Carlos spat, turned on his heel and walked away. The lesser figure of the lieutenant, trailing after, melted into the darkness.

Fred wiped the drops of helpless anger from his forehead and spat out a word which never appears in print.

There came a step behind him, and then Chadwick's strained whisper: "What was it, Ames?"

"Oh, just Cabo Carlos, our new striper. We didn't have much chance to get acquainted." And he added significantly: "Fulano was hanging around."

II.

THE FEUD that raged between the Riff village of Aïn el Fakroun and the village of Kubba Sidi Muhammad el Hadj, a few kilometers to the south, was steeped in the blood of so many years that no one remembered what had started it. Beyond the memory of the oldest, their men had been fighting each other whenever and wherever they chanced to meet in the fastness of the Atlas ranges, and the death of a warrior from Aïn el Fakroun could only be wiped out by the murder of some one from Kubba Sidi Muhammad el Hadj.

When a stripling of the southern village crept down into the fields of Aïn by night and made off with a whole herd of goats belonging to the alcayde himself, it was almost a foregone conclusion that the next night saw the disappearance of a herd belonging to the alcayde of Kubba.

They were both warrior villages, and the sweat of honest labor was as foreign to the one as to the other, but the fighting men of Kubba never referred to their neighbors save by the name *tujjar,* which meant traders, and the fire eaters of Aïn called their rivals *haddad,* or blacksmith, a word which meant fight in the proud war talk of those people.

And now a calamity had befallen both of the ancient enemies. The alcayde of Kubba, seeking to show his superior valor, had joined his forces to the banner of Abd el Krim, only to find, when it was too late, that his rival had also flung his followers into the Holy War.

And so an unkind trick of fate had made the two villages allies in the war against the alien infidel, and they were honor bound not to rob and kill each other for the duration of the war!

It was bitter medicine indeed for the two rival chieftains. Camped side by side on the slope of the Beni Hassan, where the Riff forces were toasting their day's victory over the starved and broken troops of the Spanish king, the two villages seethed under this new restraint.

The hour for feasting was over and the time was at hand for the telling of deeds of valor and the bragging of courageous exploits in the Holy War. Between the rival villages the ancient feud raged anew in a war of words.

The alcayde of Kubba sprang to his feet.

"It may be well," he called with bitter scorn, "to speak of what happened a month ago—when there is no one to recall that this was this or that was that—or to brag of what occurred a week ago, or even this afternoon. But this very night"—he turned to his rival on an impressive pause—"this very night, and not an hour ago, one of my men crossed the valley and entered the camp of the infidels. With the courage that belongs only to the men of Kubba, and with the help of the omnipotent Allah, he overcame a Spanish sentry in hand-to-hand combat. Leaving the sentry dead, he walked straight into the Spanish camp, and he returned not until he had captured so many Spanish rifles that he was laden as the burros in the *souks!*"

Triumphant, he offered the proof of his story, a pile of Spanish ordnance that lay near the fire.

The alcayde of Aïn jumped up.

"*Mugâlit!*" he shrieked, for he was old and his voice went shrill when he grew excited. "Liar! This is no proof! Your man found these infidel rifles laying by the side of the road, where any man may load ten burros with Spanish rifles. There was no fight, for since when will a man of Kubba fight for what he can win more easily by stealing?"

Men of both villages leaped to their feet. Threats and insults filled the night air. It looked as though nothing short of bloodshed would wipe out this latest grievance.

"Wait!" shouted the alcayde of Kubba. "Wait, you miserable lawyering alcayde of traders, of whining, lowland jackals! Well you know that in strength and courage you are no match for the men of Kubba. But we both fight now against the infidel, for Allah and for the great prophet Abd el Krim. Therefore we have taken oath not to shed one another's blood. And therefore——"

He paused and for a moment an electric silence held fast the men of both factions.

"And therefore——" echoed fifty whispered voices.

"Therefore," thundered the alcayde of Kubba, "we must take other means. We shall prove—this very night—which men are the bravest and the best. We shall each send across the valley a party of equal number, and this time they shall bring back, not lies and stories but *proof*—human proof!"

"Agreed!" cried the alcayde of Aïn. leaping in the air. "For once you have spoken like a man!"

"Agreed!" eagerly shouted the warriors of Aïn and of Kubba, making a scramble for their weapons.

And each alcayde made ready to pick his men.

ON THE OPPOSITE SIDE of the valley there was no such ebullient enthusiasm. But the raw orbit of the king's bantling legion bred its own rivalries and its own hot hatreds.

Fred Ames was seething as he turned to walk back along his beat. He had only his luck to thank that he was not killed, for he no longer thought of dan-

ger. The face of Cabo Carlos hung before him like a goading challenge.

Men had tried before to ride Fred Ames. None of them had gotten away with it for long. The thought that there was no way of evening accounts with the striper lashed him to a fury.

The darkness and the loneliness of the outpost gave Fred every chance to think about his grievance, and the more he thought about it the hotter raged his anger. His impulse was to leave his post and go looking for Carlos then and there.

But he canceled that. The chances were he'd run into some other striper, or an officer instead. No. The new sergeant would certainly inspect the line again. Fred decided—grimly—to wait.

"Centinela alerte!"

The far cry brought Fred back sharply from his bitter thoughts. Suddenly he realized that he had walked far beyond the southern limit of his beat. By this time, surely, he should have met Franz Thule, the Austrian who walked the post south of his.

Fred stopped where he stood.

"Centinela," he called, *"alerte!"* And he strained to catch an answer. Franz might be down near the other end of his beat.

One—two—three—the tortured seconds dragged by. Four—five—six—and the rocks sent back only the echo of his own challenge. No answer. No sound of marching footsteps—of anything—out there. If Franz did not answer, then that could mean only one thing.

Fred raised his gun and fired into the air. He started forward, eyes probing the dark, mouth a grim line. Perhaps poor Franz was not beyond help, if Fred reached him in time. The Riff knife work was not always up to standard.

But he had advanced no more than ten steps when his foot collided with something soft and heavy, and he bent down with a low exclamation. His hand touched a rigid shoulder under thin khaki cloth.

"Franz!" he cried.

His fingers trailed in a warm, wet mess, blundered by accident on the cruel wound from which it still gushed forth. Blood. This time the assassin's knife had sped true and clean. There was no life in that huddled form.

FRED fired a second alarm, to give his location. He heard the pounding of boots over the rocky soil and the hollow rattle of a canteen bouncing against the hip of the running sergeant. Grimly, Fred waited for Carlos.

But as he straightened from bending over the dead Austrian, a live fury fell on his back. Wire-tough muscles clamped about his throat.

"Damn!"

The word burst like a bubble from his lips, but it burst without noise, for the unseen hands that gripped his throat pinned the sound from escaping. Fred had been asking for a fight. It seemed Allah had answered his prayer.

His legs went taut. He could not see his enemy, but he could smell him, and his hissing breath was in Fred's ear. With a momentous surge of his back muscles he tried to throw him, but the fellow had ridden wild mares before he was weaned, probably. He stuck.

Fred whirled like a spun top and the strangler grunted. Still he stuck, though he might have lost his grip had he not caught Fred's left ear in the grip of his strong teeth. Fred's head exploded with the fearful pain of it. He had asked for a fight. Well, he was getting it!

The night spilled ghost shapes all around him—shapes robed in the dun-colored *jellabs* that the enemy wore. They swarmed out from behind every rock; they popped up from the ground; they were wherever he chose to look and see the dull, glistening metal of

their knives. Still he could not throw off the strangling, clinging devil who seemed cleated to his spine.

He heard Carlos, thirty yards away in the darkness, bellowing for him. Fred would have been glad now of a little help from his husky enemy. But he had no breath with which to answer. Awkward beneath the clinging weight, wrenched all out of balance by the grip on his throat, he lunged with his bayonet for the nearest attacker.

The single word "Allah!" exploded from the Riff's lips, it had the hollow ring of death in it, and Fred's heart sang as his first victim sank to the ground. Then—and it could not have been more than a second or two since that lithe shape landed on his back—they were swarming over him like ants over the half-eaten carcass of an old lion. His rifle was torn from his hands.

M-mp! His right fist exploded against a hard Riff skull. *K-lung!* His left sank wrist deep into the solar plexus of another. He fought with fists and feet. He butted savagely with his hard, round skull and exulted when he heard the ribs of an enemy crack like a snapping spar. In the heat of the fight he forgot to wonder why they did not use their knives. The fellow who hung to his back got the wildest ride of his life, but it did Fred no good in the end.

Their sheer weight crushed him to the ground. But Fred went right on fighting. Bodies tumbled to right and left, then recovered and closed in again.

Then something struck at him from above and behind, struck at the little hollow where his neck joined his skull. There was a moment when fire flashes filled the resounding night, searing his eyes and burning deep into his brain. The sound of their snarling, gasping breath rolled far away into the distance. Fred felt the good earth slipping away.

IT SURPRISED HIM not a little that he was alive. The Riff never took prisoners, did they? But he knew he was alive by the throbbing at the base of his skull and the searing pain of his torn left ear.

"I'd like to get my hands on the black devil that did that!" he muttered.

It took more than one knock-out blow to take the fight out of Fred Ames, and when he opened his eyes he was ready to take up the battle right where he had left it. But the lashings that bound his arms to his sides left him about as much freedom of movement as a dropped, sawed log.

He lay back on the hard ground. He wished his head would stop spinning so that he might figure something out. He might be able then to discover what he was doing, alive, on the wrong side of the valley. For the men crowding around him spoke a strange tongue. All of them were robed in the brown *jellabs* and wore the green turbans of the enemy. The firelight flickered in living patterns of raw light and shadow across their bronze, delighted faces. He was in the Riff camp, no doubt of it. Fred closed his eyes.

He found that he remembered everything that happened up to the time something knocked him out. But nothing explained the miracle that he was alive.

Those others had been murdered. Only he had been brought here, captive. There must be a reason. Chills danced on his chest and down his spine as he recalled stories of what these savage fanatics did to prisoners. Torture! Mutilation! Fred shuddered.

There was plenty of excitement over him. Men poked his chest with long, brown fingers and felt his hard muscles, exclaiming with delight. As they pawed over him, as they slapped at his thighs and biceps, as they rolled him over on his chest and back again, Fred's throbbing head was forgotten and his bewilderment deepened to a dull, black rage.

"Just let me loose for a second," he growled up at a brown face that grinned over him. "I'll hand you a sock that you won't get over in a hurry!"

Came a tall man, straight as a spear. His face bore the stamp of authority. Under his brown haik he wore a white robe. He was an alcayde, or petty chief. Fred could see that from the way the others fell back at his approach.

Now the babel of shouts died suddenly to silence. The tall man in the lemon-yellow turban looked down at Fred with evident delight. He did not use his hands, but he appraised Fred's sturdy arms and legs as though the captive were a prize piece of horseflesh. Then he, too, seemed to go out of his mind. He began shouting at the top of his lungs, and while he shouted he waved his arms in wide, triumphant circles.

The alcayde of Kubba was excited indeed.

Like a living trumpet he blared his victory and the triumph of his men across the firelighted circle, where he knew the alcayde of the rival village was seated amidst his diwan.

"Hear, O alcayde of traders!" he shouted. "No longer shall your limping, fleabitten jackasses bray that they are the equals of the fighting men of Kubba. For my men have brought proof for you—proof of their craft and of their valor!"

He struck a pose and waited for the effect of his words to strike home. But since the alcayde of Aïn failed to become excited and to demand in his querulous old voice what this proof was, the alcayde of Kubba decided to tell him anyway.

"They have brought the biggest 'Spaniard' in all the army of the infidels!" he yelled in triumph. "They have brought the very *muhâni*—the very champion of the infidels—and they have captured him alive!"

A TENSE SILENCE followed his boast. Standing about their prize, the men of Kubba waited for an outburst of jealous rage from their rivals. But none came.

Instead, the alcayde of Aïn stood up serenely from the midst of his diwan. He was a fox, that alcayde! He had thrown off his haik and he stood there in all the dignity of his white, official robe. His crafty old face was wreathed in smiles as he faced his rival across the wondering heads of their men.

"Woe to the braggart who crows before the sun is up!" he taunted. "For he shall never see the garden of eternity!"

The alcayde of Kubba was sore puzzled. Instead of worrying his rival, he was beginning to be worried himself. It looked as though that old devil of Aïn might have something up his sleeve.

"Woe to him who shuns the truth," cried the other, "for he shall never find the abode of peace!"

Again a stunned silence followed. The alcayde of Kubba roused himself.

"Explain—explain your meaning, you alcayde of a jackal pack!"

"Explain—explain!" howled the men of Kubba.

It was the turn of the rival leader to strike a triumphant attitude. His look was patronizing.

"Hear then, you alcayde of cheating blacksmiths," he squealed. "My men have also taken a prisoner. And he is in fact the biggest Spaniard ever seen—ay, as Allah is my judge, our Spaniard is the *muhâni*—the champion of champions!"

"What?" gasped the whole tribe of Kubba. Those who were sitting scrambled to their feet.

"A purse," proclaimed him of Aïn loftily, just as though money meant nothing to him, "a purse of ten thousand dirhems if ours is not the true *muhâni*—ten thousand dirhems if he is not the bigger, the heavier, the fiercer——"

This time the assassin's knife had sped true and clean. Blood——

"Wait!" cried the alcayde of Kubba.

But his rival's cutting whine shrilled on: "The men of Kubba may be brave enough at stealing goats, but when it comes to taking slaves——"

"Hold!" roared the alcayde of Kubba. "Silence, you old goat, for this is madness. I tell you—I tell you our prisoner is the true *muhâni.*"

And leaving his own men he strode over among the men of Aïn. The alcayde of Aïn, squeaking with laughter, pointed in triumph to the ground at his feet. The worried rival stared down amazed at the bound giant who lay there, glaring in wild defiance, making the earth resound with his threshing and cursing. As the alcayde of Kubba stared, his face fell. When he returned to his own fire his face was dark and long with worry.

"It is true," he whispered uneasily to those who knew him best. "They *have* a prisoner. He is a veritable monster and——"

"Our *muhâni,*" bragged his rival loudly, "has the strength of ten men and the courage of a lion. Two of my men were killed in making him prisoner!"

These taunts were more than could be borne. The alcayde of Kubba was near desperation. If he allowed the men of Aïn their triumph he would never hear the last of it. He shook his clenched fists over his head at the thick night sky. What was he to do?

A stinging laugh came from the alcayde of Aïn. The alcayde of Kubba snatched hotly for his rifle. But an old man of his diwan caught his hand in time. The old man drew him aside and for a moment they whispered together.

The alcayde of Kubba looked sharply toward Fred. Then he turned back to the old counselor and they fell to whispering and nodding again. Finally the alcayde strode over to where Fred lay. For a moment he looked down at the prisoner sternly, then he dropped to his knees beside him.

FRED AMES looked up at him with narrowed, seething eyes. What did this high monkey-monk want with him? Were they going to try to force him to reveal some Spanish military secret? Was that why they had brought him here? His thoughts were grim, for he knew no secrets of the high command. He would be tortured, he supposed. But the alcayde was talking to him.

In very bad Spanish he managed to make Fred understand. "It may be," he said slowly, "that you can earn your freedom."

Fred's eyes were like narrow bars of sunlight dancing on the upturned edges of a pair of fine ground knives. That they would ever let him go was too much to believe. But Fred had a very special reason for wanting his freedom. He was even ready to buy it at a stiff price, for there was a certain sergeant of the legion that Fred wanted very much to see.

"O. K., mister," he growled. "Shoot."

The alcayde bent forward eagerly.

"We have heard that you men of the infidel tribes have many strange and savage customs, and that among them—that among them, you sometimes fight each other with your bare hands." He looked long and searchingly at Fred before he plunged on: "Tell me, infidel—is there any truth in this wild tale?"

Fred looked up at his captor. As he looked his eyes grew wide, and then began to dance with amusement as he realized that this brown chieftain was ignorant of all that was finest and best in life. The mere mention of fight was enough to bring a grin to Fred's face any time. His deep, throated laugh rolled out.

"If you don't think so, mister, all you gotta do is untie my hands!"

It was his tone rather than his words

that the alcayde understood, for he knew fighting talk when he heard it.

"Good," he exclaimed. "Good."

He rose, beaming, and again he swept across to where his rival waited. The two of them drew together. For a few minutes they conversed in snarling undertones, while their men watched them with narrowed eyes, ready to seize their weapons at the slightest provocation. When the alcayde returned to his own fire his confidence had evidently taken quite a leap. He snapped commands right and left. There was still a fighting chance for Kubba.

Half a dozen men seized Fred Ames and pulled him to his feet. The alcayde looked up at his tall prisoner.

"You are to fight another infidel," he said, "for your life. The same terms are open to both of you. The one who wins the fight will go free. The one who loses, dies. Is it agreed?"

Behind him the men of Kubba had their eyes riveted to Fred's face. The whole, savage pack hung on his answer.

THEY SAW his pale face transformed. His sullen stare was gone and the deep lines were gone from above his eyes. His magic grin made his face a blaze of glory.

"Agreed?" His deep chuckle rolled out. "Sure. Who do you want me to lick?"

They stripped the cords from his arms and the joy of freedom swelled his chest as he flexed his stiff muscles. Eager hands ripped the tunic and the shirt from his back. He stood among the robed shapes naked to the waist, a young god of battle.

The alcayde looked him up and down with satisfaction. He was an old judge of fighting flesh and Fred looked a fair bet, even against the surly giant who was to uphold the honor of Aïn. True, Fred was a good deal smaller. In sheer size and brute force he seemed a pygmy beside the other, but the glow of young strength was on his white, hairless flesh and the surface of his big rippling muscles was satin-smooth and hard as steel. The alcayde noted that there was a reddish tinge to his unruly hair and a fighting flame buried somewhere beneath the cold-blue surface of his eyes.

"Good," said the alcayde again. "Good." But a great deal of his show of confidence was for the benefit of his men. As he turned away he grumbled in his black beard, "But for the will of Allah their *muhâni* will surely kill this stripling!"

He was a great believer in size and in brute strength.

The camp hummed with excitement. Other tribes were encamped close by, their fires flung far along the adjacent slopes. But this was a private affair, a tense episode in the ancient feud between the villages of Kubba Sidi Muhammad el Hadj and Aïn el Fakroun. A strictly private affair.

A ring was cleared between the two fires. The ground was level and rock-hard. The men of Kubba made up half the circle, the other half was formed by the men of Aïn. The front row squatted on their heels and the back row stood. Across the narrow space the rivals glared at each other with hot hatred, their weapons ready to go into action at a moment's notice. They left the talking to their leaders; only their eyes spoke, and in them was the weight of all the bitter, blood-drenched years of hating, killing, robbing. This was no mere sport. It was a serious affair for the men of the rival villages. Fred was shoved first into that ring of hot blood and of ready steel.

"Well," Fred's bearded backer asked across the ring, "where is this great *muhâni* of yours? If he is not afraid, let him fight!"

The other alcayde looked Fred up and down and sneered.

"Braggart!" he hooted. "Our *muhâni* will kill this boy!"

The taunt had a ring of truth. It stung the alcayde of Kubba. The two chiefs tensed as though they would leap at each other. The hand of the alcayde of Aïn flashed to his knife. For a moment their truce was in grave danger. But the moment died, for just then came a full-throated roar from the side of Aïn.

Head lowered level with his elephantine shoulders, great hairy arms outstretched, bellowing deep in his throat like a prize bull at a bullfight, the toughest Spaniard in all Morocco plunged into the ring.

III.

"MUHANI—muhâni!" roared the men of Aïn, already sure of their victory.

"Muhâni—muhâni!" the men of Kubba howled back defiantly, beginning to hope against hope as they saw the huge size of the opposing champion, the raw power of his great muscles and the keen battle lust in his swart face.

But when Fred Ames saw the man he was to fight he threw back his head. His laughter roared rolling out into the night. The whole thing was mad, impossible; but this was the maddest thing of all.

The other prisoner was Cabo Carlos! The chance Fred had wished for more than anything in the world was his by a mad prank of fate. When Fred had fired his alarm over the dead sentry, Carlos had rushed toward the sentry line. He had come pounding up just in time to fall captive to the raiding party sent out by the alcayde of Aïn.

Like Fred, he had put up a gallant fight, but the Riff had been too many for him. He had grasped eagerly at the chance to fight for life and freedom; for, whatever else he was, Cabo Carlos was a fighting man. Now he rushed into the ring roaring, prepared to win his liberty by the might of his huge, muscle-molded body. When he saw who the opposing gladiator was he stopped short, snorting like a winded race horse. His eyes glinted white with rage. His bellow of rage must have echoed clear across the valley to the Spanish camp.

"So it is you! You damned imbecile —I'll teach you to fire, and draw me into a trap!"

For the sergeant was a fighting man from his feet to the roots of his crisp, black hair, and the sight of Fred Ames was all that was needed to raise him to the very peak of his fury.

Fred's merriment nearly proved the end for him. Before he had time to settle into fighting form he felt himself gripped by the throat and shaken like a dry twig in the teeth of a simoon. Carlos' right paw rose in a smoking slap that sent him reeling.

The men of Aïn yelled in triumph.

Fred shook his head like a swimmer who has swallowed some water. He caught himself, balanced himself on the balls of his feet.

"Why hello, sergeant!" he drawled, and his lips took the pattern of a grin. "Thirty days, huh?" he added grimly.

And with his chin pulled in close to his left shoulder, his two fists fanning like pistons just beginning to warm to the drive of a great flywheel, Fred danced straight up to the swart, hairy giant and went to work.

Now the men of Kubba came to life with a heartening roar.

For the sergeant grunted and gave ground under the barrage of short, sharp jabs that hammered against his armored hulk.

"So it's thirty days is it, you big bum?" Fred repeated a little above a whisper, as his flying fists drove home just below the hairy bulge of the Spaniard's chest.

"Caracoles!" gasped big Carlos, pawing the air.

BUT it was only a moment before he settled down to the grim business of fight. It was Fred's style of attack that flustered him. Beside the kind of fighting Carlos went in for, the boxing game was a pale and effeminate sport. He had perfected his art in the *presidios* of old Spain, in those grim, gray, ancient walls where men returned again to the law of fang and claw, and a fight generally meant a funeral.

Carlos cared for no rules save kill or be killed. He used his fist as a crude bludgeon or struck with his open hand, and there was raw dynamite in both. He fought with his elbows, knuckles, arms, legs, feet or teeth, and he was master of a thousand bone-crushing tricks of the trade. The picayune little devices of scientific boxers he held in bitter scorn. His tactics were always the same. He was a grunting, puffing, animate steam-roller, he was a human battering-ram.

So he scorned to put up any kind of defense against Fred's clean, driving attack. After his first surprise he took the rain of blows on his chest and ribs as though they were no more than a rain of feathers. A savage leer broke on his thick, wide lips. With a bull's roar he lowered his head and charged. Fred had to side-step, covering up.

Now the men of Aïn howled with satisfaction. Anybody could see that the big Spaniard would win easily!

There was no kind of defense, no kind of attack, that would stop such a fighting engine of brute energy. Fred's legs were a pale blur as he side-stepped, gave ground, plunged in again to the attack.

The mountain men had never experienced anything like the excitement of this kind of fighting. As the two gladiators flew about the hollow circle to an accompaniment of grunts, gasps, and the solid ring of bone on bone, it churned the hot blood of the watchers to a fury. Every short-arm jab of Fred's driving fist was a blow for Kubba, and every annihilating smash of Carlos' big paw was like wine to the men of Aïn.

The moment the dazzling speed of his own attack had Carlos backing, roaring hot oaths, Fred had one solid side of the ring howling for his death. When one of the sergeant's smoking swings rocked Fred's head on his shoulders, there was a menacing roar from the other side. Ancient hatreds burned in the audience at fever heat. Neutrality and sportsmanship were modern inventions, unheard of here.

There were no rounds, no referee, no rest periods, no neutral corners. It was slug, slug, slug to a finish, and the whole circle of mountain men were screaming for that finish before the battle had well begun.

"Kill—kill—kill!" they chanted.

Wheels within wheels. Feuds within feuds. Inside the ring—Legionnaire Fred Ames and Disciplinarian Cabo Carlos. Outside the ring—the villages of Kubba and of Aïn. Nobody needed spurring on.

At first neither fighter more than sensed the storm that was raging around them. They had only glimpses of the bared steel, the savage, contorted faces of the watchers. But Fred discovered sharply that he had more to contend with than just big Carlos, when something hard and gritty swept across his face and blinded him with searing pain.

He knew the striper hadn't done it!

Aroused to savage fury at a moment when he thought Carlos was losing ground, one of the men of Aïn had snatched up a fistful of rocky sand and dashed it in Fred's eyes.

The men of Kubba howled with fury, for they saw Fred paw blindly at the air, his punches missing by a yard, while Carlos came thundering down to the attack like an infuriated bull elephant. The two gladiators crashed to the stony

ground. Carlos' left hand streaked to Fred's throat, while the knuckles of his right ground cruelly across his straining eyeballs.

ONE OF THE MEN on the Kubba side began shrieking in a voice that rang out above the rest. He had seen what caused Fred's downfall, the sneaking action of that cheating *tujjar* from Aïn, and he howled out the news to his savage brothers. Whirling and shrieking like a dervish he jumped into the ring and began to kick the big striper, who was on top.

This infuriated the other side. They swept forward with a roar of rage, their weapons bristling. The men of Kubba also surged into the ring. For a moment all was confusion. Only the action of the alcayde of Aïn stayed the inevitable clash. He leaped into the center, between the two tides of savages who were bawling for blood and vengeance.

"Wait!" he cried out. "Remember the sacred truce. Let them finish!"

The alcayde of Kubba joined him in the cry of peace. The fight was not yet over. Let the two infidels fight it out!

The two sides fell back, muttering with disappointed rage. The next time not even the authority of the alcaydes would stop them. Once more there was the ragged semblance of a ring, and the two prisoners fought on——

Fred tried to free himself of Carlos' crushing weight. He could not see. Where his eyes ought to be there was only a blinding fire of pain. The fingers clamped about his throat pent the air inside his pumping lungs.

And *bump—bump—bump*—the snarling, panting giant who rode astride him kept thumping his head solidly against the rocky ground. The dull, ringing sound seemed to Fred to come out of the mountain slope, but he knew it came from inside his own swimming brain.

Under that implacable pounding, his consciousness was fast slipping away. He could scarcely feel pain any more. He knew in a vague way that his lungs were bursting, but they did not seem to belong to him any more. His arms, machinelike, went on throwing rights and lefts into that big, crushing hulk up there, but the punches landed light as feathers. The laugh of victory was already on Carlos' lips.

And defeat meant death.

That thought echoed inside Fred's brain, inside his skull, that seemed swollen like a bubble, ready to burst at a mere pinprick. His arms were numb. He drove his strength down, down to his legs. He found he could still move them.

Now his knees were drawing themselves upward, jamming themselves in a thick wedge between Carlos' heaving body and his own. Now Fred was doubled up like a jackknife, pressed to the ground.

Death was quite near. It would be easy to die. Fred's legs didn't want to move any more. His arms lay limp and lifeless beside him. The striper's triumphant laugh rang distantly in his ears. Then, abruptly, Carlos' low chuckle ended in a gasp.

He gasped when Fred's legs came suddenly to life. Fred drove them upward with every ounce of power he had left. He had more than he knew.

Carlos lifted clumsily, off balance. He lost his grip, pawed madly at the air, and went over, sprawling. Fred heard him grunt as he flattened awkwardly to the ground.

IT WAS a second—or perhaps two seconds—before Carlos could pick himself up and throw himself back into the fight. Fred's body felt lifeless as a stick. His brain still wanted to go on living; his lungs sucked in great gulps of air; but his body was played out. He whipped himself up, drove himself on.

The will to live that was in his brain

Alone he could travel faster, farther. It would be so easy to slip from under——

ne drove out into his battered muscles, out through the nerve channels that ran to his feet and fists. His body weighed like a leaden mass. He managed to get to his hands and knees by the time Carlos regained his feet.

Fred knew he was on his feet, for he heard the big fellow coming.

He felt the wind of a flailing blow that would have torn his head from his shoulders. Somehow it missed him. Fred lurched drunkenly to his feet. Firelight came through the cataract of uncontrollable tears that spilled from his wounded eyes. He could see then —a little!

But he had to rely mostly on hearing. He managed to side-step the striper's next charge, for Carlos took no pains to move softly. The mist of blindness

was lifting. Carlos was only a vague outline, a menacing hulk that came rushing at him out of a deep fog, but at least Fred could see him now!

The habit of a trained fighter caught his chin in close to his left shoulder, shoved his fists out where they belonged, made his feet dance in a nice bit of footwork that was habit, sheer habit, and had nothing to do with his swimming head. He might be weak as a drowned kitten, but Carlos would never guess it.

The men of Kubba roared with excitement. To them his recovery was a miracle, no less.

Carlos spat out curses that bounded off Fred's bursting ears like hailstones. The striper had been within a breath of winning, and here was his victim, a mass of bruises and streaming blood, dancing around him in that boxer's way that Carlos hated, sparring just as though he hadn't been hurt a bit.

A moment ago Carlos had been within an ace of victory. He had felt the life force ebbing from Fred's body like water. And now he had the whole job to do over again!

Carlos lost his head. He attacked in a series of wild rushes. The big striper swung wilder and wilder, and his face was contorted with insane passion. He puffed like a blown race horse.

Fred's legs felt like cotton, but he had no trouble stepping out of the way of these crazy lunges, weak as he was. His steady jabbing certainly did Carlos little damage, but it stung his pride, and he roared with rage when his wild swings failed to bring down the legionnaire.

Once he charged blindly at the spectators. He ran flush against the threat of cold steel; the points of knives and bayonets drove him back into the ring.

Fred's eyes began to focus on the livid scar that ran along the left side of Carlos' jaw. There was a mark for you! It was an invitation—a perfect target for a good, solid, right-hand smash.

But Fred didn't seem to have one good, solid smash left in him. He had jabbed away three—four—five times at that jagged line and nothing happened. Carlos just grunted, lowered his head, and came charging in again.

Fred danced away. He could not feel his legs at all. He knew he could not go on much longer.

He summoned his wasted strength. The next time Carlos came thundering in like that Fred would put everything he had, every ounce of strength and strain, behind a punch that would knock Carlos out if anything could.

THE HOWLING VOICES of the spectators came and went against his eardrums like the waves of a great sea: "Kill—kill—kill!"

Fred's eyes were nearly normal now. Carlos was gathering himself. He was going to launch his great hulk in another of those insane charges. Here he came. Fred's right fist dropped, dropped—— He must time it perfectly—to come up a moment later in a smoking uppercut.

It should never have ended that way. It could never have happened if the Riff had ever heard of sportsmanship.

A warrior of Kubba felt bored with the show. He was tired of watching Carlos' mad rushes and impatient for Fred to win. He saw no reason why he shouldn't help.

So he seized his rifle by the barrel and pushed the butt out into the ring. He pushed it right in the path of Carlos' pounding feet. The striper's right foot struck it. The damage was done.

Carlos half lunged, half fell, straight into the smoking arc of Fred's right uppercut. There was the solid crack of bone on bone. So Carlos never heard

the howl of rage that broke from the men of Aïn. Carlos was out cold.

But the men of Aïn were not, and they had seen that thieving jackal from Kubba poke his rifle into the ring and trip the giant Spaniard. They were on their feet in an instant.

So were the men of Kubba. They saw their lifelong enemies coming at them across the ring, screaming for vengeance. All resistance was swept aside. There was nothing left for the men of Kubba but to grab their weapons and defend themselves. Everything else was forgotten.

Fred understood nothing of all this.

All he knew was that a tidal wave of infuriated and howling humanity poured over him in an irresistible flood. It knocked him from his underpinnings and crushed him down beside the inert bulk of his fallen enemy. Over the two of them raged the sound and fury of battle.

The truce was thrown to the savage winds that brawled down from the Beni Hassan slopes. The alcaydes were helpless to control their raging followers. The men of Kubba and of Aïn put away childish things and returned to the serious work of fighting and killing one another.

There were stabbing reports of rifles and howls of pain and rage. There was the swish of slashing knives and the lush thud of bayonets striking home in warm flesh. The air was filled with the sting of burned powder and the smells of sweat and warm, spilt blood.

Save for the fighters that fell, all Fred could see was their milling, straining legs. They trampled him, trod on him, kicked him, in their fury to get at one another.

It took him a full minute to realize that he was not the object of the attack. The blood-mad mob was paying no attention to him at all. When Fred realized that he knew what to do. The blood feud of the rival villages was nothing to him.

Fred started to go away from there. He began to crawl on hands and knees among the forest of pumping legs. But, abruptly, he stopped.

He grinned back stiffly at the lifeless heap of Carlos. Under the conditions of the contest the striper's life was forfeit. Fred himself had agreed to those conditions: the winner to go free, the loser to die. Carlos was under sentence of death. Fred had only to leave him there.

BUT FRED couldn't do that. Carlos had fought a good fight. He was linked to Fred by bonds that were stronger than a buck private's grievance against the toughest, meanest striper in the king's legion. They both belonged to the universal brotherhood of fighting men. So Fred crawled back.

"Come on, you big bum. Let's get out of here." He shook him.

But Carlos didn't move. He was still out cold.

"All right, then." Fred grabbed a thick, hairy arm and pulled it around his shoulder. Then, with the big fellow's weight across his back, half dragging Carlos, half supporting him, he began to crawl through the stampeding mob. Nobody paid any attention to them. For all the Riff cared, a thousand prisoners could have escaped.

Fred never expected he would get away with it. He didn't know what the fight was all about; he didn't stop to inquire. It was enough that they let him alone.

Behind him now the battle raged. The space between the two fires was littered with dead and groaning wounded. The air was a Gehenna of fiendish cries and the stabbing reports of rifles. Still they fought on.

Fred panted and struggled beneath

Carlos' weight. He crawled between rocks and thorny bushes, over gravel washes that cut his hands and bruised his knees, away into the cold gray dawn. The sounds of fighting grew faint and finally died, but still there was danger from the other Riff, scattered all along these slopes.

Still Fred pushed on over the dead, gray, featureless landscape, keeping low to the ground, heading, so he thought, in the direction of the Spanish camp. A dozen times, a hundred times he wanted to slip easily from under the burden of the unconscious sergeant. Alone, he could have traveled faster, farther. Each time he stopped to rest it seemed he could not drag that huge, lifeless burden another inch.

And at such times he thought of the raw deal Carlos had handed him, showing off before that dandified little lieutenant. But Fred kept on just the same, his face rock-hard with purpose. He kept on until he could go no farther, until he sagged to the ground, panting, his battered body drained of the last drop of strength.

He didn't know where he was. Somewhere, he supposed, among the maze of rock gullies and thickets of the valley between the two ranges. He was too weary, too numb to care. There was a sound in his ears, the sound of falling water. With half his mind he remembered that there was no water near. But the sound grew louder and louder. Then it began to grow faint. Finally it went away altogether, and Fred slept the sleep of exhaustion.

IV.

SOMEBODY was shaking him violently. He had the devil of a time getting his eyes open. When he did, the face of Cabo Carlos glared down at him.

Fred started to laugh. One of the striper's eyes was buried under a nondescript lump of flesh, purple and enormously swollen. A wide streak of blood had dried carelessly over Carlos' mouth and chin.

"Caracoles! What is there to laugh at, you young imbecile?" growled Disciplinarian Carlos. *"Diablo!* Where are we? What—what the devil happened?"

"I—I dunno," Fred muttered sleepily. "They—they started fighting—and I——"

"You brought me here?" The striper's voice did not sound exactly grateful. It was certainly not sweet. It was like the menace of thunder rolling up from a distance. The knowledge that he owed his life to Fred stung his pride.

"Forget it." Fred said.

"Diablo!" Carlos spat.

Fred raised himself, groaning. His body was one long, gangling agony. Muscles ached to bursting—muscles that he never knew he had till this moment.

They had been lying in the middle of a thorny thicket, on a tender bed of barbed gravel. The sun slanted redly through the bushes. Carlos crawled to the edge of the thicket and looked out.

"Diablo!" he cursed again. "Now you've done it."

Fred dragged himself to the striper's side. The sun was already sinking over where the Spanish camp had been. It was deserted now, of course. The retreating column had taken the road with the earliest light of day. And the day was nearly done.

Behind them and above them, on the opposite side of the valley, only a feeble coil of smoke rose here and there from the ashes of the Riff fires. Distantly, from the north, they heard the echoed *pak-kun! pak-kun!* of the enemy snipers as they still plagued the flanks of the Spanish column. They were miles up the valley.

"We'll have to wait here till dark," Fred said.

"Join the column at Sok el Arba," Carlos added. "They'll stay there tonight. We can get there in three hours by the road."

THE SUN was low; they had not long to wait. But neither relished the other's company. Their sore bodies were burning hot and caked with blood and dirt. There was not a drop of water. Time dragged intolerably. Carlos' single eye glowered redly. Defeat rankled in his breast.

"I'll show you a thing or two," he muttered, "when we get to Sok el Arba!"

Fred grinned encouragingly.

"O. K., sarge. I guess I knocked you out pretty clean though, that time, didn't I?"

"What?" roared Carlos, bounding to his feet. *"You* knocked me out! Why —if somebody had not tripped me——"

"Tripped you!" Fred guffawed heartily. "So that's your alibi, you big bum."

Rage took hold of Cabo Carlos. He ducked into a fighting crouch. His sides heaved.

"Why you miserable little insect," he roared. "So you think you can lick me, eh? I'll show you——"

And he lunged for Fred.

Pak-kun!

A sniper's gun barked hollowly on the ridge above them. A bullet flew through the air and *chunk-chunked* through their thicket. Both men fell flat on their stomachs. There were still plenty of the enemy in this part of the valley.

"Hold everything!" Fred said.

"I'll show you," Carlos replied, "later."

They crept out of the thicket at dark, and soon afterward located the Sheshawen road. It was strewn with the rubbish of the retreating army.

"Keep close to cover," Carlos said. "The Riff devils are out hunting for stragglers."

"O. K., sarge." Fred chuckled.

"I'll teach you respect!" Carlos promised.

For answer Fred danced away a few steps, giving an exhibition of fancy footwork on the starlighted road. Carlos rushed at him with a bellow. Fred ducked.

They did not reach the fort in three hours. It was more like four before the high walls of the blockhouse loomed up ahead. The faint starlight helped out, but they soon found that danger dogged every step. Ghost groups of Riff combed the road, looking for wounded stragglers, and for pieces of abandoned equipment with which to swell the rebel arsenals of Abd el Krim. Fred and Carlos had more than one narrow escape.

Within shouting distance of the walls, they were nearly shot for lurking enemies themselves. Luckily, the Spanish sentry who first spied them was a poor shot. They dropped to their stomachs on the ground, and the sentry's lead whined over their heads.

"He's just nervous," Fred said. "I know how he feels."

"Imbecile!" snarled Carlos. "I wish I had him in *my* company. I'd soon show him——"

"You're a tough guy, all right," Fred taunted. Carlos glared.

Lying ingloriously on his stomach, Carlos raised his voice and demanded in thundering tones the sergeant of the guard. There was an excited stir inside the blockhouse. Voices called cautiously back and forth in the dark. Finally some one was sent down to open the gates and let them through. Raging, Carlos flung himself at the first man he saw and shook him by the throat.

"Imbecile," he cried, "where is Lieutenant Fulano? Tell me—you insect—quickly!"

IN THE QUARTERS he shared for the night with a lieutenant of the garrison, Fulano bent over a table. In the last two days he had seen enough slaughter to shake him out of his elegant boredom, his supercilious indifference to life and death. But the worst part of the retreat was over. From here to the coast the column would be able to hold its own. Fulano's small, red lips pursed over a report.

He looked up as two men entered. He did not recognize the two legionnaires. The tops of their uniforms were entirely missing, and their bodies were blood-caked and bulging in the wrong places. They both saluted.

"Sergeant Carlos reporting, sir," said the taller of the two. Fulano looked at them in blank amazement.

The two legionnaires waited for him to speak. The lieutenant continued to stare. His eyes went wider and wider. At length he found his tongue.

"Diablo! What—where—how is it that you are here? You were reported missing at Dar Koba!"

"But, yes, lieutenant," Carlos acknowledged matter-of-factly. "We were both captured at Dar Koba. We are reporting back for duty."

"Captured!" the lieutenant gasped. "Reporting—back?"

"Yes, lieutenant." Carlos went into his report without any frills. He told how he had been captured when he rushed to the sentry line to investigate an alarm. He told of being carried captive to the Riff camp and of fighting for his life and the honor of some enemy village he had never heard of. There was no romance, no sentiment about big Carlos. He told about it as though it were something that happened every day, just a little incident that might occur to anybody.

"Incredible!" said the lieutenant, hardly able to believe what he heard. "Incredible."

He looked from one to the other when the striper had finished. Looking at Fred, his small red lips smiled with their faint sneer. Then he nodded to his sergeant.

"If this is true," he said slowly, "it would appear that—ah, Legionnaire Ames saved your life at considerable peril." Fulano's well-manicured fingers toyed uncertainly with the waxed points of his mustache.

"I am puzzled," he admitted. "In fact I am more than puzzled; I am amazed. The legionnaire was not compelled under the—ah, circumstances, to take you with him. If he had deserted you, no one would have known. And yet, sergeant—yet I believe I remember the occasion of your first meeting. I believe you and the legionnaire were not the best of friends!" He paused, considering. "In view of what has happened, sergeant, I suppose you will want to recommend Legionnaire Ames for a citation of valor?"

"Hey?" barked Carlos, startled.

Fred Ames blinked his eyes rapidly. Had he heard right?

"I said," Fulano repeated with his catlike smile, "that you are probably interested in getting Legionnaire Ames a citation."

It was Carlos' turn to stare, his single good eye round and red. Drawing himself erect, he saluted stiffly.

"I am afraid the lieutenant has misunderstood," he said. "On the contrary, I desire to prosecute Legionnaire Ames!"

The lieutenant's eyes were wide again.

"To prosecute——"

"Certainly!" Carlos had turned to glare down at Fred. "For insubordination and assault on a noncommissioned officer!" he boomed.

The two men looked at each other. Fred's eyes were like light dancing on the edges of a pair of freshly ground knives. His lips moved silently.

"You big bum!" they said.

"But——"

Big Carlos wheeled to the desk. His face was rigid. His lips scarcely moved.

"For the sake of discipline in the company," he said stiffly, "that is my desire."

Fulano's small, black eyes danced. There was something between these two that he did not fully understand, but he caught the delicate humor of the situation.

"Very well," he said. "Legionnaire Ames is already down for thirty days *pilleton* and one month's suspension of pay. Considering the circumstances surrounding his second offense——"

Fred braced himself for the shock.

"—ah, I think it will be sufficient"—Fulano paused, looking from one to the other—"to add to this another thirty days——"

"And two months pay suspended!" barked the striper.

FRED AMES could have slept anywhere that night. He could have slept standing on his head. Perched on a narrow plank that served as a bed in a cell too narrow for two full strides in any direction, he slept without moving until dawn.

Even the seething turmoil of his thoughts and the hot rebellion that boiled in him against Carlos and everything in the legion failed to keep him awake. In his dreams Fred wore the three stripes of a sergeant on the cuff of his tunic and he saw himself as the toughest striper in the legion. Carlos was only a buck private, greenest of the lot, and Fred ran him ragged. He had sentenced Carlos to a total of fifty years in *pilleton* by the time a thin trickle of sunlight woke him, muttering as he jerked out of his deep sleep: "Keep moving there, you big bum. Hell—it's a sucker war!"

Through the postage-stamp barred window came the sounds made of men in khaki, heavy laden with military claptrap, preparing to take the road. The column was getting ready to move out of Sok el Arba, and the whole thing came back to Fred with a start that jerked him to his feet.

They were leaving; he was staying. He was starting a sixty-day stretch in this fetid little cell, while the company moved on to the coast. Afterward, he'd probably be transferred to some other company. They were dishing him—leaving him behind.

He climbed on the bed and craned out through the bars. A little to his right, Cabo Carlos had just lined up the company, was just reporting "all present" to the lieutenant.

Fred flexed his big muscles stiffly.

"I'd give six months' pay for just one sock at that big bum!" he declared to the four walls of his cell.

Carlos faced his company with a neat right-about. He was all tricked out in a brand-new uniform, stripes and all. His one good eye glared lugubriously, but there wasn't a man in that double line who dared to laugh in the face of that cold stare.

"Squads right, forward—march!" boomed the striper.

The squads wheeled and the company moved dustily out of Fred's vision. He dropped to the plank bed with a curse.

It was a rotten war, a sucker war. They didn't give a guy a chance. If you got so much as a look at a fight it was by accident. And now two months cooped up in this lousy cell. Two months—sixty-one days. Hell! Hands gripping the plank bed, he seethed with impotent rage.

Keep him cooped up here for two months! Like hell they would! He wrenched the heavy plank from its fastenings, raised it over his head, sent

the end of it crashing against the bars of the window.

"I'll take their damn fort apart for 'em," he thought, "take it apart log by log——"

"Attention, you!"

A KEY squeaked in the lock. The door of the cell swung in and crashed back against the wall. Fred whirled.

"You!" he said.

The bulk of Cabo Carlos filled the room. He had a bundle under his arm. His one eye glared down at the prisoner. Fred dropped his board. His fists knotted.

"You dirty bum!" he growled.

His wild swing failed to connect. It missed, because at that moment a loose bundle of clothing hit him full in the face. It was a new uniform, complete.

"Put it on, imbecile," snapped Carlos. "Hurry."

Fred's lips were drawn back in a wolfish grin.

"Wha-what's the idea?"

"*Put it on,*" bellowed the striper. "We're leaving!"

"Leaving—us—me?" Fred stared, dumfounded. "What about that two-month stretch you handed me?"

"Suspended—of course!"

It crossed Fred's mind with a flicker of doubt that Carlos must have changed his mind. The big striper must have a heart, at that. After all, Fred had saved his life. Perhaps Carlos was grateful. But the sergeant lost no time in explaining his change of heart.

"*Diablo!*" He grinned. "You didn't think that after what you did"—Fred waited for it to come out—gratitude was balm to his heart—"I'd go away and leave you here—still thinking, you miserable insect, that you could lick Cabo Carlos!"

Fred's laughter bounded off the heavy timbers of the room. He was already more than half dressed. Never say die, that was Carlos.

"So that's it, you big bum!"

"Naturally, you young imbecile!"

Fred roared. His laughter echoed through the somber fort. He pulled on the brand-new tunic, buttoned it with flying fingers.

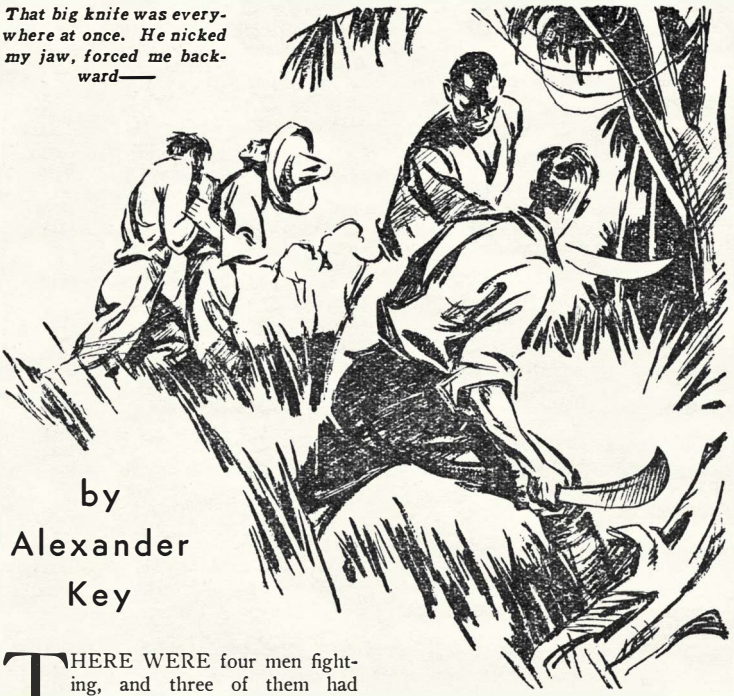
Growling, Cabo Carlos stooped to pass out through the low doorway. "I'll teach you respect," he muttered.

Fred danced after him down the dark corridor toward the blaze of morning sunlight at the end—the bright light of day that meant freedom. With difficulty he restrained himself from pounding the striper on the back with the flat of his hand, but he did a fast jig step on the solid floor timbers of the fort.

"That's the stuff, Carlos," he shouted hilariously. "Discipline! Boy, oh, boy—is this going to be a war!"

The Golden Lady

Men fought—died—and she didn't know it!



That big knife was everywhere at once. He nicked my jaw, forced me backward——

by Alexander Key

THERE WERE four men fighting, and three of them had knives. The little fellow had only a stick, but you would have thought he was a regiment. He danced about on the mud bar with his back to the water, facing the dark jungle that crowds Gatun Lake. I saw him duck a machete blow, knock the weapon out of a big Negro's hand, and send him sprawling. The other two rushed him at the same instant. He snatched up the machete, and using the stick to hold off one man, nearly decapitated the second.

There hadn't been a sound, and I saw the whole thing in a flash of movement when I thrust the dugout across an inlet. I yelled, sent a shot over their heads, and paddled toward them. But before I could reach the mud bar the little fellow was left alone—alone, that is, except for a dead black buck stretched at his feet.

I grounded the dugout and stepped

out, gun ready. The little fellow whirled around, full of fight. For the first time I realized he was a white man.

He was bare-footed; his clothes were in rags, and there was a thick growth of wiry black beard on his jaw. His hands were knotty; the hairs on them stood out like shingle nails. He had a broken nose, and what I could see of his face above the beard looked as if it had been chipped from flint by somebody who didn't give a damn how rough a job he made of it. All in all, he was the toughest, hardest-looking hombre I've ever clamped eyes on—and he couldn't have weighed an ounce over a hundred and thirty pounds.

"Nice scrap," I said. "What the hell's going on?"

He looked me over carefully, evidently not liking what he saw. When he spoke, I got the surprise of my life.

"To whom," he asked, in a mild, cultured English voice, "do I owe the pleasure of this intrusion?"

"I'm Captain O'Reilly of the canal police," I growled back, trying to size him up, but failing.

"And your credentials, my dear fellow?"

I realized I had talked too much. I was on a special case for the colonel, and I wasn't in uniform. "Listen," I said, "if I hadn't come along when I did you'd have been fish bait. I don't give a hoot who you are, but as long as I'm here I'll have to ask a few questions."

"I was in need of no assistance. You saw all that happened. Are explanations necessary?"

"They're going to be necessary. You're in the limits of the Canal Zone. I'll have to report this."

He eyed my army automatic, and glanced impatiently at the jungle. "Get on with your questions," he said irritably. "I have important work to do."

"There's no rush, wise guy. First, this is a queer place for a lone white man to have a run-in with three stray Negroes. Second, a bird by the name of Willowby Dawson disappeared near here last night, hopped off the steamer *Pomeroy*. There are several people rather anxious to talk to Dawson."

"May I inquire what you want with him?"

"He's Lord Hawley's secretary. And Lord Hawley," I lied, "is tearing his hair out to locate Dawson."

"And suppose," answered the little roughneck with his mild, college professor's voice, "I told you my name was Dawson?"

I hadn't even hoped this could be true. I tell you, it gave me a jolt. He didn't look like a secretary to a British diplomat; he didn't look like a secretary to anybody. In spite of his voice, he was the kind of an egg you'd want to lock up merely on suspicion.

Suddenly I jammed the automatic against his belt. "You're wanted all right—but it's for murder. Lord Hawley was found in his stateroom this morning with a knife in his ribs." I pulled a pair of bracelets out of my pocket. "About face!" I ordered.

He gaped at me. "Hawley—dead? Impossible! Gonzales must have——" His mouth clicked shut.

"Get a move on!" I barked. "You can do your talking at headquarters."

He moved, and I saw what was coming. But I wasn't quick enough. That knotty, hairy fist caught me on the jaw, and it felt like a ton of dynamite was behind it. I was out before I hit the mud.

IT WAS a crab scuttling along my arm that woke me. I did some fancy cursing, started to rise, and found I had been handcuffed with my own bracelets.

My pistol was gone, and so was the dugout. I picked up a machete that one of the blacks had dropped, broke through the edge of the jungle, and started north along a game trail. I was about two miles from my lookout station and a

telephone, and slightly less than that from the shack of Pedro Managua, who occasionally guided a hunting party when he wasn't drunk.

There were several men on duty at my place, but I didn't want to be seen in my present condition. The story would be all over the canal before night. But I had a thing or two on Pedro, and I knew he would keep his mouth shut.

All the way to Pedro's place I kept cursing that little devil Dawson. I've been hit a few times, and by men who knew how. I'm pretty good as a middle-weight. But it was the first time in my life I'd ever been knocked cold. The secretary line, then, was probably just a stall. Dawson had really been Hawley's bodyguard.

Not that Lord Hawley hadn't been fully able to take care of himself. The man was a queer duck, his name almost a legend from Cartagena to Mexico City. He was a sort of diplomat at large, if you get the idea. Besides that, he owned mines, ran a good part of Honduras, and had a passion for archæology.

For months at a time he would disappear into the jungles, alone, and suddenly appear one day with a gold vase under one arm and his pockets bulging with notes on lost cities and buried temples. Wealth meant nothing to him, and he'd turn over his findings to the local governments or some museum, so they could go ahead with the research.

Outside of that, nobody knew anything about him personally. Everybody had heard of Lord Hawley; no one could claim a speaking acquaintance with the man. It began to look, though, as if Dawson hadn't done the killing.

It was almost evening before I got to old Pedro's place. I found him down by his landing, unusually sober. His dugout was packed for a trip; he was nervous and seemed to be waiting for some one. He started forward when he saw me, then stopped, evidently disappointed.

"Take these damn things off," I snarled, holding out my hands.

It was not the first time Pedro had seen a pair of cuffs; he took them off easily. *"Mira!"* he said, giving me an evil wink. "I suppose the good captain put these on himself in his sleep."

"Naw," I growled, "they crawled out of my pocket and bit me when I wasn't looking. You know a bozo around here named Gonzales?"

"There are many of that name, my captain. But there is only one who is important. You had best forget him."

I GLANCED at his loaded dugout. "Where are you going?"

"I have been engaged for a hunting trip. A gentleman from Balboa."

"You'd better find somebody else for him. You're going with me."

"No, no! I cannot, captain. Last week the gentleman sent a messenger and paid me in advance. I—I cannot disappoint him."

"What's his name?"

"I do not know. I——"

"To hell you don't know! You're lying!" I caught him by the shoulder and shook him. "You weren't paid in advance or you'd be drunk. It's somebody you know, and know damn well. What's his name? Gonzales? No? Maybe it was a Señor Dawson?"

He started at the name. I shook him again. "Come on, out with it! Four times, Pedro, I've saved you from the calaboose. You know I'm your friend; now you've got to help me when I need it. Who's the guy?"

"It was the Señor Dawson, captain. But he hired me for another. Many times I have taken this other great señor on trips. Nor do I need to tell you who he is. I would cut my throat before I would tell it to any one but you."

"Great Heavens! You mean Lord Hawley was to meet you here?"

"Si, señor. And if he could not be here by sundown to-day, I was to paddle

to a certain spot, and I would find him there."

"Listen," I said. "Lord Hawley's dead. Some one stuck a knife in his ribs last night, on board the *Pomeroy*. They think it was this guy Dawson. My colonel phoned me this morning from Gatun and gave me the dope."

Old Pedro took it hard. Before I was half through, the tears were running down his brown cheeks. "I cannot believe it," he muttered. "The good señor —dead! I will cut out the heart of the pig Dawson!"

He shook his fist over the water, and clutched my hand. "Come! I know where the great señor was going, and what he was after. Amigo, we should find the pig Dawson there."

He darted to the dugout and snatched at the mooring rope. There was a roar of sound. Pedro stiffened suddenly, clawed at his chest, and fell.

FROM THE SHADOWS beyond his thatched hut came a second shot. Something stung my cheek.

I got over my surprise in a hurry, jerked Pedro's carbine out of the dugout, and flattened behind a tree. A banana plant near the hut trembled slightly, and I pumped a shot at it. Some one cursed in Spanish. Abruptly, a fusillade of shots kicked bark in my face. An old-fashioned six-shooter this time. That made two men I had to look out for.

I saw Pedro move, start painfully toward me. Blood was streaming from his left breast. Why he wasn't dead yet was a wonder. He reached the edge of the tree, lay still a moment, and managed to raise his head.

"Amigo," he whispered, "the man who shot first—I recognized his voice. He is Gonzales. There is a creek—near the boundary—and there is a golden woman named——" Pedro tried to finish, but a convulsion shook his body.

I dropped the carbine and shook him. "Pedro, for Heaven's sake, tell me!" But Pedro was dead.

I was reaching for the carbine again when a harsh order stopped me.

"Do not move, señor, or it will be ver' bad for you."

A heavy, swarthy man stepped from a tree. He wore boots and dirty linen; under his flat nose was a thick gray mustache that crawled half around his square jaws. He had me covered with an automatic. One look at him, and I remembered a picture of a revolutionary leader in the colonel's office. The fellow had been giving the government of Panama considerable worry, but he'd been quiet lately for lack of funds.

I eyed the automatic. "So you are Gonzales, eh? I don't know where the hell you come in on this business, but you're making a mistake."

Gonzales gave me a nasty smile. "I am sorry, my friend, ver' sorry. It is you who have made the mistake. You have stepped into something which is much too big for you. So the great Señor Hawley is dead, eh? We expected to find him here; but since he is already dead, it will save us much trouble. And you—I am sorry. Maximo," he barked, "come here!"

A short, thin, pock-marked peon appeared from beyond the hut. "Shall I kill this one?" asked Maximo, holding a six-shooter near my head.

Gonzales smiled again. "Not that way, Maximo." He touched his arm and I saw there was blood on it. "He had the insolence to shoot me. A small matter, but he must be given time to regret it. Take the little bracelets from his pocket and attach him to the limb that hangs out over the water."

For a minute I didn't understand; then I found myself up to my waist in water, with my arms held securely around a thick limb with the handcuffs.

Gonzales laughed. "It is thus, my friend, that I teach *Americanos* who meddle in my affairs. It will soon be

night. In a little while *el cayman*—the alligator—will call his brothers to the feast. Adios, señor!"

GONZALES and Maximo vanished in the jungle shadows. I listened, wondering which way they went; in a few minutes came the sputter of an outboard motor farther down the shore.

It was almost dark now. I was afraid to kick or make too much commotion in the water. The 'gators are thick here, and it doesn't take much to attract them. I tried raising up my feet in an attempt to hook them over the limb, but it was no use.

Finally the black dark came. I was standing there cursing, my scalp crawling with every movement around me, when a light flashed in my face.

"Well, Captain O'Reilly," said a mild voice, "we meet a second time under strange circumstances. I apologize for my harsh treatment of you this afternoon, but perhaps this will be adequate compensation." There was a click and the handcuffs were released.

"Dawson!" I gasped, crawling out of the water. "This damned, infernal monkey business is driving me nuts! What the hell are you——"

"Quiet!" ordered the little Englishman. "There may be more trouble." He flashed his light briefly over the ground, stooped to examine Pedro, then turned to me. "What happened here?"

I told him. "Now," I finished, "suppose you do some explaining. By rights you ought to be under arrest for murder, but I'll let that charge ride a bit."

"You'll have to," he snapped. "Quick, into the dugout; I'll need your help. This is no time for explanations. Tomorrow, if your sense of duty is still uppermost, I'll go with you to Gatun to call on your colonel."

"I have your word for that?"

"The word of a gentleman," he said simply. And, strangely, I believed him, probably because I couldn't see his villainous face in the dark.

He followed me into Pedro's dugout, and pushed off into the night. So far, the whole thing was becoming a little more insane every minute.

The eccentric Lord Hawley and his secretary had boarded the coastal steamer *Pomeroy* at Balboa. When the ship reached Gatun in the morning, Hawley was dead in his bunk, and Dawson was missing.

A deck hand reported hearing a splash in the night about the time the *Pomeroy* left the canal proper to enter the lake. A medical examination affirmed that Hawley had died about midnight, which checked with the deck hand's story of the splash.

All this Colonel Randall had phoned to me at my lookout station. I had spent most of the day paddling around this section of the lake trying to pick up Dawson's trail. But why, when I found him, should Dawson be battling with a gang of Negroes? And what was it he knew about Gonzales? Furthermore, what could have brought him here to Pedro's place?

Gonzales' part was almost as difficult to figure out. For some obscure reason he, too, had planned to kill Hawley. Pedro had died, presumably, because he knew too much. But what was Gonzales after? Was Dawson after the same thing? And the golden woman —— I gave it up.

"Paddle!" gasped Dawson behind me. "Paddle with utmost diligence! He's gone to meet the others; but he'll be back the minute he finds I've escaped."

"Who?" I asked.

"Gonzales, you fool. He's behind all this. His men did that job on the *Pomeroy*. Those were his scoundrelly Negroes who were out to eliminate me on the mud bar this afternoon. After I committed piracy with your dugout, the black devils took after me again, and I had to swim."

THE LITTLE FELLOW was plenty sore; but I had to laugh. Except for the memory of his hard face and agility with a machete, I would have thought it was an indignant college professor speaking. Then I forgot about him, and leaned on the paddle. From somewhere on the right came the approaching hum of an outboard motor.

A searchlight cut the dark, swept our beam, and immediately afterward came a shot. Water sprayed my face.

Dawson swung the craft to one side; we skimmed through rushes at the lake's edge. Aërial roots and low limbs raked my shoulders. The motor boat went past, turned, and came back, the searchlight flickering slowly through the shore shadows. I held the carbine ready.

The light came closer. I took careful aim and fired. The light went out. Shots whipped over my head, and then Dawson was paddling in a frenzy.

How he found his way in the dark, sliding through narrow water lanes, twisting in and out along the swampy shore line, was past understanding.

A quarter hour of this, and he sent the dugout into a black tunnel of foliage. "Crouch down," he whispered. "We're entering a stream."

I leaned over as vines scraped the gunwales. "Where are we?" I asked.

"A little creek," came the reply, "close to the boundary."

Almost the same words, I remembered, that Pedro had whispered before he died.

Then I remembered the other thing Pedro had tried to tell me. "Say, Dawson, Pedro mentioned something about a woman. Who is she? Where does she come in on this business? I've spent a good many years along the canal, but I've never heard anything of a woman living over in this direction."

"Quiet," he muttered. "They're coming again."

He thrust the dugout to one side and we slid close under the bank of a tangle of ferns and jungle growth. Out on the lake I heard the sputter of a motor again, receding in the distance. There was silence for a while. Finally I caught the faint, cautious dip of approaching paddles.

Minutes passed. At last something moved by us in the creek, so close that I could hear the low breathing of the men as they pushed their craft along.

IT WAS some time before Dawson spoke. "A trick," he whispered. "That was Gonzales went upstream, and I expect it was in your dugout they took from me. He had his Negroes, to draw an olfactory conclusion. He sent the motor boat away—a red herring to make us think he could not find the creek in the dark, not realizing we had already found it ourselves."

"As clear as bilge water on a black night," I muttered. "What's the idea?"

"A scheme, my friend, to give his Negroes an opportunity to eliminate us when we reach our destination."

"And that?"

"The hiding place of a very charming lady whom I have never seen, but whom I have sought for many years."

"Eh?"

"Exactly," replied the unpredictable little Englishman. "A lady whose very name has become a legend—but who, I assure you, is entirely real."

"Who is she?"

Dawson's soft voice became reverent. "She is known as La Diosa de la Madera. Does that mean anything to you?"

I turned around to stare at him in the dark. "You mean the Goddess of the Forest? The mythical golden goddess of the Panama jungles? Hokum! This country is full of such nonsense."

Dawson's voice hardened. "No nonsense about this. La Diosa de la Madera is quite real. Furthermore, she is in

grave danger. We must reach her before Gonzales does."

"All right," I said. "If there's a woman, and she needs help, Paddy O'Reilly's the guy to give it. But no monkey business now. You've got a lot of explaining to do about this Hawley affair."

"My dear fellow, do not be surprised when I tell you this, but Lord Hawley is not dead. Perhaps, officially, a knife was found in his ribs, but his lordship has several times risen from the dead. Perhaps, to-morrow, I will let you speak to Lord Hawley in person, the gods of life and death permitting."

I said nothing, but a cold chill went up my back. There was no denying the truth now. It was suddenly, horribly evident. I was alone in the black night with a madman.

Had it not been for Gonzales, and an overpowering curiosity to find out what lay ahead, I think I would have swung on Dawson with a paddle, put the cuffs on him, and hurried back to phone headquarters.

WE WAITED several minutes longer to let Gonzales' Negroes get safely out of hearing distance, and then pushed upstream again. The night was suffocatingly hot, and no breath of air stirred through the crowded growth around us. Sweat ran down my arms and dripped in a steady stream from my face, but I had no feeling of warmth.

The moon rose, illuminating the creek with tiny patches of silver. It helped little, for it lent a deceptive quality to whatever it touched, and made the shadows blacker by comparison. Dawson seemed to paddle by instinct, feeling for the thrust of the current to keep us in midstream.

"The worst lies ahead," he whispered

"It is you who make the ver' big mistake, my frien'——"

once. "I was counting on Pedro's help. He was part Indian; he knew this section thoroughly, could have found anything in it blindfolded. I may have trouble locating the hill."

"What hill?"

"La Diosa lives on a hill. Do you not remember the legend? La Diosa de la Madera watches the jungles from a high place. But it was old Pedro who told me where she lives. Her home is in a great Ceiba tree."

"I suppose," I said, humoring him, "that she's a good-looking dame."

"At the moment her beauty fails to interest me—except that it may be considerably marred if that scoundrel Gonzales gets to her first. But quiet, we'd better go ashore here."

The dugout slid against the bank. We moored it cautiously under the overhanging ferns, and with a machete in one hand and Pedro's carbine in the other, I followed Dawson into the obscurity of the jungle.

If you've ever been through the canal, you probably think you know what these jungles are like. But you don't. Looking high and green and black, with crimson flowers festooning the edge, is one thing. But a casual walk into them, even in the daytime, is something else. At night——

It's a black hell—a crawling, slimy, impenetrable pit, where every leaf and frond and vine you touch seems a clammy live thing reaching out to trip you, claw you, or sting and choke the life out of you.

The dark shakes and crawls before your eyes. You move slowly, a few inches at a time, feeling your way and shaking spiders off your hands, stumbling over high fan roots and lianas, sinking to your hips in ooze, and turning a hundred times to locate an opening in a tight wall of growth.

The moon didn't help now. The place was too thick. I don't know how Dawson knew which way he was going, but I was lost three minutes after leaving the dugout.

I HEARD NOTHING at first, only the dark hammering silently against my head. When I did hear it, it wasn't a sound—only a feeling, a conviction, rather, that we were being followed.

It was hardly a minute afterward that I lost Dawson. I stopped, waited, and, missing his footsteps, whispered his name. There was no answer. Finally I groped in my pockets for matches, but they were sodden and useless.

The truth hit me like a flash. I'd been a fool to trust myself to a madman like Dawson. It probably delighted his insane fancy to take me out here in the night and then leave me.

Suddenly I cursed, and, swinging the machete in front of me, plunged off in what I judged was the direction of the creek. Abruptly air fanned my face.

I dropped flat and flung myself sideways. Again came the swish of air—and the distinct *thwack* of a heavy knife blade as it cut into green wood not a foot from where my head had been!

I must have gone a little berserk then. I don't mind fighting something I can see or understand, but this thing was nightmarish. There had been the feeling of death drawing closer like an invisible hand, and now death had materialized in the black dark—silent, formless, yet horribly real.

Yes, I think I acted like a crazed animal. I know I yelled, kicked, and flung my machete at the spot where my assailant must have stood. The carbine caught on a vine when I tried to heave it. Something slammed against my back and I went down; I was up on the instant, kicking and lunging about, swinging my fists. A twig snapped and I dived toward it. I whirled and dived at a second sound, and crashed head-on into a tree. My knees buckled, and at the same moment, powerful, clammy hands clamped about my throat.

I have little memory of what went on then, except that we both went down in the slime beneath the rank growth. The man I fought wasn't big, and I knew suddenly it must be Dawson.

Those hands about my throat were like steel. I couldn't get them loose. The dark spun around me, a mad, black whirlpool. I clawed once again——

A WILD ROARING awoke me. I stumbled drunkenly to my feet, mechanically swinging my fists. Then I realized I was alone, and that day was breaking. A bevy of howling monkeys high up in a giant fig tree was causing the racket.

I found I was on the edge of a small game trail twisting through the jungle. The ground for several yards around was torn up; there was blood everywhere, and a lot of it was on me. In my hand was a knife—the small hunting knife that I generally carry at my belt. During the struggle I must have reached for it unconsciously and used it.

I found my machete and saw a second one embedded deep in a tree. The fellow who had swung it probably couldn't jerk it loose in time—a fact that undoubtedly saved my life.

Was it Dawson who had tried to kill me? I followed the trail of blood down to the edge of a muddy pool. There was a spot where some one had lain, but no sign of the man himself—only a series of deep claw marks in the mud. A 'gator had taken care of the evidence.

I searched for the carbine, but couldn't find it. I hated to be without a gun. I was wondering where the creek lay, when the distant crack of a rifle snapped my mind awake. It came from far up the trail.

Then I remembered Gonzales—and La Diosa de la Madera. The shot seemed to have come from a high place, a hill.

Beyond, up that shadowy trail, lay the answer to the whole insane business. I knew it; I felt it, and nothing in the world could have held me back at that moment. I forgot I was thirsty, that my tongue was a thick, dry thing in my mouth; I forgot the ache in my throat and the heavy, leaden feeling in my feet. I started running upward along the trail.

The shot must have been fired a mile or more away. I believe I traveled twice that distance through the jungle before some instinct told me I was nearing the spot.

The trail had been leading gradually upward. Now it swung around the base of a steep hill. I left the trail, and as carefully as if I was stalking a tapir, started crawling upward through the matted growth. After fifty yards I stopped, listening, wondering if I could have made a mistake. At night I can get lost by merely turning around once, but I've never had any trouble finding my way about by day.

A small monkey chattered near by, and a green parrot flashed in the shadows. Then, distinctly, came the ringing of an ax high up on the hill.

I started upward again, slowly, carefully keeping under the cover of the ferns. On the damp leaf mold my progress was soundless. I halted again. The ax had stopped; now I could hear the faint murmur of voices.

A FEW MINUTES LATER I gently pressed a fern aside and peered into an open glade about a huge Ceiba tree. The tree trunk was nearly hidden in the smothering embrace of a Ficus plant that had grown around it in a network of immense tentacles.

And not ten feet away, looking directly at me with black beard bristling and mud caked on his flinty face, was Willowby Dawson! He was sitting on the ground, hands tied in front of him. Beside the tree, leaning on an ax, was a Negro. Standing in front of him, twirl-

ing an automatic on his finger, was Gonzales.

Dawson turned his eyes away; if he had seen me he did not show it. I flattened down, listening to Gonzales talk.

"*Puerco!*" snarled Gonzales. "So you stick your big toe on the rifle trigger and call your dumb *Americano,* eh? For that I should cut off the toe!" He spat in Dawson's face.

"But the *Americano* will not come. Little Maximo has the eyes of a cat. If he missed you, it is because you are quick. The *Americano* is not so quick."

"And where," said Dawson mildly, "is Maximo now?"

"Fool! He is gone to bring Miguel in the big boat. Do you think that we alone could get La Diosa down to the water? La Diosa must weigh a ton!"

Dawson smiled. "She may weigh more than a ton. Solid gold is extremely heavy. I doubt if a dozen ordinary men could lift her—and you have but a few.

"But, my friend," Dawson went on, "I am an unusual man. That is why Lord Hawley paid handsomely for my services. I, probably, am the only man in the world who can lift a ton of dead weight. You do not need the others to help. I will carry La Diosa down to the water by myself."

Gonzales stared at the little man. Suddenly his laugh rumbled forth. "You are full of clever tricks, señor. You wish me to untie your hands, eh? I will not fall for your nonsense; you are too nimble with your hands."

"I am trying to bargain with you," Dawson persisted. "It is no trick—and you need not untie my hands. You have not men enough to carry La Diosa. Grant me freedom afterward, and I will carry La Diosa for you."

"And if you should fail, señor?"

"Then," Dawson spat out, "you may cut off my hands! Is it a bargain?"

"*Caramba!* It is a bargain!" Gonzales said thickly. "You are either a devil or a fool. But we shall see. On with the cutting!" he barked at the Negro. "Make the opening larger!"

THE NEGRO went to work on the tree. Dawson stretched his feet, and his glance flicked toward me for an instant. He closed one eye and looked away. It was the sanest wink I've ever seen.

I got it suddenly. He had seen me, and he was playing for time. He must have guessed I didn't have the carbine, for I would have used it before this.

The Negro was clearing the Ficus growth from one side of the tree. In the opening exposed I caught a gleam of gold. I almost cried out at the sight of it, and then I stared, hardly believing what I saw.

There was a woman in the tree. A golden woman. *A statue!*

I began to get a glimmering of the truth. La Diosa de la Madera—the golden Goddess of the Forest—was an idol, and a rare piece of Indian craftsmanship from the looks of it; probably hidden during the days of Morgan, or even during the Conquest. Hawley and Dawson had been on the trail of it, and Gonzales had found out what they were after. It had been a race to see who could reach it first.

The Indians didn't skimp material in those days; that meant the thing was solid—solid gold.

The Negro dropped the ax. He blinked into the hollow he had uncovered, jaws hanging agape. Gonzales peered at La Diosa and grinned in triumph. He stepped back and waved his automatic at Dawson.

"Now, my friend, let us see if you can get her out!"

Dawson got to his feet. He stretched forth his bound hands and flexed the muscles in his arms. "I must limber up a bit first," he announced, beginning to go through a series of gymnastic con-

tortions. "My sinews are stiff from lack of use."

What happened next was too quick for the eye to follow. There was a flash and a whirling movement as Dawson's hands swept the ground, and he was springing with a machete. One flick, and the gun was knocked from Gonzales' grasp.

"O'Reilly!" shrieked the little Englishman. "Hurry!"

I came out of those ferns like Nurmi on the home stretch, and made for the Negro.

The fellow jumped for a rifle, missed it, and tugged at the machete in his belt. Before I could reach him he had the big knife out and was crouched and ready.

I slammed at him with my machete, but he rolled his head and the point of his blade laid open my forearm. With his thick lips drawn back in a snarl, he came at me.

He must have been a Costa Rica banana worker, for he could handle his machete in a way that made my scalp crawl. There was no time for me to see how Dawson was making out. There was no time for anything.

That big knife was everywhere at once. He nicked my jaw, slit the skin across my stomach, and forced me backward. I'd always thought I was pretty good with a blade, but I was unable to touch him.

Then I tripped over a root. I knew it was all over now. I was falling, and I could see the Negro uncoiling himself for a final swing.

SOMETHING hissed past my ear. The black fellow spun around and fell threshing in the underbrush. A machete blade was sticking through his neck. Dawson had thrown it.

When I got up, Dawson was leaning against the tree, mopping his hard face with a grimy handkerchief. Beyond him lay what was left of Gonzales. It was not a pleasant sight.

"Forgive the theatricals," he said. "All I needed was a chance to do some setting-up exercises so I could pick up my machete and swing it. Sorry about last night. In my anxiety to reach La Diosa, I forgot about Maximo's peculiar ability to see in the dark.

"As near as I can understand it, he clipped me with his revolver butt and then went after you. I was *hors de combat* for some time, and was unable to find either of you when I regained my senses. So I hurried on to the hill here—and Gonzales was waiting. What happened to Maximo?"

"Dessert for the 'gators," I said, staring at his hands. "How did you get your mitts free?"

"My dear captain, I am really remarkably strong. I could have snapped the cords at any moment, only Gonzales had his gun on me."

He turned and reached into the hollow tree. One jerk, and he had the statue out upon the ground. He stooped, grunted, and my jaw gaped open. *He raised the statue over his head!*

Setting it gently upon the ground again, he motioned for me to lift it.

WHEN I TRIED IT, I got another shock. La Diosa was certainly heavy, but I had no trouble picking her up.

"Wood," announced Dawson, "covered with a thin layer of gold. Unique in Indian art, and one of the greatest archæological finds in Central America. Actually, her name should be translated the 'Wooden Goddess' instead of the Goddess of the Forest. But in time legends become twisted; there are many stories of golden statues in the country, and it is no wonder Gonzales was fooled. He wanted to raise money for another revolution, I think.

"You see, he knew I had been looking for her. He'd been searching for

her himself. He's kept his men after me for weeks, watching every move I made. I don't believe he learned La Diosa's exact location until I was on the *Pomeroy,* starting through the canal. I recognized Maximo's brother on the boat, and that evening my stateroom was searched, most of my notes stolen. The fellow must have tossed the notes to some one going by in a launch, for he remained aboard.

"But the theft necessitated immediate action, for I knew if Gonzales found La Diosa first, he would probably mutilate or destroy her when he found her gold was only skin deep. Therefore, as soon as I judged I was passing near Pedro's place, I crawled through the cabin port and swam ashore. Only, in the dark, I miscalculated things somewhat, and by morning Gonzales was organized to stop me in case I left the boat alive."

He halted, looking at my arm. "My dear fellow, I'd better bandage that. You are bleeding profusely."

He used my shirt sleeve and did an expert job. Meanwhile I digested his tale—and came to a startling conclusion.

"Good grief!" I exploded suddenly. *"You must be Lord Hawley!"*

"You are remarkably astute," he said dryly, "though a trifle slow. I am Lord Hawley, but I have long ago found it was the best policy to change identities with my man Dawson while traveling. Too many people are interested in profiting by my activities. Fortunately, Dawson and myself were about the same size, and few people knew me by sight, not even Gonzales. I grew a beard, and the rest was easy.

"Poor Dawson! He must have been killed shortly after I left the boat. Maximo's brother, of course. I'd warned him to be careful. Gonzales was out for my blood—not only because of La Diosa, but also for political reasons. I'd stopped one of his revolutionary schemes in Panama, and I was ready to stop another one. Only, naturally, my murder had to wait until the location of La Diosa was known. Now, if you'll help me carry her——"

"I'll carry her to Balboa and back if you'll explain things to the colonel. If it came from me, he'd say I was a damned liar. You'll also have to identify Maximo's brother."

"Gladly," said the little Englishman.

"But," I went on, "just one thing. If you tell about knocking me out and putting my own bracelets on me, I'm going to start a private war with the British."

"I assure you," said he, grinning, and getting a good hook around La Diosa's golden neck, "that I will do nothing to arouse international complications."

Death in the Night

Sometimes it makes weak men strong—Sometimes—

by Herman Petersen

WITH A HARD FIST, Michael Rowland hammered angrily on "Blinkin' Johnny's" unwiped bar.

"I tell you"—he attempted to shout down the laughter of the dozen men crowding the hot, smoke-choked store—"I tell you I've solved the mystery. It ain't a mystery no more. I know what happened to the *Janette*."

"Long Pierre," who sat at the table by the door, wiped the froth of warm beer from his piratical mustache. His close-set, slightly crossed eyes glittered.

"You fin' 'er, eh, m'sieu'?" he piped in a voice that was almost a falsetto. "You fin' 'er—like you fin' ze *commissaire's* pants?"

The men whooped, roared, howled their delight at this verbal thrust. Rowland's face, in his rage, grew redder and redder, until it seemed the blood must burst through skin and stain the heavy stubble of gray-and-black whiskers, a week and more untouched by the scrape of any blade.

Lann Hatfield, filling the doorway with his more than six feet of length and his great breadth of shoulders, could not keep a smile from his lips. It was common knowledge that mention of the *commissaire's* pants to the skipper of the *Arabelle* was like flapping a taunting rag in the face of an infuriated bull. It had to do with one of Rowland's many previous and abortive attempts at mystery solving.

It happened several years back when Rowland, early one morning, found the *commissaire's* pants *sans commissaire* under a clump of palms on the beach. Later, in the broad light of day when the whole island was astir, the plump *commissaire,* in sun helmet and shirt and the pretty pink of fresh sunburn, had to waddle five miles to his bungalow and a pair of pajamas to clothe his dignity.

To the delighted audience who trailed him home, the *commissaire* declared wrathfully that he had strolled forth at dawn for a constitutional and a swim, and that while swimming he had been robbed; and he ordered Rowland arrested when he learned that the captain had taken his trousers.

Rowland offered in his own defense that no man in his right mind who lived within spitting distance of the sea would walk five miles to wallow in the brine and so give the world to believe that he had met with foul play. The *commissaire,* in his humor, found Rowland guilty of something akin to *lese majesty* and sentenced the skipper to five days repairing roads.

The affair became one of the jokes of the island, that and Michael Rowland's constant search for mysteries in need of solving. The fate of the schooner *Janette* was the latest mystery. Several months before the craft, owned and sailed by Georges Mordeau, had vanished. Now Rowland was blowing the balloon that he had solved the riddle of the disappearance, and Long Pierre

pricked it with reference to the *commissaire's* pants.

With a hoarse, bull-like bellow, Rowland launched himself at the Frenchman. Long Pierre tried to quit his chair, get on his feet; but Rowland's attack caught him half risen and entirely unbalanced.

The chair went over backward. The two men crashed to the floor.

On the instant, the crowded little room was in an uproar. Those who were nearest the struggle surged back to give the combatants more room, while those in the rear pushed forward to get a better view of the fight; and every one gave tongue to his individual delight.

Rowland was a short, chunky man, and he landed with his full weight mostly on Long Pierre's chest. To the Frenchman's added disadvantage his long legs were entangled with the legs and the rungs of the overturned chair. He yowled and clawed at Rowland, spat curses in Rowland's red face. For each curse Rowland rammed a fist against Long Pierre's head.

Long Pierre yowled more, and kicked. He lifted his long legs and smashed the entangling chair upon the floor, lifted it and smashed it down again until he broke it. Then, clawing the while at Rowland and spitting his curses, he kicked his legs free of the chair wreckage; he heaved and half rolled and threw Rowland down.

Of the two men, Long Pierre was the quicker. Once he had tipped the skipper of the *Arabelle* from his chest, he came up on all fours, his long back arched like that of a cat. With his left hand he caught Rowland by the thick throat. The Frenchman's right hand swept behind him, along his belt.

LANN HATFIELD, standing in the doorway, saw the flash of naked steel. He dived for the upward-sweeping hand, caught it by the wrist.

Long Pierre screamed with the rage of frustration. He came to his feet, turning on his toes as he rose. With clawed fingers he slashed at Hatfield's face.

Hatfield jerked back his head. He yanked Long Pierre toward him then, drove up with his right fist from hip to the Frenchman's pointed chin—a blow that snapped Long Pierre's stained teeth together, lifted him clear of the floor and felled him over backward upon a table.

From the table, the Frenchman slid limply to the floor. Hatfield, who still had hold of Long Pierre's right wrist, took the knife from the now unresisting fingers.

Slipping the blade into a pocket of his soiled white duck trousers, he bent down and collared Rowland. Without much effort he heaved the skipper of the *Arabelle* to his feet.

"Better take your mysteries out of here, captain," he suggested quietly.

Rowland staggered against the bar.

"But she's sunk," he said, hoarse with anger that possessed him. "She's sunk, I tell you. I damn near put a hook on her a week ago Friday, when I anchored in Shelter Bay."

Blinkin' Johnny folded bare arms in the wet on the bar and blinked at Rowland.

"'Ere now, skipper," he said with soothing good nature. "You're makin' another ruddy mystery of it. 'Ow could a craft sink in Shelter Bay now? A blow couldn't 'it 'er there. An' there ain't the smell of a reef."

Rowland banged a fist on the bar.

"A blow didn't hit her—and she didn't hit a reef. She was scuttled."

Dead silence in the hot room until some one asked: "How do you know that, cap'n?"

"I dived down to her," Rowland shouted answer. "That's how I know. And I know more than that. I know she was scuttled by pirates—and they did murder before they sunk her!"

From a corner table where he had re-

He struck downward furiously—then gasped, "Lord, I've knocked him over——"

seated himself, Heidel, the fat pearl buyer, said in his deep voice: "You're making a damn serious charge, Rowland. You'll need some strong proof to back that up."

"There's plenty of evidence ten fathoms down in Shelter Bay—just as I found it," Rowland roared. "There's Mordeau and his three boys in the *Janette's* cabin—what's left of them. Knocked in the head they were, every man of them."

Heidel said heavily: "If that's a yarn you're telling——"

Rowland shouted him down. "You'll know whether it's a yarn or not—when the commissioner gets back. I've got proof for him. It'll sober some of you for a few days when you hear what it is."

He struck the bar a final resounding blow with his fist.

"I've brought proof that'll identify the murdering thieves." He glared at the now silent men. "Laugh that off."

II.

MICHAEL ROWLAND, when he stamped from the store, left behind him a room filled with the loud talk of excited men. On the floor Long Pierre sat up to nurse his jaw with a hand, while he looked dazedly about.

"There's a tough crew camped 'ere on Mako waitin' fer th' divin' season ter open," Blinkin' Johnny said in a low voice to Lann Hatfield. "If it's th' identity of some of them th' cap'n's got fer th' commissioner——"

He sucked in his lips, shook his bald head, screwed up his blinking eyes as if to shut an unpleasant sight from them.

"'E'd best be mindin' behind 'im nights."

Hatfield nodded. "He's let a cat out of the bag—that's a fact," he said.

Hatfield lighted his pipe. From his trouser pocket he drew the knife he had taken away from Long Pierre. He tossed the blade to the bar.

"Give it back to him later," he directed Blinkin' Johnny.

The storekeeper blinked. "Fer 'im ter be givin' it back to you—in th' back. You'd better be watchin' out fer yerself too, gov'ner."

Hatfield shrugged. He walked out to the veranda.

A barometer hung to the right of the doorway. The glass had fallen since noon, when he had last looked at it. It had started to drop, he knew from what Blinkin' Johnny had told him, during the midmorning. A storm was brewing. Hatfield's watch showed him the time now as ten minutes passed two. The blow, he thought, would hit the island about sundown or shortly after.

"Evidently Mako is in for a variety of excitement."

Quitting the store veranda, Hatfield took the path through the palms and toward Gaston Farge's bungalow.

Farge was the gendarme of Mako. Hatfield had left young Harry Fracin at the house to talk with Esther Rowland, who had come ashore with her father when the *Arabelle* dropped anchor close to the rocky reef earlier in the day; and now the two of them were on the veranda with plump, red-faced Madame Farge, who wore tight stays and heavy black silk. Farge was away to the other side of the island, where the waiting pearlers were camped.

Hatfield knocked out his pipe and climbed the five steps. He said to the blond, curly-headed boy: "We've got to be wheeling for home, kid. If we don't start now we'll get wet. It's going to blow up about sundown."

He looked questioningly at the girl with the strong, handsome face who sat beside young Fracin. Her hair was black, parted in the middle, arranged in a simple knot low on the back of her head. He asked her bluntly: "Who

was responsible for the disappearance of the *Janette?"*

"Oh!" she exclaimed, quick dismay in her voice, in her dark eyes, too. "Has dad been drinking?"

"One or two. But it wasn't so much that as it was the *commissaire's* pants. After that he just naturally had to credit himself with a victory. What sort of evidence has he brought to hand the commissioner? Or is it a secret?"

"Evidently not now. It's Captain Mordeau's diary," Esther explained readily enough. "Dad found it when he dived down to the *Janette."*

"A diary after these months in the water would hardly be readable."

"It was in a zinc box made for it," she explained further. "The box has a friction cover. The book isn't damaged in any way."

Hatfield put the shadow of a frown on his strongly molded face.

"Mordeau could hardly have penned the names of his murderers."

"With the diary he left a sealed envelope. On it is written the instruction that it be delievered to the commissioner here in case the captain was found dead."

"That suggests he expected trouble."

She nodded.

"In the diary he wrote that he was being followed by another craft. He had some valuable pearls in his strong box. Dad found the box broken open when he dived to the wreck."

Hatfield turned to Madame Farge.

"I understand the commissioner has gone over to Nuka to hold court. When do you expect him back?"

Madame Farge strained the black silk of her dress with the shrug of a plump shoulder.

"To-day—to-morrow, m'sieu'. Or maybe next week. Who knows? It depends upon the *commissaire* and the weather."

HATFIELD frowned a little. An uneasiness had hold of him. He did not like the idea of Rowland having in his possession Captain Mordeau's diary and the sealed envelope found together in the cabin of the scuttled *Janette.*

It was dangerous stuff to hold. In the hands of the commissioner it might prove enough damning evidence to put a hangman's noose about the necks of the men guilty of the acts of piracy and murder; but it was not in the commissioner's hands. Before he returned to Mako and the papers could be turned over to him, any number of things could happen. Certainly men who by the commission of one crime had put a noose about their necks, could not be hanged any higher because they committed further crimes; and there was always the possibility that another crime might destroy the evidence of previous ones. Murder begets murder.

Farge, of course, as gendarme, was in charge during the commissioner's absence. Rowland could turn Mordeau's diary and the sealed envelope over to him. That would be the safe and proper thing to do; but Rowland was almost certain to turn a deaf ear to such a suggestion. Hatfield felt sure of that. Esther might persuade her father to hand Farge the diary and envelope if she understood the situation; but Hatfield had no desire to say anything alarming to the girl. He did, however, have the wish that for the time being he could keep her near to him, near enough that he could be at her side very quickly.

"Why don't you and the captain spend the night with Harry and me?" he asked her.

Her mouth was firm in repose but quick to smile. She smiled now.

"What a sailor you'd make! If it is going to blow we will have to stay on board the *Arabelle,* of course."

"The captain perhaps. But you could stay ashore—here with Madame Farge."

"I'll stay with dad. The boys have shore leave to-night." She smiled again. "I'll be quite all right. I've been through storms before."

He could not say that he was not thinking of the storm. He turned to the boy who had been listening quietly to every word.

"We've got to go, kid. We don't want to get wet."

He lifted the lad easily in his arms and carried him down the steps to the wheel chair.

"Some day, fellow, you've got to pay me back for all these rides. Maybe when I'm old, eh?"

They said their adieus to Madame Farge, who had the look of being very hot and uncomfortable in the heavy black silk dress. There was not a breath of air stirring to rustle dryly the fronds of a palm.

Esther Rowland walked with them a way. She was a tall girl, in her slender body the strength and grace of the seas and the winds. Her dress was plain, white, sleeveless.

"I'll come up to-morrow," she promised Harry Fracin when they stopped by the bridge over a rushing brook. From there the path climbed. "Now I must go back and find father. We'll have to move the *Arabelle* to the lee of the Fin and batten down. You watch us from the cliff."

She kissed the boy and smiled at Hatfield.

Hatfield said: "If I had the nerve to do it, I think I'd go and hurt my back on a reef."

She laughed and left them; and Hatfield pushed the chair across the bridge and started up the climbing pathway. He had gone a hundred yards or so when he stopped to fill and light his pipe and to look back the way Esther had gone.

"Why don't you ask her to marry you?" the boy asked. "She'd be nice to have around. And then she wouldn't have to be in danger of storms and pirates."

"I imagine she prefers storms and pirates to the dangers of the matrimonial seas." Hatfield started on again. "Besides, I don't believe I'm the sort of captain she'd be willing to sign on with."

"You'd find out quick enough if you'd just ask her."

"I know it. That's what I'm afraid of."

"Well, if you don't ask her pretty soon," the boy warned him, "I'm going to."

III.

THE SUN stood an hour from the western horizon when Lann Hatfield pushed the wheel chair up to the bungalow that looked down on the sea.

Sweating, made a little breathless by the climb, Hatfield, with a small stone, blocked a wheel of the chair. He sat down to rest on the board incline built over the steps, a runway to accommodate young Fracin's vehicle to and from the level of the veranda screened with vines.

"Whew!" he exclaimed. With a handkerchief he mopped face and neck, and he ran fingers through his wet, closely cropped sandy hair. "I think I'll have to speak to the commissioner about building a road up here. Then I'll have to import an automobile. Now what are you going to do?"

A pulley line was rigged from the veranda to a giant old breadfruit tree that grew near to the edge of the cliff. The boy was securing the line by means of a snap to the hitch attached to the chair; and then, turning the chair wheels with his hands, he began to propel himself toward the tree.

"I'm going to watch the *Arabelle* move her anchorage," he said over a shoulder.

Hatfield filled his pipe and lighted it. He watched the boy roll the chair to the

other end of the pulley line, stop in the shade of the giant breadfruit. The drop from the edge of the cliff was eighty feet to the stony beach below. Hatfield had rigged the line as a safeguard against the boy going beyond the tree, where he liked to spend much of his time. From there he had a wide view out over the heaving sea—the sea that had taken from him the power to walk.

Harry Fracin was the fourteen-year-old son of Hatfield's late neighbor. Five years before, attempting to cross the reef while a heavy sea was running, the elder Fracin had capsized a whaleboat in the boiling, rock-studded water. The sea had swallowed him; and, as if satisfield with that feast, it had cast the boy, broken and all but drowned, upon the beach.

Hatfield, an eyewitness to the tragedy, carried the lad home to the bungalow on the cliff. Through the months that followed he nursed the youngster back to health as best he could; but there was nothing he, nor the doctors he had from as far away as Papeete, could do for the injured spine.

"He'll never walk again," the doctors told Hatfield.

"I'll do his walking for him," the planter declared. "I'm going to keep that kid."

Hatfield smiled now as he thought back over the years. Young Fracin had never walked again, for he could not move his legs; but he had not spent all his hours in wheel chair or bed. With Hatfield's help he had learned how to get about with a pair of crutches; and he had worked out a crawl against which a man's ordinary walk was no match for speed. Everything he did in this way he did, of course, with his arms, and he had developed a muscular strength in them that was astonishing. He could pull himself, hand over hand, up a rope with apparently no effort at all, a feat that Hatfield, powerful man that he was, always had to give up before he had climbed ten feet.

From the shade of the breadfruit tree, the boy called: "The *Arabelle's* moving out to the Fin. Esther's waving to me."

THE FIN, so called from its shape, which was much like the dorsal fin of a shark, was a bare basalt upthrust from the sea about a mile and a half from the rocky reef that guarded the beach, There was no passageway through the reef for craft as large as a schooner, and when such boats visited the west side of the island their safest anchorage was in the shelter of the Fin. The schooner *Arabelle* was moving to such an anchorage now.

Esther Rowland was at the wheel, Hatfield saw when he had focused the binoculars young Fracin handed him. No one else was on deck. Rowland evidently was below tending the gasoline engine, for the schooner made slow way under that auxiliary power. The whaleboat towed astern, and several island boys swam a race after it.

Hatfield watched the swimmers. One lad, with flashing arms, outdistanced all the others. He gained the whaleboat, climbed in and stood poised, gesticulating at his less speedy companions. Then he went overboard in a graceful dive; and the boys raced back to an outrigger they had moored to an oil-drum buoy just outside the reef.

"You missed your swim to-day," Hatfield said to young Fracin. He returned the binoculars to the boy. "The other kids are at it."

"I'll have two swims to-morrow. Let's get up early and go out to the *Arabelle,*" the lad then suggested. "You haven't been through the reef in a long time. If you don't keep in practice you'll forget how to find the hole."

Island swimmers went through the reef by letting the undertow, which followed the breaking of each wave against

the rocky barrier, suck them along a submarine passageway. It was dangerous to venture, but the boys delighted in the risk; and even Hatfield had experienced more than once the thrill of being rushed through the tunnel by the swift and powerful current.

"All right," he agreed. "But we'll take the outrigger after we're through the reef. In the morning it may be pretty rough for you to swim the mile and a half to the schooner. You don't want to get too tired."

A puff of wind blew up dust from the grass. In the northwest a great cloud mass was piling high.

"The *Arabelle* will just about make it," Hatfield said. "I'm going in to close the window shutters and then start supper." And he warned the boy, "Now don't sit out here until it starts to rain."

The cloud bank moved westward, swallowed the sun. About half an hour later the storm broke. The wind came, gusty at first, then a demon shrieking in from the suddenly flattened sea. Level-driven, the rain struck like shot against the quivering bungalow; the cloud mass burst with flame. Thunder shook the island.

The gale grew in strength and in volume of sound, while Hatfield and the boy sat at table and by lamplight ate their evening meal. They had about finished when a pounding came at the front door which was barred against the wind—the unmistakable hammering of a fist. It had about it a sort of frenzy that was startling.

WHEN Lann Hatfield lifted the bar, the press of wind exploded the door in. The gale howled about the room, swished flooding rain across the floor, blasted out the light.

A man staggered in from the raging darkness. Hatfield put his strength against the door and closed it, dropped the bar in place again. As soon as he could find his way to the table, he relighted the lamp.

Young Fracin was the first to identify the guest whom the storm had blown into the room.

"It's Biff Snyder!"

Hatless, barefoot, dressed in torn and sodden blue shirt and patched dungarees, the scrawny man mopped his bony face with his hands, pushed streaming, stringy hair back from his sunken eyes. Water pooled on the floor about him.

"Good heavens, Biff!" Hatfield exclaimed when he had a look at the drenched, breathless man. "Did you swim up?"

"Just about," Snyder said. "An' I'm near done in. You'll have to do th' rest."

Hatfield tensed against the chill that touched him inwardly. There was deviltry being done under cover of the violence of the night. Because of no other reason would the sick Snyder have ventured forth in the storm. Hatfield was sure of that.

"Get out to th' schooner—th' *Arabelle*," Snyder went on hoarsely. "Rowland's due to get knocked in th' head tonight—him an' th' girl with him. He shot off his mouth too much this afternoon."

He coughed, swayed uncertainly on his feet. Hatfield placed a chair for him, but Snyder waved it away.

"I can't stop. I've got to get out of here," he croaked.

He braced his thin arms against the table. The lamplight reflected from his eyes in a feverish glow.

"It's Long Pierre," he said then. "Him an' his cutthroat crew. Heidel, the pearl buyer, is in on it, too. I heard 'em talkin' when they come back to camp from Blinkin' Johnny's place. I been bunkin' in th' same shack. I guess they thought I was asleep."

Hatfield, his strong face colorless, his breathing short and sharp, stared at the man.

His throat rasped when he asked: "What are they planning to do?"

"Long Pierre an' two of th' others are goin' to beat around th' north end of th' island. They'll use a whaleboat. It won't be missed."

"To-night? In this storm?"

Snyder choked and nodded. Water dripped from his stringy hair.

"Th' storm's just what they want. It'll cover them. They'll make it to th' Fin about midnight. Th' rest'll be easy. They'll board th' *Arabelle*—Rowland won't be standin' any watch. His men are ashore."

Hatfield cried hoarsely: "The devils! Picking a night like this!"

"It's a night for killing. When they've done in Rowland an' th' girl, they'll slip th' anchors an' let th' schooner go on th' reef. That'll destroy all evidence of a killing."

ANOTHER SPASM of coughing racked the man. Hatfield tried to get him to sit down.

Snyder only shook his head. "I've got to get out," he said when he could talk. "A couple of them followed me when I slipped away from camp. They must have guessed I overheard some of their plans."

"They've trailed you here?"

"I ain't certain. I hope not. If they have, your goose is cooked—yours an' th' boy's here. They'll put th' quietus on you, too. You can bet on that."

He straightened his scrawniness, turned and stumbled toward the door.

"Le' me out. If they get me—that don't matter. It might as well be with a bullet or a knife as with th' cough. I just wanted to do a good turn. I know—you like th' girl."

He tried the bar on the door but had not the strength to lift it; and he choked again: "Le' me out."

Without a word, Hatfield went to the door and removed the bar. A second time the door exploded in, and the gale filled the room with its howl and its rain. Again the lamp went out.

The scrawny Snyder stumbled from the room and across the wide rain-swept veranda. He staggered down the incline built over the stairs as a runway for young Fracin's wheel chair.

Lightning made the raging night more blinding bright than midday. Darkness crashed down again with a violence that jarred the ground. Before the tremor ceased, fire ripped the clouds again.

In the blue-white glare, Hatfield had a glimpse of Biff Snyder falling. Slipping, he thought, on the boards made treacherous to the feet by rain. The next blaze showed him the scrawny one huddled on the ground. Hatfield jumped from the veranda and took the drenched man up in his arms.

Snyder was limp, and not much heavier than the boy. Hatfield carried him into the house and put him down in young Fracin's chair, because that happened to be nearest the door. Then he closed the door and barred it.

"What happened?" the boy asked.

"Biff slipped and fell from the incline. He seems to have knocked himself out. See if you can light the lamp without burning your fingers. Take hold of the base of the chimney."

The boy lighted the lamp.

Snyder lay oddly in the chair, his head rolled loosely over on his left shoulder. Hatfield stood before him and looked down at his own storm-drenched shirt. That shirt was blood-stained where he had held Snyder against him when he had carried the man into the house.

Dropping to a knee, Hatfield pulled open the front of Snyder's wet, torn shirt—and he sucked in a breath sharply at what he saw.

"By heavens, kid! He's been shot! Biff's—dead!" And then he snapped the command: "Blow out that light!"

IV.

THUNDER jarred the house again.

"Do you think they'll try to get us, too?" the boy asked. His voice was entirely unafraid.

"They'll have to, kid—to save their own necks. They're bound to believe Biff told us of the plot he overheard."

"What are you going to do—about Esther and the captain?"

Hatfield groaned his despair. He was caught up on the cruel horns of dilemma. Death was abroad in the hellish night. Unless warned of the fate planned for them, Rowland and Esther would be taken unawares and murdered in cold blood hours before the fury of the storm had blown itself out. But how to warn them? If he left the house in an attempt to get to them and put them on their guard, he would expose the boy to the same danger that only a few minutes before had felled the scrawny Snyder at the very door of the bungalow.

After a little he sat down beside the boy in the darkness, put an arm about the lad.

"I can't leave you here alone, kid."

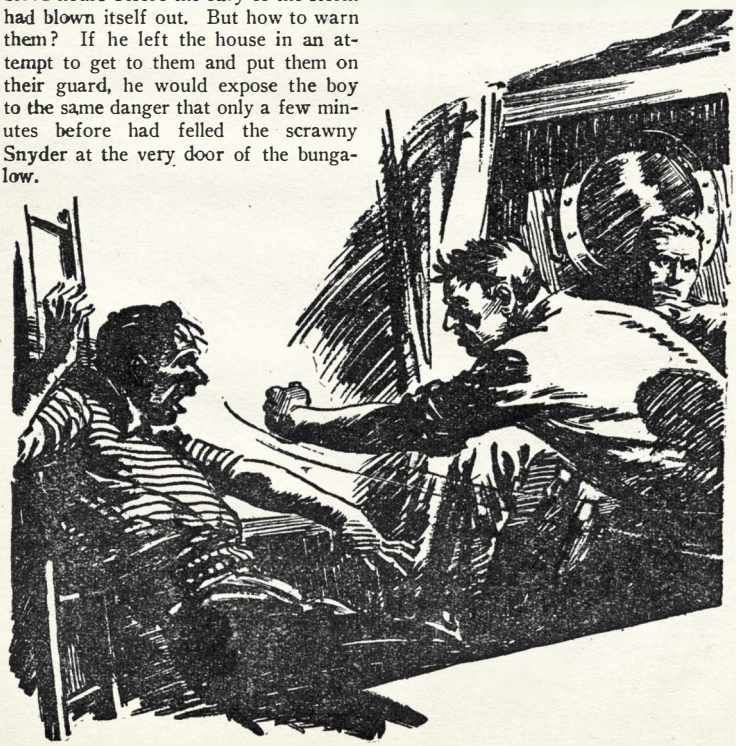
Lightning blazed. Thunder crashed. Howling wind tore at the bungalow, shot the quivering structure with a drumming barrage of rain.

The boy leaned against Hatfield.

"Those men outside," he said. "They can't hurt me any unless they get in here—and if I had the rifle and the shotgun I could keep them out. You know I can shoot."

Hatfield nodded. "As well—even better—than I can."

"Then you needn't be afraid of leav-



ing me alone. You'd better be afraid for those men."

Hatfield gave the boy a quick hug.

"Stout little guy, aren't you? Wish I had half your courage."

"It won't take much courage to sit here with a couple guns and wait for somebody to try to break in a door or a window," the boy declared. "But it will take a lot to get to Esther and the captain—and that's what you've got to do."

Hatfield asked in a hoarse whisper: "But suppose I don't make it, kid? It's not only those men outside. There's the reef, too—then the mile and a half of rough water between the reef and the Fin. I'd have to get to the schooner before mdinight."

The boy rubbed a cheek against Hatfield's arm.

"You're a big stout guy—and you've got good legs."

"Legs?" Hatfield held the boy tight against him. "By heavens, kid! I'll at least be as game as you are. I'll do it!"

He gave himself no pause then to dwell in thought upon what he proposed to do. To think was to hesitate—and the minutes were passing. With each beat of his quickened heart the hour of

Hatfield tried to shout a warning. Esther fired her gun—twice. The big Negro fell forward——

midnight drew nearer. It was like a dark tide threatening to engulf him with its flood. And in that lay disaster. He did not dare think of that.

Feverishly, he threw himself into the preparatory work he had to do. He cleared the middle of the room so that if the need arose the boy could shoot freely in any direction. He pushed the table into a corner and he set the chairs against the walls. In the middle of the floor he threw down mats, and he set the boy upon them, laying the rifle and the shotgun beside him.

"And here are cartridges, kid—and shells. And here are your crutches."

The boy immediately busied himself loading the guns.

From under his cot Hatfield dragged a flat trunk. From the trunk he dug an old blue serge suit, coat and trousers. The soiled whites he had on he quickly discarded; he dressed in the blue.

"Dark clothes won't be as conspicuous as white ones," he explained to the boy. "I've got to get by those devils outside."

He had peered through the bars of the window shutters to see if he could discover the number of men watching the house; but the lightning flashes showed him only storm-lashed trees and scrub stuff, rain-drenched rocks.

"There can't be more than two or three," he said.

WITH A PILLOW, with the discarded white trousers, and then with the addition of an old raincoat, he fashioned a dummy. He stuffed a rolled blanket into each trouser leg. When he had finished, he lifted young Fracin to his feet and fitted the crutches under the lad's arms.

"Now listen, kid," he said huskily. "I'm going through a window to the veranda. I want you to bar the shutter behind me. And don't you open it again for any one, until it is broad daylight and you know who is outside. Get me?"

The boy nodded.

"Yes, Lann." Then he asked, and for the first time a note of anxiety crept into his voice: "What are you going to do?"

"Hook that dummy to your pulley line, try to make it look like a man crawling away from the veranda. If I can get the attention of those devils outside focused on that dummy for a minute or so—maybe I can get away from the house without being potted."

"S-suppose you get p-potted, Lann?"

"Never mind what happens to me. Just as soon as I'm through the window you bar the shutter. Then you hustle back to these mats and you sit tight in the middle of the floor—until it's broad daylight. And you blow the head off any one who tries to get in."

A crashing roll of thunder interrupted him. He had to wait for the jarring heaviness of sound to pass before he could go on. Then he insisted: "You've got to promise you'll do just exactly what I'm telling you to do, kid."

"But if you're shot, Lann—if you're lying out there in the storm——"

"You're to let me lie. Promise, kid. If you don't, I won't go."

The boy gulped, very audibly. Storm fire flaming about the room showed him nodding his curly head.

"I promise, Lann."

"Good boy!" Roughly, Hatfield rumpled the blond curls. "Stiff upper lip now. And come over to the window with me."

By the window, he paused just a moment. He dropped to a knee, took the boy in his arms, kissed him.

"Hang on to it now, kid. I'll be—back. That's my promise."

He unbarred the window shutter. Quickly he thrust the dummy through, followed after it. It took his strength to pull the shutter back against the wind, and he held it until he heard the boy drop the bar into place.

Then Lann Hatfield crouched behind

the lashing screen of vines. Howling wind tore at him; rain, stinging like shot, drenched him. He slid across the veranda and found the pulley line. He had to fumble with the snap until he could hook it to the collar of the raincoat clothing the dummy.

It did look much like a man crawling on the ground, a man flattening out when lightning ripped the clouds again, a man waiting for the darkness to crash together before he crawled farther on his way.

"Oh, Lord," Hatfield choked, "let them think it *is* a man!"

He hauled the thing along about as fast as a man would crawl. Lightning hissed and showed the gleaming raincoat made to flap by the wind. The white of the dummy's trousers was revealed.

Again the night took flame. Two men ran through the blaze, one from the south side of the house, one from the north. Living men these. One stood to toss rifle to shoulder, to aim.

The earth-smashing peal of thunder drowned out the sound of the shot. But Hatfield saw the brief, feeble lick of flame spat out by the gun. When he saw it, he leaped to his feet and dived through the screening of vines at the south end of the veranda.

Then he ran.

V.

THE SHORT WAY to the beach was down a treacherously steep and rough trail that had its beginning about two hundred yards south of the house. Hatfield ran that way. The press of wind helped him, for it screamed out of the northwest, and even the rain, shot against his back, seemed to drive him. The heavens for the first moments of Hatfield's race flung down no hissing torches to light the way. The blackness was unrelieved, and the ground was rough. He had covered little more than half the distance between house and path when he stumbled and fell with force enough to jar much of the breath from him.

While he lay flat, the lightning blazed. When the fire was done, he leaped to his feet and ran again. If only he could gain the head of the path before he was discovered—he would be safe then, he felt. By now, he guessed, the men watching the house had discovered that he had tricked them with a dummy. They would guess he had fled the house. Would they guess which way he had run?

Every ounce of driving power he had in his legs he made to act. He had to reach the head of the steep path, start down the treacherous trail, before lightning flashed again. In his run he leaped high to avoid unseen obstacles on the ground. A dozen feet more——

"Made it!" he sobbed with breathlessness. His feet slipped on the slope running with rain. By clutching at the rock wall now at his left side, he saved himself from falling. "Made it! Now for the beach——"

But a white blur blocked the path.

"Not so fast, Hatfield."

Hatfield recognized the heavy voice of Heidel, the fat pearl buyer. He saw the gun in Heidel's hand when lightning ripped across the sky.

It was no time for hesitation. Heidel stood a few feet below him on the path. With the explosion of the rent heavens, Hatfield launched himself at the man. He struck downward where he had seen Heidel's gun before the smashed darkness fell violently together again; and at the same time he drove a fist for Heidel's jaw.

Metal—and soft flesh. He felt both with his hands. Then the white blur was gone. The blue-white glare of lightning revealed the path below him as untenanted.

"Lord! I've knocked him over——"

It was eighty feet to the stony beach below. Hatfield could not run now. The trail was too steep, too rough, too

treacherously slippery with wet. A misstep and he would follow the way Heidel had gone.

He slowed his pace, picked his way carefully to the beach.

WILD SEAS beat to angry white upon the rock-studded reef. The roar of storm-maddened waters drowned out the howl and shriek of the wind. It matched with its mighty voice the crashing roll of the thunder. Waves smashed the beach, and the air was so filled with spray and hard-driven rain as to be near to suffocating.

Hatfield tore off his drenched coat, his shoes, his trousers. He had no need of them now. Now he had to swim, and he fought his way into the water that tried to hurl him back upon the beach. He had to gain the reef, and then he had to find the hole, the submarine passage through the barrier. If he failed——

"But I can't," he gasped. "I've got to find it—get through—— The kid thinks I'm a stout guy——"

The sea choked him with its white smother, smashed him down with black walls of rushing water. It tossed him, tumbled him. Twice it cast him back upon the beach, breathless, bruised, bleeding. But each time he refused defeat. He flung himself back into the furious tide—and in his third attempt he got to the reef.

Close to the boiling barrier he went under the water, and swam down in search of the submarine passageway. Again and again he tried to find it, feeling for the pull of the undertow. But his struggles had taken much of his strength and breath, so that each time he could stay much less than a minute under the surface. Then he had to go up quickly to the air.

Minutes, more minutes passed. The sense of failure began to crowd in upon Hatfield. He could not—the thought filled him with despair—fight this wild sea forever.

"Once more," he choked. "If I don't make it then——"

He went under, swam down—and suddenly the undertow snatched him.

It was a fierce rush of current. He could no more have struggled against it than he could have held back against the current of life itself. On, on it carried him, faster and faster. It squeezed him, like steel bands tightening about his ribs, and he felt that his lungs were bursting. His whole being was filled with a roaring that was neither the tumult of storm nor the rushing of water.

"You sit tight, kid! Never mind me but——"

As suddenly as it had seized him, the current set him free.

He was struggling upward then, for air. He had to have air. When he broke surface he gulped both air and water. The water strangled him. He choked and coughed and spat—and gulped more air.

Waves heaved him up—up and up. Waves smashed him down, thundered over him! Thunder of the sky, thunder of the sea! He was somewhere close to the reef. How close? He did not know. He could not see. And he had to see. He had to locate himself before he was dashed against the rocky barrier.

Lightning tore the massed clouds apart. Rain stung Hatfield's face. Spray half blinded him. He was in a trough of the sea.

"Sit tight—kid! I'm—O. K.——"

The buoy—the outrigger the island lads always left moored there—— He had to find it. That outrigger was his one hope. If the storm had torn it from its mooring——

"Then I'm—done. I've got—to find it. I can't—be very far—away. If only I—could—be at the crest—of a wave—when the lightning flashes——"

But there was no way to time the lightning flashes. There was no time to them. Jove played with fire. The god struck white-hot sparks in quick suc-

cession. Then he paused, gave the storm to darkness.

A wave lifted Hatfield up and up. Then it rushed him down; then up again, higher—higher, as the lightning flashed.

"I see it—the buoy! And the canoe!"

He had new strength, new courage. He struck out for the buoy he had seen, for the outrigger moored to it.

"I'm going through, kid! Just a couple minutes now——"

HIS HANDS found the bracing of an outrigger, then the gunwale of the canoe. Then he was in it, lying gasping in the craft that was full of water.

"Made it!" he sobbed. "I'll rest—a minute—get my breath. Then I'll paddle——"

But he could find no paddle.

LANN HATFIELD sobbed his despair. Beaten—beaten. His pounding heart hammered out the word. He had swum out his strength to get to this canoe—and now the paddle was gone, snatched from the craft by the storm. Without that paddle he was beaten.

Near exhaustion numbed him physically, dulled his mind. He seemed unable to do or to think. He still had consciousness, but only that much of consciousness to leave him an awareness of a night gone violently mad. Sound and motion—light and darkness. The gods made war, and he had dared come upon the field of battle; the battle had rolled over him, and he had been crushed.

His sobs presently turned to weak laughter.

"I'm madder than the night!"

Whatever light-headedness he had went with the laugh. He struggled to sit up, struggled then to hold himself upright in the wave-tossed canoe; struggled to think, to marshal wits enough to go on with the battle from where he had left off. Where had he left off? What was he to do? How was he to go on? What did he need?

A paddle——

It came to him then, like buffeted memory fighting toward him through the raging night, that the boys who kept this outrigger moored to the oil drum for their play guarded against paddle loss by securing the paddle to the craft with a length of small line. He remembered having seen the line reeved through a hole in one gunwale.

Hatfield felt along the gunwales. Presently—and he gave a hoarse shout of relief and delight—he found the line. He hauled in on it quickly, snatched the paddle from the sea.

"Now I'm going places——"

But he did not at once cast the canoe free from the buoy to which it was moored.

Through the brief life of several brilliant lightning flashes he studied the storm-wild sea. The blow, he knew, came shrieking from the northwest. The northern horn of the island curved to the west. The high headland there took some of the force of the wind and turned it, enough that the sea in the bay was chopped, was made to heave in mad confusion rather than to hurl in rushing violence directly against the rocky reef.

"If it was square against the reef," Hatfield knew only too well, "I never could get away from it. It would smash me on those rocks."

His hope lay in the confusion of water. He cast loose the canoe—and he began to paddle frantically.

Vivid lightnings flashed. Thunders roared. Mountainous waves tossed the little outrigger as they would. Hatfield put his strength to the paddle. He had to get away from the reef.

"But I won't get caught," he gasped. "I'm getting away—I'm making it, kid and——"

INCH BY INCH, then other inches, he gained away from the reef. The

heave of waves stayed him; rushing water hurled him back—but inch by inch he gained.

He gained a mile. Lifted high on the crest of a wave when lightning flashed, he saw the *Arabelle,* naked masts at an angle as the anchored craft rolled.

"I'm making it, kid! I'll put on more steam!"

He drove the paddle deep, set his weight against it.

The blade snapped off short.

As if made a bit stupid with surprise, Hatfield held up the broken paddle shaft before him and stared at it while lightning flashed. The blade was gone, the shaft was a useless stick of wood. In its very uselessness the thing seemed to mesmerize him.

Then, suddenly, he roused from the trance. Hoarsely, he cried out his dismay. He hurled the broken stick of wood from him. In the tossing, turning canoe he raised himself to a half stand, a half crouch; and he went overboard in a short dive that just cleared the forward arm of the outrigger.

He swam then, through roaring eternity. When waves lifted him and lightnings flashed he had glimpses of the Fin. So he guided himself until he came into the lee of the big rock. Not so mountainously did the storm fury pile the water here. He felt now he could make surer progress; and shortly he located the *Arabelle.*

When he found an anchor cable, he clung to it, with his last strength desperately when a pitch of the schooner snapped the cable taut and jerked him bodily from the water, grimly when the cable slackened and plunged him down and down to strangle and choke and fight fiercely against gasping for a breath.

He thought of calling for help. In full vigor, Hatfield then realized, he would have but small voice to shout against the tumult of the storm. Spent as he was now, the feeble shout he might make would be heard by no ears other than his own. Yet—he had to cry warning to those on board the tossing, rolling schooner.

"How?"

He asked himself the question many times, but he could give himself no answer to it. Lighted ports showed him that a lamp burned in the cabin of the pitching, rolling schooner. Esther and Rowland were snug below deck. How was he to get to them?

Climb the anchor cable? He had not the strength left to do that. Yet he had to get aboard the schooner. Somehow he had to do that. If he could swim alongside and let a heave of the sea lift him, and if at the same time the schooner rolled—if his luck was with him he might be able to grab hold of the railing and haul himself to the deck. But if his luck was not with him, if the sea should crash him against the side of the *Arabelle*——

"I'll have to risk it," he decided.

He let go of the cable when it went slack, and struck out for the starboard side of the *Arabelle.* Occasionally, he had observed, the schooner rolled her starboard scuppers under. He tried to time himself to the heave of the sea, but that was almost impossible to do. One needed sight to do that, more sight than a swimmer ever had. All he could do was swim close to the craft and wait his chance.

That chance came at once—a heave of water even as the schooner rolled down.

Hatfield caught the rail with both hands. Slippery that rail—and the sea fell away from under him, gave a heave to the schooner. The craft lifted, up—up. Hatfield's hands slipped. There was no grip in his fingers——

He dropped back into the sea.

VI.

FOUR TIMES Lann Hatfield fell back into the sea. Twice the sea dashed

him against the side of the schooner. Fending with his arms and legs, he was able to avoid too severe a bruising, and the fifth time the sea lifted him he managed to grasp the rail firmly enough to cling to it and then to pull himself up and over.

He tumbled to the deck, lay limply in the foaming wash of seas that spouted over him when the *Arabelle* rolled scuppers under. He rolled with the roll of the schooner. Whether he fell completely unconscious Hatfield never quite knew. If for a time he was not unconscious, certainly he was very close to it. He lay for a long while unable to move of his own volition, and he had little, if any, awareness of what went on about him.

The storm crashed and roared; the sea heaved and fell—and Hatfield lay like a dead man. But the urge in him to carry on was not dead. That had life, life enough to ride him like a specter spurred of heel, whip in hand. It roweled him and lashed him until at last he groaned and stirred and then, with an effort, raised himself on his arms.

But he could not get to his feet. Several times he tried, but he had not the strength. Even to crawl called for tremendous effort; but by pulling himself along a few feet at a time he gained the closed companionway hatch. There he hauled himself up on his knees and pounded weakly with his fists on the cover. He called out hoarsely.

It was Rowland who dragged him down the ladder. It was Rowland, again, who poured cognac down his throat until the stuff set his whole being on fire. It was Rowland who kept shouting——

"What the hell's up, man? What the hell's up?"

Hatfield gulped his raw throat a moment free of fire. He gasped: "What —time—is it?"

"Gone six bells," the loud-voiced skipper told him. "What the hell's up?" He poured more cognac down Hatfield's throat.

Hatfield gulped and choked. For moments he felt that he must be breathing flame. He saw Esther's face vaguely. It seemed to float in mid-air, detached from any body. He tried to reach up toward her.

"Long—Pierre," he managed then to whisper. "He—and—two others—a whaleboat——"

Somehow he got out the story. The fire of the brandy in his veins flowed to his very toes, to his finger tips. His voice, though strangely hoarse, grew stronger. There was new strength in all his body.

"I came out to warn you," he said. "I left the kid alone. I've got to get back to him."

He tried to get to his feet.

"Lie down, you fool," Rowland yelled at him. The skipper had two revolvers and a double handful of loose cartridges on the table under the violently swinging lamp. "Where do you think you're going?"

"Back to the kid. I left him alone. I've got to get back there. I feel stronger now."

"That's the booze in you," Rowland roared. "It won't last. Don't be a damn fool. Lie down and be still."

Esther gently pushed Hatfield back on a settle.

"You can't go back alone," she said quietly. "We'll go with you."

"But I'll have to go! I've been away for hours. If those men break into the house—they'll murder him. He's such a little fellow—a cripple——"

"I know," she soothed him. "We'll go right away."

Water rushed along the sides of the pitching craft. Then—a bump.

ROWLAND GROWLED: "They're here!" He clutched a revolver ready in a big fist. The other gun he handed to

Esther. "We're ready for 'em. We'll have more than evidence to turn over to the commissioner. We'll have the damn pirates in person." With a hand, he swept up the loose cartridges from the table, crammed them into a pocket of his dirty, white trousers.

Tensely they waited, and listened. The men would be barefoot, Hatfield guessed. Any sound they might make on the deck would be drowned out by the storm.

After a little Rowland said in a hoarse whisper: "They're at the hatch." To Esther: "Keep your gun out of sight, girl. Sit down beside Hatfield." He thrust his own gun into a rear pocket of his trousers.

Esther sat on the settle where Hatfield lay. She put the gun behind her. There followed then more moments of waiting and listening.

Suddenly the hatch cover was shoved back. Three men sprang down the ladder. Long Pierre came first. One of the others was a huge Negro, naked to the waist.

Rowland let out an angry bellow. "What the hell's up? What's the idea busting in on us like this?"

As drenched as if he had swum from the island, his piratical mustache streaming water, Long Pierre, with his glittering eyes, made a quick survey of the room. Then he faced the skipper. In his right hand he held a naked knife, the same knife Hatfield had taken from him earlier in the day. He held the blade low, as if ready to bring it up in a quick, ripping stab.

He took a sliding step toward Rowland. At the same time the huge Negro and the other man, a hard-faced, muscular individual whom Hatfield did not recognize, sidled away from the foot of the ladder. Their intent, Hatfield guessed, was to close in on Rowland from the rear.

"Zat evidence w'at you fin', m'sieu'," Long Pierre said, hissing sharply. "We come for zat."

Rowland snarled, "You've come for more than that—only you don't know it yet."

He went for his gun. The hammer caught in the cloth of the pocket corner.

Before Rowland could pull the caught weapon free, the hard-faced white and the huge, half-naked Negro closed in suddenly upon him. The white man tried to throw his arms about Rowland. The skipper smacked his left fist to the fellow's jaw, knocked the man staggering back against the companion ladder.

A knife glinted in a black paw of the big Negro, now at Rowland's back. Hatfield raised on an elbow, tried to yell a warning and made only a hoarse noise in his throat. Esther sprang to her feet. She made no outcry, but the gun in her hand let go twice, with ear-shattering blasts.

The Negro's knees buckled under him. He bent forward at the middle and pitched head-first under the table. The hard-faced man, whom Rowland had knocked back against the ladder, had turned and was trying to scramble up the steps. Rowland caught him about the middle and dragged him back, and the two fell, a tangle of threshing arms and legs.

Screaming foul French, Long Pierre was fairly hurtling around the end of the table to get at Esther. He rushed with his arm extended, the long knife thrust straight forward. He had to pass close to the settle where Hatfield lay. Hatfield, doubling back his legs, drove both bare feet squarely into the Frenchman's ribs.

LONG PIERRE fell gasping against the table. The kick had taken most of his breath, but the man had gone too mad to be stopped by anything short of a crippling wound or blow. Voicing noises in his throat that sounded like nothing human, he threw himself for-

Across the wildly heaving seas, through the blazing, roaring night they sped, the oars pulled by a slender girl in sodden white!

ward upon Hatfield, the long knife stabbing and slashing. It stabbed and ripped the cushions of the settle, and twice Hatfield felt the bite of steel.

Hatfield tried to pin down Long Pierre's knife arm. He did succeed in hampering it, and he did get the Frenchman by the throat. But Hatfield's long battle with the sea had so used his strength that he had little left to fight this madman. Locked together, they rolled from the settle to the cabin deck. On the deck they rolled, over and over, until they came up against a leg of the table. There Long Pierre rolled on top. The long knife flashed up——

And Long Pierre wilted, fell limp upon the startled Hatfield.

It was Rowland who pulled the Frenchman away. It was Rowland who dragged Hatfield from under the table and lifted him to unsteady feet. Rowland waved a revolver in his hand.

"If I'd caved in his head I'd have spoiled hangman's meat," the skipper was bellowing. "I had to smash him down before he slipped you the knife." He prodded Hatfield's bloody left side with a finger. "He cut you a couple times at that. But they don't look very deep."

Hatfield looked dazedly about the room. The hard-faced white man lay inert at the foot of the companion ladder.

"Had to rap him one, too," Rowland shouted. He looked at his revolver. "Hope I haven't ruined this gun." He put the gun away in a pocket. "The black boy's spoiled—two slugs in the belly where he can't digest them. These other two I want to keep 'em till the commissioner gets back, if I can."

He dug cord from a locker and quickly and very securely he trussed up the unconscious men—Long Pierre and the hard-faced one. Then, one at a time, he shouldered them and carried them up the ladder to the deck. He took Long Pierre up last, and he shouted for Hatfield to follow.

Esther was on deck, her white dress tightly plastered to her by the rain. She had hauled the whaleboat alongside—the whaleboat Long Pierre and his men had used and left tied to the rail—and she held it while Rowland dropped his bound prisoners into the bottom.

"The girl and I will row," Rowland bellowed. "You take the tiller, boy. We'll run the reef. We won't be long now getting to that lad of yours."

Nor were they long getting to the beach. Across the wildly heaving seas, through the blazing, roaring night, they were sped by wind and waves, by the oars pulled by the short, chunky skipper and by the slender girl in sodden white. Loosed by the storm, her black hair streamed in the wind. Her mouth was firmly set. Once, when lightning flamed, she smiled at Hatfield who stood braced against the steering oar.

Over the boiling reef they charged, riding the crest of a mountainous wave. Then they slid to a grounding on the beach, and Esther went overside with the men into waist-deep water, to run the boat high on the stony shore.

Rowland shouted: "You two get up to the house and take care of that boy. Here!" He handed Hatfield his revolver. "Get along with you! I'll take care of these two." He bent to haul his prisoners from the grounded whaleboat.

FROM THE BAY, Hatfield had had glimpses, when lightnings flashed, of the bungalow on the cliff. From the beach the house was not visible. But he looked up, and at the same instant he began to run.

"Fire!" he cried out hoarsely. "The house!"

The high, ragged edge of the basalt wall was backed by a brightening ruddy glow.

Just how he made the climb up the steep, broken, slippery path, he never knew. He knew only that of a sudden his weakness and weariness fell from him like a weighted garment he had worn far too long, and that with a cold, sickening touch fear girded him with the strength of a dozen men. He went up the treacherous path with the fleetness and sureness of a goat, and like a goat he used all fours.

"I'm coming, kid! I'm coming——"

With one last heave and bound he reached the top—and stopped.

The bungalow was one mass of roaring, crackling flames.

Hatfield flung his arms up before his face and sagged to the ground.

At the startling sharp sound of a shot, Hatfield jerked up his head.

At the second shot he faced in the direction the sounds had come—the rocks in the rear of the blazing bungalow. The basalt there mounted in a second broken step, thirty to forty feet, in places absolutely sheer. At the foot of the steps the talus was mostly broken slabs, pieces loosened and shaken down by some earthquake of the forgotten past. From those rocks the shots had come.

Those rocks, that basalt step—the boy's playground. It was there he had so often shamed Hatfield at climbing a rope, hand over hand. He had a retreat, a niche in the face of the step, to which he almost daily climbed. It was about twenty feet up from the base. Hatfield had never been able to climb there.

The rope hung down the sheer face of the step now. By the ruddy light of the fiercely flaming bungalow Hatfield could see it bowed by the wind. And he saw one other thing, a sight that jerked him to his feet—a man crawled along the high edge of the step, crawled toward the spot where the rope bent over the lip of the rock and dropped down from its point of fastening.

Suddenly Hatfield was alive again, with his heart in him and pounding madly. A man crawled along the high edge of the step. Of that act there could be but one explanation—the boy had not been trapped in the burning house. Somehow he had escaped. He had climbed the rope. He was at this very moment hiding in his niche in the basalt wall.

From the rocks at the foot of the step came another shot. That meant another man was there, a man with a rifle. But at what was he shooting? At the niche in the high step, Hatfield guessed. And the reason for the shooting? To keep the boy from moving from the retreat.

"And that devil up above—he's going

down the rope! They've got the kid cornered."

Hatfield dashed toward the rocks at the foot of the wall. He was barehanded. Somewhere he had dropped Rowland's revolver. He did not know where. The flame spit of another shot showed him where the rifleman lay, resting his gun over a basalt slab. Hatfield jumped for him.

The fellow either saw or heard Hatfield coming. He started to scramble to his feet, but he got no farther than to his knees when Hatfield was upon him. He tried to grapple, to get Hatfield about the legs and throw him down, but Hatfield braced against it. With his left hand he caught the fellow back of the neck. With his right hand under the man's chin, he snapped the grappler's head back.

The man's neck cracked horribly. The fellow sagged completely limp against Hatfield's legs. Hatfield kicked him away and snatched up the rifle.

Forty feet up the basalt wall the other man was just starting down the rope. Working the cocking lever of the rifle and making sure the gun was loaded, Hatfield snapped it to his shoulder, took quick aim, fired.

Through a darkening mist, he saw the body come hurtling down. He dropped the rifle. Swaying, he cupped hands to his mouth and weakly tried to shout the words——

"Hey, kid! It's me—Lann——"

Black night crashed down upon him.

"HE'LL COME AROUND," Michael Rowland was saying gruffly. "Don't you worry about him, lad. He's put in a tough night, and it's used him up. Lost a little blood, too, from those digs Long Pierre gave him in the ribs. But he'll come around."

"I'm already—around," Hatfield croaked in a whisper. He opened his eyes and tried to grin at the anxious young face crowned with curly blond hair that bent over him. "What happened?"

"You keeled over, you blasted weakling," Rowland growled. "Esther's gone down to Farge's to get a couple men and a stretcher or something. You'll be tucked in bed shortly, with a couple fool women making a fuss over you."

The boy said, "Lann, I couldn't stay in the house the way I promised. They found the oil drums and they set one side of the house on fire."

"How'd you get out?"

"Through a back window," the boy told him. "I fooled them—the same way you did."

"With a dummy?"

"N-no. Not exactly with a dummy. I used—Biff."

"Biff?"

The boy nodded.

"You left him in my chair. Remember? When they set the house on fire, I got the front door open. I shoved the chair out. It went across the veranda and down the incline, then down the slope toward the edge of the cliff. I guess they thought it was me. Anyway, they went after Biff—and I went out the back window. I couldn't carry a gun with me. If you hadn't come back just as you did——"

Hatfield reached up and rumpled the blond curls.

"I got back, kid," he whispered. "That's all that matters."

"The house——"

"We'll build a new house, kid."

"And have a housekeeper."

"What?"

"A housekeeper," the boy repeated. "I asked Esther if she'd marry you. I told you I was going to ask her if you didn't. So I asked her to-night. She said she would—to-morrow or the next day—sometime before you got back enough strength to get away."

Mountain Savvy

Wet snow sticks where it hits!

by Bruce Douglas

TOM BRANT, forest ranger, pushed his bear paws with machinelike precision along the road leading up Squaw Mountain. Beneath the collar of his heavy service jacket sweat formed on his neck and trickled down his backbone. A late September blizzard, the first of the season, had laid two feet of wet snow on the ranges, then stopped abruptly. Now the temperature was mounting, and a thaw was in the air.

Brant's face was set in lines of worry as he plodded along in the single set of wagon tracks that alone broke the sweep of clinging, sticky snow which

spread over the ground and weighed down the pine branches with clumps of heavy whiteness.

"That'll be Clem Dudley," he remarked, nodding down at the wagon tracks and speaking aloud, after the fashion of men who spend much time alone. "After I find out what's the trouble up on Squaw, I'll back-track an' see where that wagon came from. It won't be from the Humboldt, though. Dudley's got too much mountain savvy to high-grade a mine an' leave a clear trail in fresh snow to prove it against himself. Got to hand the slippery geezer that much, anyway. Wonder what the proof is that Joe Elder said he'd finally got against 'im."

At mention of Joe Elder, the furrows of worry deepened in his face, and he forced his rackets to a faster pace through the clinging snow. He glanced anxiously along up the steep slope. Gun-metal clouds hung low, and early dark would be falling in another hour and a half. Two hours had passed since Brant, sitting in his lookout cabin on Chief Mountain, had answered the jangling ranger telephone to hear Joe Elder's voice.

Elder had spoken only three words; and over the crackling, rattling mountain line they had seemed to come in a choking gasp. "Help! Come quick!"

That was all. A sudden grating of static along the wire had followed; then the line had gone dead. Brant had wasted five precious minutes trying to get a connection through again. Then he had grabbed his jacket and snowshoes and set out. Like a human avalanche he went tearing down the slopes of Chief; and now he had covered most of the upward trail along the humped backbone of Squaw.

As he panted along the ever-steepening slope, his mind worked furiously at the mystery of that cry for help. What had happened to good old Joe Elder? And what about that youngster, Sid Cole, who was up on Squaw with him? Why had Elder phoned across to Chief instead of just calling across the short line from the cabin to the lookout post around the hump of Squaw? According to Brant's time records, young Cole would be up in that lookout when the phone call came through, trying to make a ranger out of himself.

Of course, Cole was too green to be of much help in any real emergency. And instead of sopping up mountain savvy from the hardened old ranger, he was always talking back and arguing with him—trying to show that he was smart. Too, the trouble, whatever it was, might have involved Cole along with Elder. Anyhow, Elder had called for help—and old Joe didn't do that if a situation could possibly be handled alone.

BRANT plodded swiftly along in the wagon tracks. Around the next bend in the trail the ranger cabin would be in sight, a little more than a hundred yards farther on. The lookout post was about fifty yards on beyond, and out of sight from the house around a granite shoulder.

His tired legs working like pistons, Brant rounded the bend. Then his eyes widened suddenly, and he halted. Anger replaced the look of worry on his face. He glanced quickly upward along the side of a mountain pine. A jagged end of bent wire showed where the line had been cut close to the crude, uninsulated metal clip on the side of the tree. Mountain phone wire used in ranger lines is not the thin, braided, insulated stuff of city lines. It is one thick, tough piece of metal, calculated to withstand the force of falling limbs wrenched from pines in mountain storms, to bear up under the dead weight of clotted snow along thousand-yard unsupported spans where the wire leaped across gulches hundreds of feet deep.

No thought is given to insulation under such conditions; a stout metal hasp driven into a blaze on the side of a pine holds better than glass contraptions that crack under the extremes of mountain temperatures. And if one can make out a voice in the midst of the line static, that is sufficient for the rangers.

But the very stoutness of the ranger telephone lines invited other interference—difficulties originating with humans. In vain did the Colorado legislature place a fine of fifty dollars against cutting ranger wire. In the wild fastnesses of the upper ranges, all laws go by the board in an emergency. And when one of those queer, silent, hermit-like men who dwelt apart in their little shakedowns in the mountain glens found himself stranded with a broken wagon, that wire was too handy along the trail to be resisted.

Many a time, as Tom Brant started out in the midst of a howling blizzard, a roll of new wire over his shoulder and pliers in his pocket, to repair a cut in the line, he had sworn bitterly that even a death penalty would fail to protect that line from harm. The whole service was bitter about it.

It was with this same bitterness in his eyes that Brant scanned the bare space between the two trees, saw the section of wire being wound tightly around an axle, and strode toward the wagon. It was halted just at the spot where the side trail branched off toward Clem Dudley's place. And Dudley himself was on his back in the snow beneath the wagon.

Brant stirred him up with a boot against his hip.

"Come out from under there, Dudley," he commanded. "This is goin' to cost you a fifty-dollar fine."

SPLUTTERING, the man crawled out from beneath the wagon. His hands were waving, and his little eyes were thinned to apologetic slits as he faced the ranger.

"What else could I do?" he demanded. "What else could I do? Here I am with a busted axle, an' more'n two miles to go before dark. It's comin' on to blizzard again after dark; you can see that for yourself. Look at the way them clouds hang low. An' the thermometer's droppin' already. Come dark, an' I'd been snowed in, an' the horses, too."

Brant glared into beady eyes. "It's only a couple hundred yards, even less, to the cabin. You could walk up there an' borrow some fresh wire, instead o' takin' this. No, your emergency talk won't stand up this time. You're slippery, Dudley, but you won't talk yourself out of this one." His eyes turned toward the tarpaulin drawn close over the body of the wagon, and he remembered his earlier suspicions. "What you got in that wagon? Some more high-grade ore stolen from the Humboldt?"

Dudley's tone was whiningly indignant. "Take a look if you want to!" he exclaimed, waving a hand toward the wagon. "I've been over to Bill Yore's place. Left there when th' blizzard ended, an' I've been comin' ever since. He'll swear to that. Besides, you can read the trail yourself. There's no snow on that wagon top; an' you'll find wagon tracks without a flake o' snow in 'em clear over to his place on Papoose." He waved his hand excitedly forward. "This is as far as I came. You can see that."

Brant followed the direction of the wave. From where they stood, on up the slope the blanket of snow lay white and spotless, unblemished by trail or footprint, either on the road leading by the cabin or on the side trail toward Dudley's place. Twin banks of snow leading from the rear of the ranger cabin upward around the shoulder of mountain indicated a path that had been shoveled out to connect the cabin with

the lookout roost. Elsewhere, the snow was unbroken. A thin wrinkle of puzzlement bisected the ranger's forehead as he turned back to the man before him.

"Come on," he ordered. "You're under arrest. We'll stay at the cabin tonight, an' I'll take you down in the mornin'. Sid Cole can put your horses up in th' lean-to when he comes off duty in about half an hour."

Expecting objections, he took a step forward. But Clem Dudley stepped along with surprising alacrity. Brant's eyes traveled bitterly across the vacant space in the telephone line, then followed along the final sixty-yard span from the last pine tree to the corner of the cabin. He quickened the pace.

"Come on," he grunted anxiously. "I've got to see what's wrong up there at the cabin."

"SOMETHIN' WRONG up at the cabin?" Clem Dudley picked up Brant's remark as he scuttled along beside him, kicking the two-foot layer of snow to either side. There was a kind of eagerness in his face as he looked sideways at the ranger. "What kind o' trouble? I heard some loud talkin' comin' from the cabin while I was workin' on the wagon—sounded sort of angry. But I didn't think nothin' of it, because Elder an' that young feller are always jawin' at each other when I pass by."

Brant did not answer as he covered the final few yards to the cabin door. But he was to remember that remark later. Without pausing to knock, he pushed the door open. Then he stood still in the entrance, as though rooted to the spot.

"What's the matter?" Dudley finally pushed in close behind him. "Somethin' wrong?"

Brant's face was grave as he turned half about, then nodded toward the inside.

"Murder," he replied, his voice sounding strange in his own ears. "Come on in, but don't lay a finger on anything."

Clem Dudley's Adam's apple moved slowly up and down as he squeezed in beside the ranger and stood there, looking at the lifeless body on the floor. Stretched out flat on his face, the receiver of the telephone still grasped in fingers which had long since gone rigid, old Joe Elder lay in front of the big fireplace.

The handle of a knife stood up from between his shoulder blades, a brown spot of blood widening from the knife to cover half the back of the olive-drab uniform jacket. His service hat lay on the floor at the other side of the low table beneath the wall telephone. The room was chill; the fire had burned out, and the gray ashes matched the streak of gray above the ranger's lifeless temples.

It was Dudley who broke the long silence. The habitual whine in his voice grated on Brant's raw nerves. "So he done it at last! I was lookin' for somethin' like this to happen, sooner or later."

"Who?" Brant snapped. "What do you mean?"

Dudley jumped. "You don't need to bite my head off, do you? Figger it out for yourself if you're so touchy. You can read sign as well as the next man. Here's a man dead in a cabin surrounded by snow without a mark or a footprint in it except where a path's been shoveled out to the lookout roost. It don't take no Sherlock to say who done it, especially with them two always quarrelin' together."

Brant's eyes narrowed. "So you're dead certain it was Sid Cole, eh?" His face was working as he gazed down at the lifeless body of his old friend.

Dudley's voice took on more assurance. "Who else could it be?" he demanded. "Here's them two, alone at th' post, an' the post surrounded by

unbroken snow. If somebody'd come in an' done it, he'd 'a' left tracks, wouldn't he? O' course he done it!"

THE RANGER turned slowly away from the body. His gray eyes bored into the man beside him. "Ain't you takin' a lot for granted?" he inquired levelly. "First place, how do you get so certain that it didn't happen before the blizzard?"

His eyes were fixed on his prisoner's face. He himself knew that Joe Elder had been alive after those gray clouds had laid the telltale blanket of snow. He had heard Elder's voice on the telephone not over two hours ago. But Dudley's assurance was puzzling.

Without waiting for a reply, the ranger spoke again. "Second, whoever done it might have come in before the blizzard. In which case, he's still in the cabin. An' third, that path at the rear leads around a bend. How do you know that whoever done it didn't come across by way of the lookout roost an' leave the same way? Looks to me like you're takin' a lot for granted."

Clem Dudley flushed. "I—I hadn't thought of that. But if Cole didn't do it, an' th' man came by way of the lookout, then Cole would 'a' seen 'im come an' go. It don't stand to reason a man would do a killin' that way."

Brant moved over toward the closed door of the bedroom. "Let's take these things one at a time. For all we know, we may find Cole dead in the roost. But first we'll settle this possibility of the murderer still being in the cabin."

He flung open the door and peered in. Two bunks stood along opposite walls, a washstand in between. Clothing hung on pegs along the inner wall. The room was empty. Brant proceeded to the little kitchen. It, too, was deserted. A teapot full of cold water stood on a cold stove, and frost had begun to obscure the view from the one window.

With a jerk of his head, the ranger led the way toward the back door. "Settles that," he said shortly. "Now we'll have a look around the corner."

They went out. The path stretched away from their feet, leading up the slope and around a sheltering rampart of granite. The site for the cabin had been chosen with this bulge of stone in view, to break the arctic sweep of winter blasts before reaching the cabin; but the lookout roost had to be placed above and beyond it, so that the ranger on duty could scan the slopes of the ranges in all directions. The house and part of the road was cut off from view of the lookout; but that could be seen from the house itself.

Brant led the way up the slope. No fresh snow lay on the path; it had been shoveled clean after the blizzard was over. They rounded the bend. Mounted on sturdy stilts, a ladder leading up to it, the lookout roost stood in a small clearing on the rounded top of Squaw. Young Cole came down the ladder as they approached. A questioning look was on his youthful face as he recognized them.

"Hello, Brant. What you doing over here? Did Elder ask you to pick up that skinmulink?" He nodded toward Dudley. Then a look of annoyance crossed his face. "Elder said he had evidence against 'im; but the old geezer's about as talky as a clam when it comes to things of that sort. You'd think I was clean outside the service." There was more than a hint of irritation in his tone.

Brant did not reply at once. His eyes were busy scanning the slopes beyond the lookout roost. Snow lay on them in an even, unbroken blanket. He turned back to Dudley.

"You were right," he said shortly. "But you were a bit previous about it—almost as though you knew we wouldn't find tracks around this side."

Dudley flushed. "Well"—the defiant whine had come back into his voice—"why don't you arrest 'im?"

"Arrest?" Sid Cole gasped. "Arrest who? What for?"

Brant's gray eyes bored into the young man. For a long moment he remained silent. Then he turned.

"Come on back to the cabin," he commanded. "Elder has been murdered."

HALF AN HOUR LATER, Tom Brant sat at Joe Elder's desk in the main room of the cabin, facing the two other men across the desk. The old ranger's body had been removed from the hearth and laid out on his bunk, a white sheet drawn up over the still face. Fire burned again in the fireplace, and a lamp on the table shed a yellow glow about the room. W intry gray outside was rapidly fading into gloom.

Sid Cole sat in a leather-bottomed rustic chair over by one wall. His face was pale and drawn as he stared silently at the ranger. Clem Dudley sat on the opposite side of the room, his little eyes shifting from one to the other of the men, fingers fiddling nervously at a button on his coat.

Tom Brant's face was expressionless as he turned to Colt. "There's less than half an hour of daylight left; and it'll be snowing within an hour. That will blot out everything. Better take another look about, Cole. If you're ever goin' to make a ranger, you ought to be able to use your eyes to save your neck."

Dudley stirred nervously. His whining voice raised objection. "You ain't goin' to let a murderer go out there all by hisself, are you?"

Cole glared across at him, but said nothing.

Brant answered: "He couldn't get two miles in the blizzard that's comin' on," he stated.

"Yeah!" Dudley whined. "But he could shoot us both down from out there in th' dark! I—I don't like th' way you're handlin' this case, Brant! I tell you, I'm goin' to speak to the ranger captain about it!"

Brant's eyes narrowed. He looked searchingly across the table at Dudley. Then he nodded to a service automatic which lay on the desk in front of him.

"That's Cole's gun. He's unarmed, and he can't get away. All I'm offerin' him is a last chance to use his own savvy to clear himself if he can."

He turned his gaze back to Cole. The young man shrugged hopelessly.

"I—I swear I didn't do it, Brant." His voice was hollow. "I swear it! But there's not a speck of use in my going out to look around again. We've been over the whole place together. I'll admit there aren't any tracks, if that's what you're driving at. I'll admit that Elder and I were cooped in here together with snow all around us and not the sign of a track in it. I can't help but admit it; you've seen it for yourself. But I didn't kill him! I didn't! It's—it's uncanny, that's what it is!"

A harsh laugh came from Clem Dudley, a laugh with a taunt to it. "You killed him!" he exclaimed excitedly, his voice rising to a shrill note. "You can't get around it. Killed 'im an' figgered to make away with th' body after dark. To-night's blizzard would 'a' covered all traces o' your carryin' the body away an' dumpin' it in a gulch somewheres where it wouldn't be found till spring! You'd probably got away with it if Brant an' me hadn't come along to-day, too!" He looked toward Brant with a kind of cocky pride, as though being brought in a prisoner made him partners with the ranger in this business.

BRANT waited until both men were looking at him. He filled and lighted a short pipe before speaking.

"Then you give up, Cole?" he in-

quired. "You can't figure your way out?"

Cole shook his head hopelessly. "All I can say——" he began.

But Brant cut him off. "Dudley," he interrupted, "you said something out there on the road about hearing voices. Tell me that again."

"That's right! I heard loud voices; sounded like them two was quarrelin' again."

Sid Cole leaped to his feet, strode three steps across the floor, and stood in front of the man, fingers clenching and unclenching.

"It's a lie!" His eyes blazed with fury; and Dudley cringed and squirmed there before him. "It's a damn lie! I was in that lookout from two o'clock on." He swung back toward Brant. "You know that!" he exclaimed in an almost pleading tone.

"I know you were *supposed* to be there," Brant replied. "But that won't do you any good."

Dejectedly, the young man made his way back to his chair, slumped down in it. Brant rose to his feet, moved out from behind the desk until he stood between the two men. He turned his back on Cole, stood facing Dudley.

"So it's an open-an'-shut case, eh, Dudley?"

Dudley's head bobbed in excited agreement, and he grinned evilly across at Cole. "You goin' to lock 'im up now?"

Brant stepped back behind the desk again and sat down. His hand lay within a few inches of the automatic which young Cole had surrendered.

"Not yet," he replied slowly. "First I'm going to give him a lesson in mountain savvy. Old Joe preached to him on the value of mountain savvy, but he wouldn't listen to him. I think he'll pay some attention to this lesson, though."

"What—what do you mean?" Dudley stammered.

Brant's hand moved the few necessary inches, began to toy with the automatic. "Just what I said," he stated tonelessly. "Cole was too all-fired cocky to listen to an old mossback like Joe Elder. But he's not so cocky now. I think he'll be willing to sit still and listen. And if he does, he'll learn a lot of things he might have learned from good old Joe. But first, Dudley, I've got some things to say to you."

"To—to me?"

Brant nodded soberly. "To you. First: you were within two hundred yards of this ranger cabin when you cut that telephone line. That looks funny—damn funny. Why didn't you come up to the cabin and ask for wire instead of breaking the law?"

Dudley opened his mouth to speak; but Brant went on. "Maybe you knew what you'd find if you came up here. Maybe you didn't aim to put any of your footprints on that unbroken layer of snow. Speaking of that, you were pretty sure that there wouldn't be any tracks leading up to the lookout roost from the outside, though the lookout was around the corner from you and you couldn't possibly see it. You were pretty damn sure. I'm wondering why."

He paused, his keen gray eyes looking searchingly across the desk at the man.

Dudley was flushed and squirming. A light of defiance gleamed in the man's little eyes.

"You can't lay it on me!" he exclaimed. "You can't! I was down there at my wagon when you come up; an' there wasn't the ghost of a trail beyond my wagon—not the ghost of one!"

Brant turned to Cole. "While you were looking about, did you take a look at that axle that Dudley was winding with our telephone wire?"

Cole's eyes widened with mystification. "No. Why? What could a broken axle have to do with the fix I'm in?"

Brant's cool gaze swung back toward Dudley. "Not a thing, Cole. But maybe an axle that's *not* broken might have a lot to do with it."

DUDLEY cringed under the whip lash of Brant's gaze. "Dudley," Brant's chill voice cracked out, "why was it that you cut that wire to bind an axle that didn't even have a crack in it? Was it so that you could be sure to be on the spot when I came up—to make certain that I didn't overlook one little bit of the evidence of that unbroken sheet of snow? Didn't you cut the wire to make sure you'd be arrested and brought up here, where you could stand right at my shoulder, pointing out evidence to hang Cole? And didn't you forget yourself in your haste and mention the unbroken sheet of snow before either of us could have seen that it wasn't broken around the hump at the lookout?"

Again he paused. Dudley was glaring defiantly at him. "You weren't satisfied," Brant continued, "to do it and drive on. Had to stick around and be sure that nothing was overlooked. And to give yourself reason to wait for me—since you stabbed him while he was telephoning for help, and you knew I would be coming—you cut that wire and pretended your axle was broken. Pretty slick, Dudley. That gave you reason to be sticking around; and it made me arrest you and bring you up here. But it wasn't slick enough. No," he corrected himself, "it was too slick!"

The accused man finally found his voice. "You're crazy!" he exclaimed, his indignant whine rising to a falsetto note. "You can't hang this onto me! I couldn't 'a' done it! There was nary a footprint in that snow. You can't get around that!"

With a flip of his hand, Brant flung the automatic over to Cole. "Cover him," he commanded, drawing his own gun from its holster. His eyes were icy, baleful, as he sat there, staring at the man.

"Joe Elder was a friend of mine—a close friend," Brant stated. Then he rose and slowly made his way around the desk. He stood staring at Clem Dudley.

"Too slick," he repeated. "You yourself put me on the track, Dudley. First, you cut that wire, causing me to look in that direction, which I probably would have been too hurried to do otherwise. Second, to prove that you left Bill Yore's place on Papoose after the blizzard was over, you pointed out that there was no snow on top of the wagon. You've got mountain savvy, Dudley. So have I. *We both know that wet snow sticks where it hits.*"

Suddenly, furiously, with the desperate courage of a cornered rat, Clem Dudley launched himself at Tom Brant. His first leap put the ranger between him and the gun in Sid Cole's hand; and his grasping fingers closed around Brant's wrist and thrust his gun aside.

The force of the leap flung the ranger backward, and they crashed to the floor, a tangle of whirling arms and legs. But Brant was half ready for the move. As he fell, he flipped his strong legs outward, closed in on the body of the man on top of him. He tightened the deadly scissors hold.

Dudley's breath came in short, painful gusts. Screaming, the man fought to break the hold that was slowly crushing his ribs. He clawed at the constraining knees with both hands. The hold on his gun released, the ranger brought the gun up in an overhand sweep. It came down on Dudley's head with a hollow *plunk*. The man relaxed into unconsciousness.

TOM BRANT rose to his feet.

Sid Cole stood there facing him, his mouth hanging open. "I—I don't un-

derstand," he stammered. "I suppose Dudley's making a break that way means he is really guilty. But I don't get it. All you said was that wet snow sticks where it hits; and the next moment he was at your throat!"

A slow, grim smile spread over Tom Brant's face. He nodded down toward the unconscious man. "He knew when the game was up," he said. "He's got mountain savvy."

"But—but tell me!" Cole exclaimed. "I don't see——"

Brant faced the would-be ranger. "No, you don't see. I gave you three chances to find out for yourself. And even with your own neck at stake, you didn't see! I'm afraid you'll never have mountain savvy, young fellow."

Cole flushed. "I'm grateful to you for getting me out of a tight place," he said slowly, "but I still don't see how Dudley could get in and out without leaving a single track——"

Brant stopped him with a raised hand. "He didn't leave a footprint; but he did leave a track. And it was Dudley himself who got me to looking in the right place for that track. When a telephone line is cut, you naturally look on ahead to see how far it has been cut. That's what made me look at that last span of wire leading up to the cabin. There wasn't a speck of snow on that last span—not a speck, though the snow was so wet that it even clung to the twigs on the aspens."

Pausing, he picked up his pipe, lighted a match, and held it with fingers that trembled a little.

"Get it yet?" he inquired. "Dudley came across that stretch hand over hand along the telephone wire. There were flecks of dropped snow underneath, and the wire was bare. He must have done it just when you were relieving Elder on watch, and you were both in the lookout roost. He went back the same way after stabbing Elder. Then he cut the next section of wire, partly because his footprints would show beneath that tree, partly so that he could stick around and help clinch the evidence he had built up against you!"

He walked slowly over and opened the bedroom door. For a long moment he stood there, silently peering into the gloom at the still form beneath the enshrouding sheet. Snow had begun to fall again outside. It sifted sibilantly against the dark windowpane. Brant's shoulders were square back when he turned and looked searchingly at the young ranger.

"Do you see now," he inquired softly, "what old Joe meant when he preached to you about the importance of developing mountain savvy?"

ROD AND

The ideal department for all sportsmen.

by DONALD STILLMAN

Wolverenes and Other Weasels

THE WEASEL FAMILY is a strongly individualized group, containing marine and arboreal animals, with contrasting characteristics but having much in common, according to the National Park Service. All are predators, but have such beautiful fur that man, in his turn, has preyed on them until many species of the group now are very rare. In fact, the service states, the marten, otter, fisher and wolverene would be fast approaching extinction in the United States were it not for the protection given in the national parks, where visitors are offered an opportunity of observing members of this interesting family. All the weasel family are great fighters, making up in fierceness what they lack in size.

The arch predator, not only of the weasel family, but of all predator species, is the wolverene. This animal is almost extinct in the United States. There are a few in Mount McKinley National Park in Alaska, and in Sequoia National Park. Recently one was sighted in Glacier Park, an event that aroused much interest.

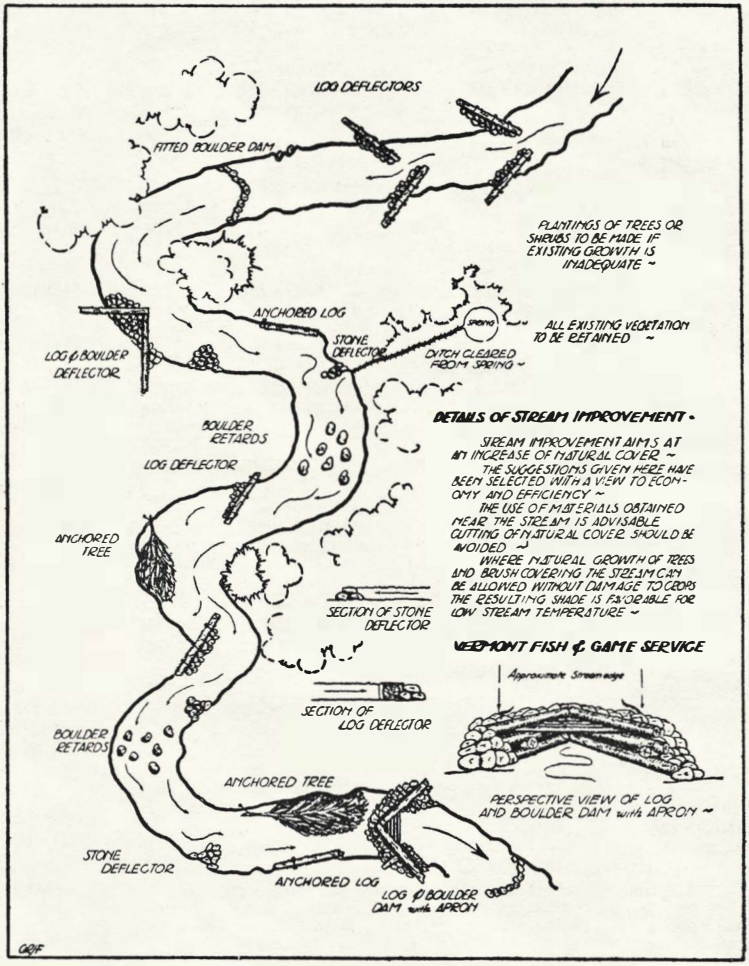
About the size of a bulldog, this animal is considered one of the most remarkable of all predators in the entire range of wild life in the national parks. The wolverene is a real personality, and was called Indian Devil and King Beast of the Sierra by the pioneers. However much he may be feared or hated for his many thefts in the past, yet he is admired for his courage, his fearlessness, and power in meeting his enemies. So great is his strength and so dauntless his spirit that the black bear, the cougar, and even the timber wolf have been known to relinquish their prey at his approach.

Wolverenes have been known to gnaw through log walls nearly a foot thick to get at supplies of meat hidden within, while the assiduity with which they will follow a trap line in the far north, eating the bait and often tearing the traps to bits if they happen to get caught themselves, has invested the race with legend and superstition.

Formerly a few wolverenes were found in Glacier, Yellowstone and Rocky Mountain national parks, but only in Mount McKinley in Alaska does the species maintain anything like normal numbers. The other parks probably afford an inadequate refuge because their areas are too circumscribed and their boundaries too arbitrarily drawn to include a sufficient amount of its native habitat. The food of the wolverene consists chiefly of marmots, rats, gophers, frogs, rabbits, and almost any meat that falls in its way. Even deer may be attacked when the wolverene is hard pressed for food.

A story proving the undaunted courage and daring of the wolverene is related by Judge Walter Fry, park commissioner and one-time superintendent

GUN NEWS



Stream improvement will play a large part in the future betterment of trout-fishing conditions.

of Sequoia National Park. While establishing a camp in Sequoia one night some years ago, he heard the growlings and mutterings of bears. To locate the disturbance, he walked out to a near-by precipice and saw below two large bears feeding on the flesh of a cow. After much disputing over the right of possession, the two settled down in friendly amiability to their evening meal.

Then a large wolverene emerged from some near-by brush. At first he seemed to have nothing much on his mind, walking along at a slow pace, grubbing for snails and frogs. Then, in a few moments, a sudden shifting of the wind brought the scent of fresh meat on the breeze.

At this he sprang on top of a large boulder, Judge Fry says, pointed his nose, and saw the bears. He watched them for a few moments in a thoughtful, appraising mood, then slid quietly to the ground and sat down. Soon his bristling hairs told of his decision. It was fight to death if need be, but have the carcass he must.

Shifting his position a few paces to the right, he secured the protection of a large boulder within thirty feet of the bears, which shielded him from their sight. He stood up rigid, peered around one side of the boulder, his passionate anger glittering in his beadlike eyes, while the hair on his back was erect and rough like that on a dog when going into a fight.

Then, after he bristled himself up to what appeared to be twice his natural size, and in this queer and picturesque attitude, he shot down the mountainside, landed directly on the carcass between the two bears and ferociously growled and snapped his powerful jaws and teeth in their very faces. Judge Fry described the amazement of the bears in the following amusing language:

"Never were two bears more frightened than when they were startled by the wolverene. The brown bear gave three great bounds and landed high on the side of a large fir tree. His companion turned a complete somersault backward and landed on his feet, head foremost downhill, and he left at such a speed that only a cloud of dust drifting toward the horizon marked his course.

"Then the wolverene gorged himself. But when one of the men in the camping party approached he gave a coarse growl, grabbed a large bone in his mouth and walked slowly into the depths of the wood. Then the brown bear came down from the tree and ran away."

The other members of the weasel family are smaller and not so ferocious, but they, too, are always ready for a fight. Most of them live partly in the water and frequent streams and small lakes and ponds, where they build their nesting holes along the edge of the water.

An interesting member of this group is the pine marten, particularly valuable for its rich brown fur. To get a glimpse of it one must keep a sharp lookout, for the marten is tirelessly playing and leaping from branch to branch of tall trees with a great deal of scurrying and energy. Spending much of the time in the trees, martens are even more active than squirrels, on which they largely prey as well as on rabbits, frogs, reptiles, and small fish.

It is a ferocious little creature, rapacious and merciless to its enemies. Its grace and speed make it feared by ground and tree dwellers alike. On the ground they hunt with sagacity, penetrating brush and thicket and making life miserable for any ground animal which approaches it in size. It is abroad night and day, and is not infrequently seen by the park visitor who is willing to venture into the deep woods, leaving behind the noisy areas of human concentration, which the marten also shuns. In the northern parks, Crater Lake, Gla-

cier, Mount McKinley, Rocky Mountain, and the California parks, they can sometimes be seen, although they are the least social of this unsocial family.

The fisher, another beautiful fur bearer, resembles an especially large marten, being somewhat larger than a cat. Unequaled in speed and agility by any other arboreal mammal, it is able to catch and kill even the marten, and while on the ground it captures rabbits and similar prey by the tireless persistence with which it stays on the trail. So agile is this animal that a jump of forty feet is not excessive when bent on prey.

It is one of the few animals that can successfully attack a porcupine by cleverly making for the unprotected undersurface of the latter while nimbly avoiding the barbs. One of the cleverest animals, it can outwit its pursuers with great skill and cunning. Although rare in the United States, it can still be seen in Rocky Mountain National Park and the California parks.

Mink, beloved of most women for its exquisite fur, is common in all the Western parks, in the Great Smoky Mountains and the newly created Mammoth Cave National Park, though seldom is it seen in the daytime. Being an expert swimmer, it lives in the water almost as much as the otter, diving below the surface for fish, but eating birds as well. The mink is frugal, and stores food in time of plenty so that when the lean days come it has a full larder.

The mink is a strongly characterized animal, and one of the most widely known and valuable of this fur-bearing family. Tireless in its activity, with great muscular strength, it will fight to a finish if attacked by an enemy, and does not hesitate to attack other species larger than itself. It can climb a tree as well as the fisher, and when hard pressed by an enemy will often take refuge in the branches of near-by trees, although it also lives in the water and handles its body with amazing skill when pursuing fish, on which it feeds voraciously.

The weasel is the epitome of the traits of its family. It has been called the gangster of animal land. Compared to it, the marten and the mink are mere novices in the practice of killing, whether for food or for the delight of slaughter. In its small size is concentrated the fury of a predator. Nearly always killing its own prey, it sucks the blood of its victims rather than eating the flesh. It attacks rabbits, grouse, chickens, and ducks, much larger than itself, without a qualm.

Although such a savage little beast, the service considers that it really does a great deal of good by destroying harmful rodents, especially mice, and so is important in keeping the eternal balance of nature.

Weasels have the distinguishing characteristic of changing the color of their coat twice a year. In the winter the Northern species turns a snowy white, except for the tip of the tail, which is jet black, and is valuable for its precious ermine coat, the robe of royalty. The change of color is protective and renders it almost invisible as it scampers over the snow, digging down into some soft

Never were two bears more frightened.

The otter came out of the water, began combing its hair.

spot and seizing an unsuspecting mouse for its supper.

When spring comes, the weasel loses the snowy covering and changes to an inconspicuous brown, but in the change it loses nothing of its ferocity. Moving quickly, it is sure to act like lightning, and nearly always with success, in bearing down on its unfortunate prey.

The otter is the most specialized member of its family, and is next largest to the wolverene. Its velvety, dense and durable fur has been prized by trappers since pioneer days. The consequence has been that it has almost disappeared, although there are over fifty known to exist in Glacier National Park, and there are a few in Yellowstone, Mount Rainier, and Grand Canyon; and recently it has also been recorded in Yosemite. Primarily a fish-eater and living almost entirely in the water, the otter has a long, flat, tapering tail that is helpful in swimming. These little animals travel long distances for their food, sometimes covering fifteen or twenty miles of a given waterway within three or four weeks.

The otter is joyful, keen and fearless by nature, and shows real affection for its mate. An incident is told of a pair kept in captivity, that when the male lost its mate it grieved for days and would utter a plaintive cry and keep watch for her, scarcely eating any food.

One of the rangers in Yellowstone National Park reports of the fun-loving propensities of the otter, watching a family of five, which he observed for some time. He states that suddenly they would break off in the midst of getting food along the Snake River and rush merrily to a near-by pool to engage madly in a game of follow the leader, chasing each other and trying to outdistance the leader. Tiring of this sport after a few minutes, four of the animals headed downstream. The fifth was a short distance away and did not notice the departure of its family.

Soon it missed them and, thrusting its head high above the water, cried like a chick that had lost its mother. Diving down again, it swam aimlessly around in the crystal water, only to repeat the procedure again and again. Finally he seemed to to discover the whereabouts of his relatives and went streaking through the water to join them.

Another Yellowstone ranger tells of an amusing incident which occurred when he was out fishing in a shallow stream. Hearing a deep growl, he looked in all directions expecting to see a bear. Unable to locate the source of the sound, he turned back to his fishing. The growls continued for about ten minutes: then the ranger saw the head of an animal swimming about a hundred yards ahead of him.

He stopped fishing and watched the animal, which he then saw was an otter, come out of the water, park itself on an island, and begin to comb its hair with one of its short forefeet. The ranger crept closer, to observe the movements of the otter, and was surprised to find the animal took little notice of him other than to growl occasionally. It was evidently a case of mutual interest and attraction.

Game Hogs and Pot Hunters

THE TERMS "game hog" and "pot hunter" are considered by some sportsmen to be synonymous. Actually the meanings of the two terms are different. A game hog is a hunter or fisherman who kills excessive amounts of game or fish without regard for others or the future of the game or fish itself.

One can be a game hog without violating either State or Federal laws. There are no seasonable limits on certain species of protected game and fish, while all migratory salt-water fish are subject to neither daily nor seasonable limits.

Recently, J. R. Leonard, of the Canonsburg Sportsmen's Association, urged hunters and fishermen to "forget the limit" and to take only such fish and game as they could reasonably use. This, I believe, is excellent advice, and had this habit been practiced more in the past, many species of game and fish would to-day be more plentiful than they are.

When primitive man hunted and fished for his living, and when his success or lack of success meant the difference between a full and empty stomach, fishing and hunting were probably just work to him. To-day we hunt and fish for sport. But fortunate indeed is the sportsman who is enough of a pot hunter to enjoy a good fish or game dinner. For, in addition to the pleasure of sitting down to a dish of deliciously fried brook trout or richly browned duck, the sport itself takes on added flavor, and the thrill of slipping your net under a three-pound bass or connecting on a long shot on grouse is doubled when you really want your game for your table.

The Woodchuck and the Pheasant

THE FOLLOWING STORY might well carry a Winsted, Connecticut, date line, but it doesn't. Instead, it concerns a resident of Canopus Hollow, which is located in the Hudson Highlands.

This hunter recently went out for woodchucks armed with his trusty .30-06 and, according to my informant, he worked out several meadows and clearings near his home without success when, crossing a field near the stream bottom, he spotted a 'chuck.

The 'chuck was headed for home and traveling at a speed that suggested it was in a hurry to get there. Frequently it glanced back over its shoulder. The hunter withheld his fire, anticipating that the 'chuck would stop, or at least slacken its pace before entering its hole, when out from the brush burst a big cock ringneck pheasant. The pheasant tore after the 'chuck, which made its escape by vanishing into its hole. It was a complete victory for the pheasant.

This tale undoubtedly will be greeted by raised eyebrows; but I believe it for two reasons: first, because it was told me by my good friend the game warden; and, secondly, because I have occular evidence of an instance in which a ringneck pheasant gave chase to an overcurious house cat which ventured too near the bird's nest.

However, I expect that the next story from Canopus Hollow will concern the putting to rout of some hunter's springer, cocker or setter by a particularly pugnacious ringneck, and I warn the game warden that while I have an exceptionally trustful nature, any such tales as this will stretch my credulity to the breaking point.

Night Sounds

THE OTHER NIGHT at about two a. m. I was awakened from a sound sleep by the deep, fog-horned hoots of owls outside my bedroom window. For perhaps ten or fifteen minutes it sounded as if all the barred owls in Fairfield County had gone into convention in the woods at the foot of the cliff on the west side

The pheasant succeeded in chasing the woodchuck into its hole.

of the house. There must have been a dozen or more of the birds, and they hooted, geeped, and chortled with satanic glee. How the rest of the household slept through the racket I do not know, but apparently they did, and eventually the sounds ceased as abruptly as perhaps they began.

Most sportsmen who pass much time in camp in the woods have heard at times strange, inexplicable sounds. When heard at night these sounds seem magnified and intensified, probably by the quickening of the listener's sense of hearing when darkness blinds his sight. Generally these weird and perhaps terrifying sounds are of harmless origin. The makers of some of the hair-raising outcries are foxes, bobcats, owls, great blue herons and other aquatic birds. Even a squirrel, scampering over the dry leaves, makes more noise in its passing than a 400-pound bear.

The thin, doglike yap of the fox is familiar to most of us, but the loud, catlike scream to which the gray fox sometimes gives vent may prove startling to those hearing it for the first time.

The hunting cry of the bobcat at a distance sounds somewhat like the yowl of a domestic cat. But when a bobcat is disturbed, its screeches and growls sound quite menacing.

Owls give voice to sounds other than their familiar call notes, and the cries are sometimes unnerving to the inexperienced. Great horned owls and barred owls occasionally emit nerve-racking screams, while Pennant says of the snowy owl that "It adds horror even to the region of Greenland by its hideous cries which resemble those of a man in deep distress."

Then there are sounds in the woods other than the cries of wild life. Two trees crossed so they rub continually against one another sometimes whine and cry with every passing breeze. Heard in the daytime, the sound may easily be traced down, but when first heard at night the listener's imagination may run riot. A movement of rock or soil on a steep hillside sometimes sends a growling roar rumbling through the hills.

Night sounds are many and varied, but seldom need danger be associated with them. Undoubtedly a man is safer to-day in the woods than almost anywhere else he might be. The greatest danger, which is ever present, is from a fall, or falling tree or limb.

But there is one wild-life sound to which it is well to give heed. That is the dry, whirring, locustlike warning of the rattlesnake.

Trout Stream Improvement

"DESPITE frequent stocking and fishing regulations of all kinds, trout fishing is slowly but surely becoming poorer every season," says R. F. Lord, in charge of the Vermont Experimental Trout Hatchery, at Pittsfield, adding that some sort of better trout-stream management should be in order.

He suggests that stocking methods may be wrong or fishing regulations inadequate and that any plan to improve

the situations must give consideration to these facts.

"Who knows what a typical harvest from a good trout stream should be? Who knows the relationship between the number and size of fish planted and the subsequent take?" he asks.

"The fact of the matter is that year after year we have been chiefly concerned with one end of the problem—that is the number of fish planted," he said. "What becomes of them afterward? How many fish are the stocked streams producing?"

The question was taken up by the Bureau of Fisheries in connection with the Vermont Fish and Game Service, and certain stretches of stream were set aside as "test streams." Furnace Brook, in Rutland County, was among the streams selected, and the report from 1935 showed that:

1. From May 1 to August 14, 1,197 angling reports were secured.

2. The season's catch was 8,589 legal trout from four miles of stream.

3. Anglers averaged 7.2 trout per fishing attempt. Rainbows made up 34 per cent of the catch, indicating that this species is maintaining itself without stocking. Brook trout made up 66 per cent of the catch. The number caught exceeded the number planted before the first month of the open season was over.

The department considers that the test indicated the following facts:

1. A great intensity of fishing.

2. Fish being taken faster than replaced.

3. That a later opening date would supply better sport and bigger fish.

4. That the present creel limit is too high.

The careful return of all undersized fish to the water and the strict observance of fishing regulations is urged by the department. Stream improvement will play a large part in the future betterment of trout-fishing conditions, the department believes, by providing an increase of natural cover. A chart depicting the best methods of accomplishing this stream improvement has been issued by the department, and is reproduced on page 77.

Swordfishing Off Chile

FOR THE SPORTSMAN who wants to take swordfish, there are no known waters that can compare with those of northern Chile. It is difficult

The makers of most hair-raising night sounds are quite harmless.

to say that there are more swordfish off Chile than in any other location, because of the fact that in Chile there is no modern commercial fishing fleet to cut down the numbers. But for the sportsman this area undoubtedly should lead all others.

What is also important to the sportsman is the fact that, for some reason or other, all swordfish are large. For example, of the 9 rod-and-reel swordfish catches, the smallest weighed 410 pounds, and even the market seldom sees a smaller one.

To get an accurate comparison of this point, it should be realized that in the 22 years swordfish have been taken on our Pacific coast and the 8 years on our Atlantic coast, there have been taken

only 10 or 11 swordfish over the four-hundred mark. Another thing to consider is that the swordfish catches made in this country are the result of the attemps of many fishermen, among them W. E. S. Tuker, George Garey and H. W. Major. The catches of these three fishermen include the largest swordfish, 837½ pounds, and the second largest, 674½ pounds, that have been taken in any waters.

Another section along the coast of South America that is bound to become famous for its fishing is the Cabo Blanco district north of Lima. Although Mr. Major was unable to make a personal survey of this district, and therefore can give little data which will help the fisherman in that locality, he has the daily logs of two fishing trips which were made to Cabo Blanco and has talked in detail with those who have fished it. He feels sure that Cabo Blanco will become one of the most, if not the most, famous fishing center in the Western Hemisphere.

There is much groundwork to be done before this locality can be recommended to the fishermen, because of the peculiar conditions found on and off shore. Almost no one has fished there, but the largest marlin ever taken in either of the Americas was landed at this point. It weighed 710 pounds and passes the next largest of 630 pounds which was taken in Bimini.

The rattlesnake's warning is one wild-life sound to which it is well to give heed.

Broadbill are also taken; but it seems that there is some difference between this broadbill and those taken in other waters. Tuna, probably yellowfins, over 300 pounds, have also been seen. It is at Cabo Blanco that the Japanese Current meets the Humboldt Current, with the result that the waters are alive with an assortment of fish of all sizes.

In the following report on big-game fishing along the coast of Chile, Mr. Major based his conclusions more on the number of fish that are there to be taken by sportsmen, rather than on what the commercial fishermen actually take. For example, through the port of Iquique pass 46 per cent of the swordfish taken by the five principal ports in that industry during their winter months.

Iquique fishermen are also favored with the highest price, which is 23 points above the price average. The result of this is that fishermen can afford to fish constantly during the season without glutting their market, and the yearly catch of that port probably represents the largest tonnage that is possible with their present method of fishing.

In some other localities, when the fishermen bring in a good catch, the price drops so low that they will not bring in more fish until the supply is consumed and the price rises. Many other facts, as well as those gleaned from personal investigation, have been considered before arriving at the following conclusions:

Their winter season—March 15 through October.

Swordfish may be taken from Mollendo south to Antofagasta. The best district lies between Iquique and Tocopilla and can be fished from either city. A survey covering several years shows little choice in fishing during these

months, although there may be some variation.

During this season there are no other game fish to be found in those waters until the latter part of October, when tuna and albacore come down the coast, as well as some striped marlin, although I am not convinced that the latter are found in any great numbers. Several other species of small fish also make their appearance at the close of the winter season and stay through the summer months.

December 15 through February.

During these months, swordfish are to be found off Chanaral, Caldera and Taltal. There is not much choice between these locations, with Caldera probably a little the best.

Tackle for swordfish: a split bamboo rod of 15 or 16 ounces, or a hickory rod of 17 to 19 ounces, is the best, and should be used with a 36-thread line.

Other tackle recommended is as follows:

1. Reel, 12/0 star drag.
2. Leather harness.
3. Leaders, cable laid 15 or 20 feet long with tandem hooks 14 inches apart. Hooks should be Sobey 12/0 in front and 13/0 in the rear.

There are no charter fishing boats in the above-named area. Mr. Tuker made it plain that his boat, the *Copihue*, will not be available for charter. Until arrangements can be made to get some boat for this purpose, the regular market fishing boats can be used. These boats are open, clinker-built type, not unlike what we would call a dory. They have no conveniences whatever, and they are usually powered with a small one- or two-cylinder engine. This sounds like a very crude combination, but it is possible for a fisherman who is willing to rough it.

They are safe on account of the fact that storms are nearly unknown in the waters where swordfish are taken, and in case of a breakdown of the engine, it is always possible to row home. Many of these boats, in fact, do not even have an engine, but rely on oars and a small sail.

To use one of these boats for fishing, the fisherman must bring with him a fishing chair which can easily be mounted in the bow of the boat. It is not an ideal set-up, but it works. Mr. Major tried it. Arrangements for securing one of these boats should be made before the arrival of the fisherman, as the owners of these boats get inflated ideas as to the price to be charged. It will be a good plan to have one member of the crew able to speak some English.

STUBBORN MEN

And one called the other "Fool!"

by Peter H. Lassan

IT WAS not an hour since the sun had set; and now the moon, clear of the somber island peak, spilled bright flood upon the shadow-laden night.

Neil Adams stood on the screened-in veranda of Georges D'Aprix's bungalow. A tall, blond man dressed in soiled and wrinkled white, Adams' rather handsome face wore a frown of much uneasiness as he looked at D'Aprix. The planter sat in a wicker chair beside the littered table on which burned a white-shaded kerosene lamp.

Uneasiness shook Adams' deep voice. "You've got to get out of here, D'Aprix."

The Frenchman was older; a shorter man than the trader; more thickly built. What hair he had, a thin, closely clipped band at the back of his head, was black. Like Adams', his shirt and trousers were a soiled and wrinkled white; and his round face wore, like the taller man's, a troubled frown, but with a difference—his chin thrust forward pugnaciously.

He swore in French. "Run—from a pack of yapping curs?" He swore again, and then declared emphatically, "Never!"

From beyond the palm-grown bight of land that separated the upper and lower bays, a wolfish howling rose, as it had risen some moments before—the blending of the shouts and cries of excited men.

"They're working themselves into a frenzy," Adams said with disquietude. His uneasiness made him walk to the end of the veranda faced toward the distant camp. "With Bloody Bill to egg them on—with booze to fire their courage—they'll come before the night is over." He added the warning: "If you're here then—you're likely to get hurt."

D'Aprix made a gesture toward the wall against which the table was pushed. Across two pegs in that wall rested a rifle.

"I won't be the only one who gets hurt," he growled.

Adams pressed his lips together in a thin, straight line. He shook his head slightly.

"Stubborn," he thought. "Stubborn—even unto death."

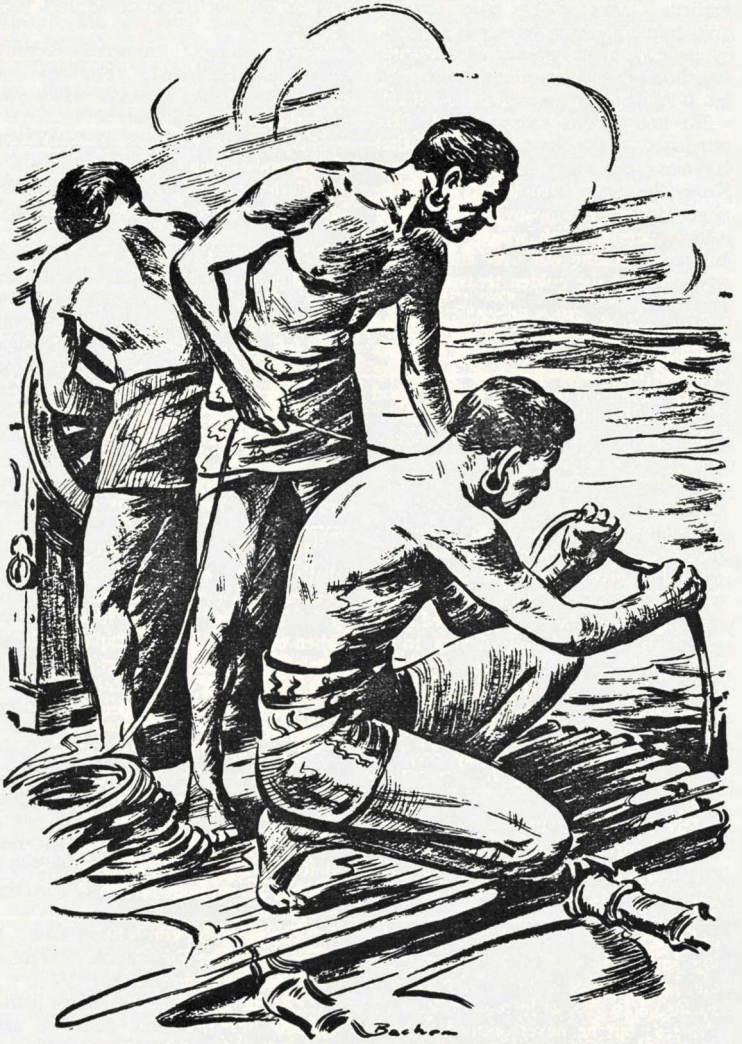
THE BEGINNING of this night, as Neil Adams reviewed the events, went back quite a number of years, to that violent day of storm when the steamer *Dolphin* capsized off Vao and went down with all hands.

A million in gold the *Dolphin* had in her hold that day. At least that was the tale.

Men had struggled to win that gold from the earth. Men struggled again to win the gold from the sea; but the sea proved a jealous guardian. She fought to hold what she had taken by storm. With storm she fought. Several salvaging attempts to bring the yellow metal again to light were wrecked.

With one such venture Georges D'Aprix came to the islands.

He came as an engineer with a French company financed by one Monsieur



He had taught native boys to man pump and handle lines; he had gone into the sea—but he never seemed to make any attempt to get the gold!

Mallette. Like several other expeditions before it, the venture was smashed by the sea. The company subsequently was disbanded, the men sent home. All but D'Aprix; he remained on the island.

He had a little money saved. He purchased a run-down plantation that lay along the shore of the south bay. From the camp abandoned by Monsieur Mallette's company, D'Aprix salvaged materials with which he built a bungalow looking out over the restless sea that held the golden treasure in its depth.

"I'll get that gold," D'Aprix told Adams one day. Adams was in trade and had his headquarters on a near-by island. The two men had become good friends. "It will take time. But then"—he shrugged—"I am in no hurry. The gold can't get away."

D'Aprix did work slowly, so slowly, in fact, that for a time, it seemed, he did nothing at all about salvaging the gold from the sunken *Dolphin*. He seemed to give all his time to the run-down plantation he had acquired, to the cleaning up of the long-neglected palm groves, to the harvesting of nuts, to the making of copra. He even made seed beds and planted them, took to raising young trees to be set out at some future day.

"The plantation must pay me," he explained to Adams. "It's all I have now."

Pay him, apparently, it did, enough that D'Aprix began to buy parts of diving equipment—a suit, a pump. He got these things together, piece by piece. Adams heard from the captain of one of his schooners that D'Aprix was training several native boys to man pump and handle lines, that he had even gone so far as to risk a descent or two into the sea; but he never seemed to make any attempt to go after the gold.

"It can't run away," he said to Adams, when the trader, prompted by his curiosity, questioned D'Aprix about why he did not try to bring the treasure up.

"True enough," Anderson readily agreed with his friend. "But some one can come and take it away. Have you ever thought of that?"

D'Aprix's answer was an indifferent shrug, and a somewhat amused laugh.

"It's been tried before," Anderson reminded him. "It may be tried again."

THAT WARNING of Neil Adams' was almost a prophecy, for a few months later "Bloody Bill" Bandon came to Vao. A ruddy, burly man with a mouth ever full of loud, rough talk, he brought with him a dozen men of his own stripe. They set up a camp on the shore of the bay north of D'Aprix's place. A palm-grown bight of land hid the camp from the bungalow.

Adams, always with an eye open for trade, flew over and visited the new camp.

"Booze an' grub—plenty of both—that's what we want," Bloody Bill roared. "We've got th' coin t' pay for it." Then he laughed loudly. "An' when our cash is gone, cap'n, we'll pay you off in gold. We're goin' t' get th' loot that's sunk on th' *Dolphin*."

"That's been tried before," Adams reminded him.

"Aye—an' it's goin' t' be tried ag'in—once more. Th' next time, cap'n, it's comin' up. We're th' boys that's goin' t' git it."

Adams wished the new venture luck. Before flying back to his own island, he stopped for an hour or two at D'Aprix's bungalow.

"You've some competition now," he remarked to the Frenchman. "What do you think of their chances?"

D'Aprix smiled. "When the gold is brought up from the sea," he said, cheerful with confidence, "I will bring it up."

Adams flew home. A few days later he shipped a load of food and drink to

the new camp, and he established a store there. He put old Tom Doban in charge.

The store did a thriving business; for the camp grew, almost overnight. Gold—tempting bait. From all the islands men began to drift in. Before the month was out Doban reported a hundred customers.

Bloody Bill did not seem to object to the swelling of his ranks.

"A share for everybody," he roared heartily. He was the undisputed leader of the camp. "There's a million in gold in th' old hulk. We're goin' t' get it. Th' sea ain't goin' t' smash us. We're goin' t' beat th' sea. About six weeks more an' we'll be ready t' make our try. Then, lads, th' yellow stuff's comin' up."

NEIL ADAMS kept abreast of the times. His schooners—he owned four—had Diesel engines for auxiliary power; and each craft carried a short-wave radio transmitting and receiving set. Adams made it a point to keep in daily touch with his skippers. Because he was greatly interested in what went on in the roaring camp on Vao, he installed a short-wave outfit in the store, and he talked with Tom Doban every evening just before sundown.

"There's the devil to pay," the old man reported one afternoon. Metallic though the reproduction of his words was in the ear phones clamped about Neil Adams' blond head, there was no mistaking the note of high excitement in Doban's voice. "The camp's in an uproar."

Adams asked with quick interest, for he could think of no other reason for any great excitement: "Have they got the gold?"

"D'Aprix's beat them to it," came Doban's very surprising answer. "The camp's gone howling mad."

For a moment Adams could not believe what he had heard. It seemed so utterly impossible. How could one man alone do what well-organized, well-equipped expeditions had repeatedly failed to accomplish? He asked Doban that question, and he said: "There must be some mistake. How in the world——"

Tom Doban shrilled so that he all but made the ear phones whistle: "Don't ask me how. All I know is that the roughnecks here are hog wild. They say the gold's gone. And the wreck, too!"

Adams laughed. "But that's impossible. Something has happened."

"I'll say it has! And it ain't even begun yet. Bloody Bill's bellowing that D'Aprix snatched the loot right from under his nose. He's demanding his share—a share for every cutthroat in camp. He's give D'Aprix until sundown to come across."

Adams asked anxiously: "What does D'Aprix say to that?"

"He's sitting tight at his bungalow. He's threatened to pot the first hellion that sets foot on his beach. He'll do it, too."

The sweat beaded on Adams' forehead turned cold.

"If he does that, they'll tear him to pieces."

"You telling me?"

"Get up there as fast as you can," Adams ordered Doban. "Tell him he's got to get away from the island. He can take a canoe, a whaleboat—anything. I'll fly over and pick him up. Tell him that."

"I can't do nothing with him," Doban wailed. "The damn French mule won't listen to reason. The stubborn fool wouldn't move when he could. Now he couldn't get away if he wanted to. Bloody Bill and his crew have grabbed up every craft on this side of the island."

With a hand, Adams mopped his sweating face, his sweating neck.

"Wait a minute," he said to Doban desperately. "Stand by."

He pulled the ear phones from his head, threw them down on the table. He had to think, and he could not think while listening to Tom Doban's shrill voice. Nor could he think sitting still. He got up from his chair. He had to move, stir his mind with some action of body. Three times at a fast pace he circled the sparsely furnished room.

"Damn a stubborn man!" he swore over and over again in a fury of helplessness. "The idiot will be murdered!"

He rushed out of the door then, to the wide veranda of the bungalow. Cupping hands to mouth, he yelled to a group of half-naked natives at work under the thatched shelters near the copra sheds, yelled orders for them to run his plane from the hangar and down the runway, float it upon the still, blue water of the lagoon.

Then he rushed back into the bungalow and snatched up the ear phones, clamped them about his blond head.

"Tom—listen! I'm coming over!"

"You can't do nothing," Doban said discouragingly. "You can't move that D'Aprix no more'n you can move the moon. And trying to stop Bloody Bill and his crew would be like trying to hold back a tide. You'll only get yourself hurt."

"I'm coming over," Adams repeated determinedly.

Doban shrilled:

"You're as bad as D'Aprix. I've had enough of stubborn fools! I'm clearing out. I ain't going to get my head stove in for nobody. I'm locking up the store. I'm going visiting. I got a friend on the other side the island."

He added then a final warning. "You better stay home. There's going to be blood loose to-night on Vao—and you can't stop it."

Adams said firmly: "I'm flying over. I'm starting right away. I'll get there a little after sundown."

NOW ADAMS stood on the veranda of D'Aprix's house, at the end that faced toward the hidden camp of Bloody Bill Bandon. For the moment the savage howling of the excited men had died down to an angry muttering.

The trader turned to D'Aprix. "When did you bring up the gold?"

D'Aprix answered shortly: "It isn't up."

Adams' frown deepened with annoyance. Somewhat sharply he said: "There's no need for any fiction between us. Doban told me over the radio——"

The planter interrupted with an oath. Then he finished the sentence for Adams:

"—that I took not only the gold but the wreck itself." He swore again and demanded: "Does that sound reasonable?"

"Not exactly," Adams had to admit. But he insisted: "Certainly something has happened."

"*Ah, oui.* Seven years ago."

Adams' frown turned thoughtful.

"Seven years ago," he said, "Monsieur Mallette's expedition was wrecked by a storm."

"A great storm—one that shook the very islands."

"An earthquake? I had forgotten. They're almost as common as squalls in these parts. They seldom do much damage. Certainly that one seven years ago didn't wreck Monsieur Mallette's expedition. The hurricane did that."

"*Oui,*" D'Aprix agreed. "The hurricane smashed us." He fell silent a time before he added: "But the earthquake sent Monsieur Mallette home."

Adams' frown was puzzled.

"I'll tell you why," the planter then went on to explain. "The *Dolphin* lay about a mile offshore, in twenty-five fathoms of water. She was bottom up, wedged in a rocky fissure."

Adams nodded.

D'Aprix went on: "We took soundings after the blow. We found that the

"Up with that anchor!" the Frenchman ordered. "Get that motor going!"

quake had widened the fissure—and the wreck was gone."

"Sunk more, you mean?"

"So Monsieur Mallette believed. I sounded the fissure carefully, but I could find no trace of it."

Adams said: "The quake might have forced the wreck out of the fissure."

"That's what I thought. I had an idea that the disturbance might have set up a submarine current, one powerful enough to have moved the hulk. Monsieur Mallette would not accept the suggestion. He refused to put more money into the venture, or stay long enough to make a search."

"So you stayed on—to search for the wreck." Adams now knew.

D'Aprix shrugged. "I believed what I believed. So I searched. Three years, *mon ami*, I searched."

"And found it," Adams guessed.

"And found it," D'Aprix admitted, with no little ring of the pride of accomplishment in the words. He pointed toward the star-touched, restless sea. "The *Dolphin* lies not more than half a mile from this house. It is in less than fifty feet of water."

Adams demanded with great interest: "What about the gold?"

"It was there."

"It is there—now?"

"But, *non*. I moved it."

Adams quickly protested that as a statement contradictory to one D'Aprix had made but shortly before.

"You said you hadn't brought it up."

"So I haven't." D'Aprix chuckled at the trader's very evident confusion. "That gold has never been above the surface since it went down with the *Dolphin*." Again he pointed toward the sea. "I moved it, *mon ami*, to a safer place—a submarine grotto."

"You moved a million in gold—alone?"

D'Aprix chuckled.

"A treasure always grows with each tale told of it." He wagged his bald head. "It wasn't a million. But it was enough. And it is safe."

"Bloody Bill and his crew couldn't find it?"

D'Aprix laughed. "Not in a thousand years."

"Then"—Adams seized quickly upon that admission—"there is no reason in the world why you should stay here and expose yourself to danger. The sea will guard your gold—and the police patrol will take care of Bloody Bill and the rest. I gave the commissioner a flash before I left home. The patrol is at the southern end of the group. It'll need twenty hours to get here."

From the camp beyond the palm-grown bight of land came again the howling of the men.

"They're coming!" Adams exclaimed his alarm. He listened tensely. "It's getting louder—nearer!"

He turned quickly to D'Aprix, who had risen from his chair.

"We've no time to lose! Come on, man—to the plane!"

D'Aprix, his chin thrust forward pugnaciously, got up from his chair. He reached for the gun on the wall, took it down from the pegs.

"I've warned them," he growled, as he worked the lever to load and cock the rifle. 'I'll shoot the first dog that sets foot on my beach."

"You're mad, man!" Adams cried warning. His tight throat made the words hoarse. "Shoot one of them in the temper they're in—and the rest will tear you to pieces! You've got to get out!" he said desperately. "You've got to run for it!"

"I've never run from a cur yet, nor even a pack of curs."

"You won't come back with me?"

"No."

IN A SUDDEN FURY of frustration and despair Adams cursed the planter.

"Maggan!" he yelled hoarsely. "Stubborn fool!"

D'Aprix made no reply at once. He put a hand on the table, leaned over and blew out the light of the lamp. Then he took the tall Adams by an arm and led him to the screened door. He opened the door, gently pushed the trader down the low steps.

"You get to your plane, *mon veux*," he said softly. "Those devils are in an ugly mood. They may smash your pretty ship for you."

He closed the door quietly and went back to stand at the end of the veranda.

"And they will kill him," the trader thought. "They're wolves—human wolves. If D'Aprix drops one of them and the rest get the smell of blood—there's nothing that will stop them."

D'Aprix would shoot. Adams was positive of that. He would drop the first man to step a foot on his beach.

Adams walked a few slow steps toward his anchored plane. Then, abruptly, he wheeled about and began to run—toward the palms.

From the bungalow D'Aprix shouted at him; but Adams gave the Frenchman no attention. He ran on, at top speed. The dry, loose sand of the upper beach hindered him. It gave under his feet. Twice he stumbled and all but fell; and he began to pant.

This panting was, he realized, the breathlessness of apprehension, of desperation, more than it was of exertion. Exigency spurred him. He had to reach the palms before a man stepped from the shadows and on to D'Aprix's beach. He had to do that.

And he did.

He met the shouting mob beneath the palms, four score men and more, a drunken, raging crew. They were armed, with knives, with clubs, with here and there a pistol or revolver showing; and howling, they closed in about him.

"Kill 'im!" some one yelled.

A thrown club struck spinning across the back of Adams' knees and threw him down. Men rushed toward him.

"Avast!" Bloody Bill bellowed. "Lay off, you hellions! That's th' cap'n."

He tossed yelling men aside, hauled Adams upright. He shouted the demand, "What you doin' here?"

Adams caught hold of the big man by the opened front of his torn and dirty shirt.

"Stop them!" he gasped. "Stop them, Bandon—before there's a killing! D'Aprix's all set to shoot the first man who steps on his beach!"

Bloody Bill scowled. His broad face was black with more than a week's growth of heavy beard, and his eyes, small and closely set, were beady in the moonlight. He gave a hitch to ragged dungarees, and he growled in a rum-rough throat, "You keep out o' this, cap'n. You keep out an' you won't get hurt."

Adams tried to shake the burly man. As well he might have tried to shake a rock. He yelled—he had to yell to make himself heard, "D'Aprix's waiting—with a rifle."

With a powerful arm, Bloody Bill pushed Adams easily aside.

"We're a hundred men, cap'n," he bellowed. "Th' Frenchy can't shoot us all. He may get a few; th' rest'll get him. Then we'll get th' gold."

He pointed toward the beach, the way Adams had come.

"You get t' your plane an' fly back t' your own island. We'll take care o' this."

He thrust Adams behind him then, and he bellowed: "Come on, men—let's go!"

The howling mob surged forward, carried Adams with them.

ADAMS struggled against it, for he had no wish to go along; but the men were on all sides of him, and in their excitement they pressed him close. As

they neared the edge of the palm grove they broke into a lumbering run, as a thirsty herd begins to run down the smell of near water; and Adams was forced to run with them.

So he ran with them, until the thinning of the trees let them spread out more. The press about him eased. He slowed his run, walked. He could see D'Aprix's house now. He looked toward the screened veranda, kept his eyes focused there. D'Aprix stood in the blackness, he knew—D'Aprix with rifle in hand, his lower jaw thrust forward pugnaciously—waiting.

A yelling man, running ahead of the others, broke from the shadows of the palms, ran out into the moonlight washing the beach.

Adams caught his breath, stopped dead in his tracks. If D'Aprix shot now——

A tongue of flame licked briefly from the blackness of the screened-in veranda.

The runner crumpled to the moon-washed sand.

There was no sound of the shot, none that could be heard above the howling of the men. Then that howling cut off abruptly. It seemed to Adams as if a hundred invisible, looping cords all at once had been snapped strangling tight about a hundred throats; and as if some giant hand upon those cords jerked every runner to a halt.

Every man of the mob stood without making a stir. The whole island world seemed to pause, to hold its heart and wait upon the fallen man to rise.

He did not move.

The cords of restraint that held the men let go. From their many throats came a beastlike growling, and then, acting upon a common impulse, they surged forward.

"Belay!" Bloody Bill bellowed. "Backwater, you swabs!" And with his fists he beat back those he could reach. "Back—or there'll be a dozen o' you who'll spend no gold!"

The mob stopped again. A score of men began to yell protest.

"Stow it!" Bloody Bill roared angrily. "Bellyachin' ain't goin' t' get us nowhere!"

"What is?" some one shouted the question.

"Sand," the burly leader shouted louder. "Bags o' sand." And then he roared the order: "Scatter, you hellions! Back to camp! Grab all th' bags you can lay your paws on! Get shovels; get cord!"

With wild yells, a number of men set off on a run for the camp. Shortly they were back, and with them they brought bags, burlap sacks. Some few had shovels.

Bloody Bill set them to work filling the bags with sand and securely tying the ends.

"Get some sticks," he commanded. "Some stout sticks, boys."

Stout sticks were brought. Bloody Bill took one of them. He threw down a bag filled round with sand, lay himself on the ground behind it. Using the stick as a lever, he rolled the bag over and over, and he crawled along behind.

"D'you get what I mean?" he bellowed. "Th' bags'll be shields. Th' Frenchy's bullets can't plow through th' sand. Just keep your heads down; that's all you got t' do. Keep your heads down; keep rollin' th' bag over an' crawl along behind. That's th' way we can get t' th' house."

"Yeah? An' what do we do when we get there?"

Bloody Bill roared, "Blow th' Frenchy t' hell an' glory—with his own dynamite!"

Adams' heart sank. Those bags filled with sand, men with dynamite crawling behind the rolling shields—— D'Aprix was doomed.

"Doomed," he thought, "by his own stubbornness."

He went with the rush of excited men toward D'Aprix's powder house, a small sheet-iron shack in a dip of the beach near the water's edge. Hidden as the shack was from the bungalow, by the contour of the land, D'Aprix's bullets could not reach the men as they tore open the door and brought out a case of dynamite.

Dynamite, caps, fuses. In a few minutes a dozen destructive bombs had been made. Then a dozen more. With them the men ran back into the shadows laid by the palms.

Adams was left alone. No one paid any attention to him. He walked toward the little shack. Dynamite, caps, fuses lay on the ground, scattered as the men in their mad hurry had left them. Deadly stuff. He could guess easily enough how the men intended to use the explosive. From behind sandbags, safe from D'Aprix's bullets, they would creep upon the bungalow and toss their bombs at the house.

"If D'Aprix only had a few to toss back."

But D'Aprix had no dynamite at the house, nor was there any way of getting a supply to him.

No way? Adams' eyes began to burn with an unholy light. He laughed a little, a grim, devilish sort of laugh, the laugh of a desperate man with a desperate plan of action in mind; and he went down on his knees by the open case of dynamite.

He began to work fast now, capping sticks of explosive, putting fuses in the caps. He prepared a dozen sticks; he gathered them up in his arms like so much kindling. At a trot he started along the beach, headed toward his plane.

A DOZEN MEN, crawling on the moon-washed sand, were slowly rolling shielding bags across the width of the beach, when Neil Adams swung his plane low over the fronded tops of the palms.

They were scattered out, fan-shaped, the men rolling the bags, and they were converging on the bungalow from three sides. Adams, watching sharply, saw that again and again a lick of flame tongued out from the end of the screened-in veranda. D'Aprix was keeping his rifle hot; but to no avail. Slowly, relentlessly, as uncheckable seemingly as the swing of the very stars through the night, the bags moved inch by inch across the beach. In the shadows of the palms the rest of the mob stood and cheered the crawlers.

Adams bent his head below the level of the cockpit combing and lighted a cigarette. He took up a capped and fused stick of dynamite. Heading the plane toward the beach, he nosed the ship down—and he touched the fuse of the dynamite to the glowing end of his cigarette.

He cast the sputtering thing overside quickly.

Then Adams hauled up the ship and banked into a circle.

The first stick of dynamite struck perhaps ten or fifteen feet from one rolling bag. A geyser of sand was flung up by the explosion. So far as Adams could see, no damage was done. The bag rollers paused in their rolling act to look up at him.

"Stopped you—for a minute," Adams yelled excitedly. "Here's another minute."

He threw down a second stick.

His aim was better that time. The bomb landed almost directly in the path of one of the bags. There was no explosion as there had been before.

"A dud!" Adams exclaimed his disgust.

He saw the man behind the sandbag jump to his feet and start to run back toward the palms. The fellow ran a few steps, went sprawling on his face

when D'Aprix's rifle spat. Then the hang-fire bomb let go, heaved a wave of sand over the fallen man.

Again and again Adams swung his ship down over the beach, and each time he threw down a sputtering-fused stick of dynamite. Eight sticks he threw down in all. He made no direct hits on either bag or man. There was no need for that. After the first explosion the crawlers no longer inched their bags along. One or two turned and tried to crawl back the way they had come. They could not drag their sandbags with them. When they moved away from the protection of the shields, D'Aprix's rifle stopped them.

The others, every man of them, tried to run. D'Aprix's rifle dropped them —all but two. They gained the palms.

Adams circled over the palms. He had four of his makeshift bombs left. One by one, he lighted them, dropped them overside to fall among the trees.

The mob scattered. Here and there he caught glimpses of men running. He saw one man fall, then scramble to his feet in such wild haste that he fell again.

ADAMS turned back toward the lower bay. He circled once, cut the motor and went down. When he had anchored the ship, he splashed ashore, then trotted up to the bungalow.

D'Aprix met him at the screened door —D'Aprix with rifle in hand and swearing in excited French.

"What the devil did you set down again for? Why didn't you fly home?"

"I don't like to fly alone at night," Adams answered.

"You mean you came back for me?"

Adams looked at D'Aprix closely. The light of battle was in D'Aprix's eyes, his chin was still thrust forward pugnaciously.

"No." Adams shook his head. He thrust his own chin pugnaciously forward. "No," he repeated, "I came back to stay with you."

"You can't." The planter swore furiously. "You must go—while you can. You must fly for your life! Those devils will come again. The next time they will rush the house. Hark! Hear that? They're howling again. And look! That glow! They've fired the camp!"

"Probably my store," Adams said indifferently. He sat down in the wicker chair beside the table. "Got another rifle?"

"You won't go?"

"No. I'm a determined man when I get my mind made up. I came over here with the determination to save your life or die in the attempt."

"You're a stubborn fool!"

Adams shrugged. "It's a game two can play at."

D'Aprix eyed him angrily. "So! A game, eh? You think to spill your blood on my head?"

"Probably just on one corner of your veranda," Adams said. "Give me a rifle."

D'Aprix swore again. "A rifle, eh? You want a rifle? Then a rifle you shall have—so!" He thrust the muzzle of his rifle against Adams' chest. "Get up!"

Adams looked once in D'Aprix's eyes. He got to his feet.

"To your plane—march!" the angry Frenchman commanded him.

Adams marched. With D'Aprix's rifle now prodding his back he marched across the beach, waded into the sea to his waiting plane.

D'Aprix waded behind him.

"Up with that anchor!" the Frenchman ordered. "Get that motor going!"

Adams obeyed.

"Now climb in and take off," D'Aprix directed. "Get in the air."

Adams turned and grinned tauntingly at the angry planter.

"O. K., D'Aprix," he said very agreeably. "Just tell me one thing: Have you figured out how you're going to keep me in the air after you get me there?"

D'Aprix glared at him a moment. Then——

"Sapristi! I never thought of that," he admitted. His eyes narrowed. "You think you fool me, eh? You think you won't go home. You think you just go up and then come down again?"

"What are you going to do about it?"

"Hah! I'll show you," D'Aprix declared. He motioned toward the ship. "Get in!"

Adams climbed into the pilot pit, which was forward. To his surprise D'Aprix promptly climbed in behind.

"Such a stubborn fool!" the planter swore. "But I'll save your neck—if I have to fly home with you. Take off!"

Adams grinned. He chuckled. Then he laughed aloud as he opened the throttle.

Something terribly wrong was happening up there! The man had fallen as though——

7

It was real— too real!

BIG JIM DODD shouldered his way through the carnival crowd and nodded to a cop standing by the giant Ferris wheel. Farther down the main artery he spoke to other cops lounging around hot-dog stands and cubby holes where you tossed three darts for a dime and got a box of candy if you stabbed the ace of hearts.

He saw other cops watching a loop-the-loop device, where for two bits you could get your stomach drained and go

STEPS to DOOM

by Hugh B. Cave

home staggering. Then he glanced at his watch and hurried toward the high board fence behind which an orchestra was playing.

"MAMMOTH SUN-DANCE SPECTACLE"

said the tall letters gleaming red along the fence. There were more cops present than there were coconuts on the palm trees.

Well, maybe they'd be needed. Maybe the author of those goofey death threats would try to keep his promises.

Jim Dodd drew a breath of cool night air into his six-foot frame and walked around to the women's dressing rooms under the big wooden stage. Again he looked at his watch. In four minutes the show would be starting.

A large lady planted herself in front of him and said: "You can't come through here. These are——"

"I know. I'm boss of the detective squad assigned to keep things in order around here." He showed the woman a badge, because her scowl of suspicion seemed reluctant to depart. "Tell Miss Benson I'd like to see her, will you?"

"Wait here," the woman said.

She walked away, and Jim Dodd heard her knocking on a door. A moment later he gazed with wide-eyed admiration at a dark-haired, smiling young lady who came toward him out of the shadows.

"Scared, Molly?"

She shook her head. "Not even thinking of it. All I'm afraid of is that I'll forget my dance."

Jim Dodd could see that she didn't look frightened. Her face was wonderfully flushed and her eyes were glowing with eagerness. Lord, she was pretty!

"How do I look, darling?" She let her coat fall open, revealing sleek sun-browned legs and shoulders. The rest of her was covered by a white satin swim suit that emphasized and glorified every alluring curve of her twenty-year-old body.

Jim Dodd stared, grew red in the face. "You'll knock their eyes out. But remember what I told you—soon as your number is over you get dressed and go straight home. No hanging around."

She nodded. "You'll be over later, Jim?"

He pulled the flaps of her coat together, kissed her and whispered tenderly: "You bet I will. Good luck, honey." Then he strode away.

At the first gate he came to he showed his badge, entered, and followed the crowd. The show was about to begin. The huge stage was in darkness. The orchestra was playing the first few bars of Tschaikowsky's "Hymn to the Sun." A battery of colored spotlights swept the immense open-air amphitheater as Jim Dodd found himself a seat.

A big night, this. For over a month the city had been preparing for it, and for once the press agents' use of the word mammoth was actually justified. You'd never know Waterfront Park. A horde of workmen had been swarming over it like ants during the past three weeks, and presto! this enormous theater had sprung up out of the ground. Must be a crowd of forty thousand here to-night, easy.

Jim Dodd sneaked a look at a neighbor's program just as all lights went out excepting one over a small pulpit at midfield. He caught the printed words, "Presentation Number One—Babylonian Sun Worship."

Then a man in purple robes began reading from a large book, and his voice came booming through the amplifiers. Something about Baal and the temple of the sun and the sacrifice of the maidens.

THE PRESENTATION lasted twenty minutes—there'd be eight more following it before the show was over—and Jim Dodd was slightly amazed by the hundreds of colorful costumes, the group dances, the strikingly weird lighting effects up there on the big stage.

When it ended, some forty thousand spectators applauded, and the fellow in the purple robes began reading again.

Molly's number! Jim Dodd felt a ripple of pleasant anticipation running through him. No need to listen to the announcer for this one. Molly had told him all about it, and even danced her dance for him in the living room of her home, with the carpet rolled back.

Symbolic stuff based on epic Greek poetry by Homer, having to do with gods and goddesses and mortals. Beautiful Aphrodite had fallen in love with a handsome young fellow by the name of Adonis, and Adonis had got himself killed by a wild boar. Broken-hearted, Aphrodite went to Olympus where the gods resided, and implored Zeus, the Mighty, to bring her dead lover back to life.

The thing started with a gal doing a weird sort of ceremonial dance on a big drum. The gal was practically without clothes, and the audience fell into a hush, watching her. She stamped out a rhythm with her bare feet. The only

light in the place was a green spot playing on her.

When that ended, the stage lights swelled on, and there was Zeus sitting on his throne, with the dead body of Adonis sprawled out at his feet. The orchestra struck up a dirge. Dancers came tripping across the greensward, followed by a torchlight procession of major and minor gods and goddesses, all of whom took their places on the stage.

Seven swarthy brutes lined up on the seven white steps leading to the throne. Then came Molly. And though big Jim Dodd couldn't see more than a few of them, he knew that every cop in the place had jerked to attention. The writer of those mysterious death threats had sworn that Molly Benson would die at to-night's performance.

She came alone, a stumbling, sobbing figure of despair and humility. The white swim suit was not in evidence; over it she wore seven veils of black gauze and a flowing robe which left only her arms and face exposed to the collective gaze of the forty thousand.

She danced to the foot of the steps and started up them, discarding the robe at the bottom. The first of the seven swarthy brutes seized her and tore one of the veils from her weaving body.

The idea was that she'd lose a veil on each step of her climb to the throne, and then, naked and ashamed, she'd dance before Zeus in an effort to soften his anger. Only, of course, this wasn't burlesque and the nearest she would get to nakedness would be the white swim suit.

Jim Dodd's face oozed perspiration as clutching hands tore the third, fourth and fifth veils from Molly's writhing body. The death threats were ridiculous, of course—but you never could tell.

The sixth swarthy brute seized Molly and released her. She fell into the arms of the seventh, lost her last veil, then staggered away and slid to her knees. It looked like the real thing when she pitched forward on her face and crumpled inertly at the foot of the throne. It looked *too* real!

Jim Dodd lurched erect, breathing hard and pawing the air with his hands. Angry protests went up behind him, but he planted a heavy foot between two spectators on the bench in front and vaulted the infield railing.

He got halfway across the greensward, with amazed people staring at him and a few shrilling catcalls at him, before he realized his mistake. Molly wasn't hurt. The business of sprawling forward was just a part of her routine. She was up again now, weaving through the rest of her dance.

A red flush crept out of his collar and ruddied his face. His rush across the field had sucked half a dozen other racing shapes out of the crowd. They were cops, and they had recognized him—but he was ahead of them and alone. A titter of amusement was running through the crowd. The walk back was going to be a long one. He felt like a barber's pole in a desert.

Laughter is contagious in a mob of forty thousand. It swelled to a deafening roar accompanied by much clapping of hands and stamping of feet as Jim Dodd headed for the side lines. Up on the stage Molly had stopped dancing. She was going to be sore about this, and she had every right to be.

AND THEN, suddenly, something was happening up there.

Jim Dodd saw it because he had turned, while walking, to look at Molly. He forgot the crowd then. Number Seven of the seven swarthy brutes on the steps had sagged down to a kneeling position and was frantically clutching at his own throat, as if suffocating.

The crowd sensed something wrong and stopped cheering. Jim Dodd's shoes slapped out a tattoo that lingered in the weird silence as he rushed up the steps. He elbowed his way through a score of

frightened dancers, caught a glimpse of Molly's white, scared face, and gripped the stricken man's shoulders.

The fellow clawed at him, moaning piteously. One clawing hand was swollen, discolored, with a deep, clean wound between thumb and forefinger. He labored for breath, stopped moaning and began screaming. Before Jim Dodd could drag out a handkerchief and fashion a tourniquet, the man was vomiting violently and having convulsions.

"Get a doctor!" Jim snapped.

Cops pushed through the thickening crowd and reached his side, but the tourniquet was in place then and no one could do more until a professional arrived. The crowd was curious and uneasy; forty thousand people all talking at once could make a lot of noise.

One of the cops put his mouth close to Jim Dodd's face and said: "He acts like he was bit by a snake—a moccasin —only how the hell——"

Some one back on the stage began shoving, and the resultant wave sent Jim Dodd sprawling on hands and knees across the stricken man's body. He swore as he clambered up again.

The loud-speaker horns were blaring out: "There's been an accident. Will some doctor please come forward at once? Hurry, please!"

But a doctor couldn't help now. The guy was dying. Jim Dodd knew it, and so, apparently, did a lot of other people who had crowded close and now wanted to retreat. The fellow's body seemed paralyzed; his eyes were leaving their sockets. His lips were twisting around a curled tongue.

Jim Dodd and a couple of cops near him caught the throaty words: "Molly Benson did it. She had a knife——"

"What?" Jim demanded. "What?"

The fellow tried to say it again, but couldn't. He was dead.

Jim leaned away from him and knew that the two cops were staring. "He's crazy," Jim muttered. "Delirious." But the two cops had heard those whispered words, too. They edged away from him as he pushed back to make room for a doctor.

Molly had done it. Jim wagged his head. That wasn't possible. The writer of those crank letters had sworn to kill Molly, and although she had tried to hide it behind a brave smile, she'd been scared to death by the threats. This other thing was all wrong. *She* hadn't sworn to kill anybody.

He looked for her in the crowd, but her white, frightened face was gone. She wouldn't be hanging around in that scanty swim suit, anyway; she'd want to get dressed.

He hiked down the white steps and around back to the dressing rooms. She wasn't there. A group of goggle-eyed girls in fantastic costumes broke apart and became suddenly silent as he approached. Had they seen Molly? Sure they had. Right after the accident, Molly had rushed down here in a mighty big hurry, grabbed her clothes and disappeared without so much as a farewell. "That girl had something on her mind," one of the group told Jim emphatically, "and she was certainly in a rush to get somewheres."

He hiked through the gap in the fence and across the parking lot where Molly had left her roadster. People hadn't begun to move their cars yet, and it was some time before he located the right lane. There'd been a car with New York registration parked alongside. It was still there, but the roadster was gone.

She'd gone home then, keeping her promise not to hang around.

He piled into his own car and snaked it out of the lot. A mob pouring out of the big open-air theater held him up for ten minutes, and he used up ten more minutes backing out, turning, and circling the other way. The chap who had accused Molly of killing him had been

dead a good half hour before Jim Dodd rang the doorbell of Molly's home.

Her mother opened the door. She said: "Hello, Jim. Where's Molly?"

"I guess she got caught in the crowd," Jim said.

Right away her mother began to worry. He and Molly had tried to keep her from knowing about the crank letters, but the papers had received a couple, and Molly's mother had read the papers.

"Jim, you don't—you don't think anything has happened to her?"

"Not a chance," he said, grinning. "I'll go find her."

HE DROVE BACK to the park. A small crowd still moved up and down the main artery of the carnival, but the floodlights in the big sun-dance theater were out and only the stage was illuminated. Half a dozen men stood there. It looked like a rehearsal for a play. Jim walked across the grass and climbed the steps.

Andrew Hennessey, one of the two cops who had heard the dying man's last speech, was repainting the picture for the others. With the exception of a short, chunky, bald-headed man named Girard, who for a dozen years now had directed the annual sun dance, the others were all police officials.

Jim Dodd said he was looking for Miss Benson. They stared at him. Hennessey evidently didn't like the expression on Jim Dodd's haggard face and took a step backward.

Some one else said: "Sorry, Jim, but she tried to skip after it happened—and you heard what Albans said before he died."

"You've arrested her?" Jim's knuckles were white, but he stood stiff and kept his voice under control.

"Well—for questioning."

"What killed him?"

"The medical examiner says snake poison." The police official knew Jim Dodd of old and thrust a hand out to keep the big detective away from him. "Now take it easy, Jim. Holding a girl for questioning isn't serious. If she hadn't tried to skip——"

"She was on her way home. I told her to go."

"Yeah? Well, anyhow, it looked kind of funny, her being in such a hurry, so we——"

Jim Dodd walked away like a soldier on parade, slammed into his car and drove to police headquarters. Steering through downtown traffic, he let his thoughts dwell on the man who'd been murdered.

The fellow was Philip Albans, home on a vacation from Washington. Weeks ago the papers all over the nation had been full of him, and Congress had been on the verge of throwing him out on his ear. He was a horrible example of what the privileges of public office could do to a glorified moron. He'd been elected on a fluke, bought himself a mess of race-track clothes that suited his mentality, splurged on a foreign-made car, and gone haywire.

Newspaper headlines had called him "Mad Congressman Albans," and a lot of other things less complimentary. The police of a dozen cities had arrested him for speeding, fined him for contempt of court, for using abusive language to officers.

He'd come here on vacation, demanded a part in the sun dance on the grounds that his presence would provide grand publicity—which it had—and he had publicly threatened to have his political enemies machine-gunned out of town.

The world would be better off without him. He'd be mourned only by his wife and women—perhaps not even by them. But if his death was going to cause trouble for Jim Dodd's girl——

At headquarters, Jim pushed through a knot of reporters, strode into the back room and found Molly being quizzed by detectives. He herded them out, slammed the door on them and locked it. He took Molly in his arms, took a crumpled handkerchief out of her fist and wiped her eyes with it. "There's not a thing to be scared about," he said. "Now listen, honey. Albans said you had a knife. Did your costume for the dance call for any sort of knife?"

She shook her head. She'd been frightened, as any girl might be, by what had happened, but apparently in Jim Dodd's presence she felt safe. "I didn't have a knife, Jim. I can't understand why he said that."

"Neither can I. Tell me what happened, the best you can remember."

"Well, he grabbed me the way all the others did—in the dance, I mean—only he was rough about it and I fell against him. I tripped, I think, and he did, too. He said something. It sounded like an oath, but I'm not sure; you see, I had to break away from him and keep on dancing."

Jim Dodd nodded. "Albans had a fight with your brother a few days ago, Molly. You know that?"

"Yes. I—I read the papers."

"Where's Tony now?"

"He's away. He left to go on a tour for Mr. Bradlin, to make speeches. Jim—will they let me go now?"

He held her by the arms and stared into her face. "I don't know, Molly. I'll do what I can, but I don't know. I'm a detective, not a politician. If they keep you here, hold you chin up and trust me."

"Tell my mother not to worry," she said calmly.

"That's more like it," he declared, nodding. "You just stick to your story and wait for me to make Albans change his—even if he's dead."

He talked for a while with Ennis, chief of detectives, but got no satisfaction, went out scowling and took with him a copy of the medical examiner's report revealing that Philip Albans had died from the effects of moccasin venom injected through a three-inch slash on the left hand.

HE DROVE to Waterfront Park and left his car in the lot. The place was dark now, deserted; the forty thousand had gone home. Jim Dodd slipped through a gate in the high wooden fence and made his way under the grand stand toward the huge stage.

There was a tie-up somewhere—there must be—between the murder of Albans and the fight which had taken place a few days ago between Albans and Tony Benson, Molly's brother. That scrap had made history, and the town was still talking about it.

Tony Benson was a hot-headed lad, leader of the Young Men's Independence Club which had political affiliations with the party opposed by Albans. They'd met, Tony and Albans, ringside at a wrestling show, and there'd been words between them. Liquored up as usual, Albans had stripped off coat and shirt, stepped into the ring, and challenged Tony to climb in after him.

So, with no holds barred and ten thousand cheering spectators waiting to spread the story of the battle all over the city, Tony Benson had blackened the congressman's eyes, made a punching bag of him, cleaned and pressed him, and tossed him to the mob.

Albans had received plenty of publicity for that—but not the right kind.

Tony Benson had answered all questions with a grin and a "Well, he asked for it, didn't he?"

Tony was up-State now, stumping while his name was hot. Albans was dead. But somewhere there might be a tie-up. There must be. Through Ed-

mund Pakeman, his chief tool in the city's politics. Albans had sworn to get even.

Jim Dodd scowlingly pondered the possibilities as he walked along under the grand stand. The sloping rows of benches overhead shielded him from much of the thin drizzle of rain which had begun to slant down through darkness; some of it smeared his face, got in his eyes.

He gripped the cuff of his coat sleeve and rubbed the sleeve across his nose. The movement blindfolded him for an instant. He failed to see the dark shape that streaked toward him from behind a wooden upright.

Hit low and hard, he staggered back, gasping, and went down. He whipped his legs around and planted the soles of both shoes on the chest of his assailant, and slammed the man back and got up again. But there were four shapes then, converging on him from four different directions. They had lengths of two-by-fours for clubs, and they went to work on him.

One against four, Jim Dodd used his six feet two of brawn to even the odds a little. His attackers were hoodlums using rough-house methods, so he used feet, knees, elbows in retaliation. A good scrap was raw meat and raw liquor; he curled his lips back from his teeth, snarled curses, and fought like a lumberjack.

His fists slammed home and got bloody, and his knees sank into the pits of soft stomachs. He caught one man by an arm, whirled, threw the man ten feet into a post, then dropped to his knees, cursing, when another assailant leaped onto his back and twined two arms around his throat.

They paid for it with broken teeth and smashed bones, but they downed him, flattened him on his back and swarmed over him. With ten fingers tangled in his hair, holding his head down, Dodd squirmed and raised havoc with his feet, while clenched fists rained blows on his face. Blood choked him and blinded him, but he fought until, with hands sore and raw from slugging him, one of the men grabbed up a club and swiped him with it.

II.

THE RAIN brought him to. When he rolled over, groaning, he struck his head against a post. The blow shook some of the mist out of his brain. He was alone then; rain made the only sound in the darkness around him. His face felt puffed and raw, and he ached all over.

He guessed that after such a beating he must have been unconscious for at least a couple of hours. Anyway, the night was still black as pitch, and a good many more hours would go by before he felt right again.

He'd been lying on his hat. He pulled it out from under him, shaped it with swollen hands and jammed it on his head. The face could wait; it probably looked weird enough with its blood and bruises to scare the wits out of any one who might walk into him; but in the dark no one would see.

He sat up. The hoodlums who had done this had been paid to do it, of course. Perhaps they'd been paid to get rid of him and had left him here for dead. But Jim Dodd wasn't dead—yet. And there was a scrap of paper pinned to a buttonhole of his coat. Maybe, then, they hadn't meant to——

He detached the paper and fumbled a match out of his pocket. The match flared off his thumb nail. The paper, about four inches long, looked like a strip torn from the bottom of a sheet of expensive linen, and the words written on it were in ink:

> Get out of town or we will not be responsible for what happens.

So they wanted to get rid of him. They'd gone to quite some trouble to scare him off the case, probably because they were afraid he'd uncover something. They had the colossal nerve to order Jim Dodd out of town!

That was good. That was a great big horse laugh. With Molly tangled up in a murder net, they actually thought they could turn on enough heat to blast Jim Dodd off the premises. Well, they'd learn. There wasn't that much heat even in hell.

He stuffed the paper into a pocket, got up and went stumbling along under the grand stand. The quickest way out of here now was through the gate by the dressing rooms. The route took him under the huge stage, and in the dark he tripped over something lumpy, lying there.

The fall stunned him. A couple of minutes went by before he got hold of another match and struck it. The hand holding the match didn't move after the flame showed him what lay there.

It was almost as if Philip Albans, dead on the big wooden platform above, had melted through the boards, landed here underneath, and swelled up like a balloon. Only this wasn't Albans, and this wasn't any of Albans' associates.

The man lying here in a fat heap, his face purple and contorted, his hands half buried in a pile of refuse, was Jonathan Weldon. He was well-groomed. He'd been wealthy, and he'd been one of Albans' hated enemies. He'd also been a close friend of Tony Benson, Molly's brother.

After lighting four matches, Jim Dodd found out what had caused it.

One hand—the right one this time, not the left—was gashed across the palm, as if it had closed over a sharp chunk of glass or a razor blade. The rest was easy to figure. Every indication pointed to snake poisoning.

Behind Jim Dodd a gate creaked, a flashlight's beam bored the dark, and a voice growled out: "Say-y-y! What's goin' on here?" The voice was Andrew Hennessey's.

Jim didn't move. The effort of turning the corpse over and examining it had left him without strength enough to get up off his knees.

The voice said harshly: "Get up out of there, you!" Then the footsteps and the light came closer, and the voice changed its tone. In a whisper of amazement Hennessey gasped: "It's *you*, Dodd!"

JIM DODD leaned away from the dead man, exerted himself and laboriously straightened to his feet. He knew what he looked like after the mauling he had received, and he supposed that Hennessey was secretly exulting. Until six months ago, when the Albans crowd had squeezed him into the police force, Hennessey had peddled moonshine for an unlicensed distiller.

"Say-y-y!" Hennessey croaked. "What've you done to this guy?"

Jim Dodd stiffened, stared into the light. "What do you mean—what have *I* done?"

"Why, the guy's dead. Lord, Dodd, you've killed him!"

"Listen, Hennessey, and get this straight." It was going to be hard, because the cop's interpretation of the situation was actually more or less justified. Here was a dead man and here was Jim Dodd, bloody and battered after a dog fight. Hennessey's thoughts were labeled by the horror creeping out on his face.

"Listen, Hennessey. The fight I was in was not with Weldon; it was with a gang of thugs, back there under the grand stand. Maybe some of your friends uptown know more about it than I do. I was walking along here and I found Weldon like this, dead. Chew on that while you go call headquarters."

The reference to friends uptown put a glint of hatred in Hennessey's eyes. "I'll take you along with me," he said.

"You'll——"

"You're nothin' to me, Dodd. You ain't in my department, and I never even heard of you until now, when I find you messin' around a dead man and it looks like you been in a fight with him. I know my job. Make trouble for me and you'll wish you hadn't."

Jim Dodd clenched his hands and took a step forward, then stood still, pulled a deep breath into his big chest and coolly, acidly told Hennessey what he thought of him. He concluded with: "I'm walking to my car and driving to headquarters, see? Your job may make you go with me, but you'll walk behind me and sit in the back seat. And one of these days I'll make it my job to punch your teeth out."

Hennessey was silent until he got to headquarters. He talked then, and made the most of his opportunity. He glared at Jim Dodd while he talked, as if daring Dodd to deny his statements. It looked bad. Jim knew it looked bad. Relieved of Hennessey's presence at last, Jim talked to the chief.

The chief listened and said: "Well, I don't know. You'd better stick around. I mean, personally I'd say O. K., go where you want and do what you like—but I only work here. See?"

Jim Dodd said he saw. He said, too, that he was tired. There was a cot in one of the back rooms. After a hot shower and a clean-up, he went to sleep there.

Next morning Mr. Edmund Pakeman, high local deity of the Albans crowd, came mincing into headquarters to find out what was all this he'd been hearing about Jonathan Weldon's being murdered.

Pakeman had soft white hands and talked with them. He kept his hat on because the bald pate underneath would have added ten years to his age, and he was the kind of man who liked to look young. He was tall, thin, pale and handsome. Jim Dodd had met him before, seen him around often, but looked long and hard at him and disliked what he looked at.

In Ennis' office, Jim pushed a strip of paper across the desk toward Pakeman's hand and said: "You any idea who might have written that?"

It was the paper he had found pinned to his coat. Pakeman studied it. "Yes. Have you?"

"No."

Pakeman fished a wad of letters from his coat pocket, sorted them, let one flutter to the desk. "Compare the handwriting," he said. "It's a good thing I saved this. I received it several days ago."

THE LETTER was from Adrian Bradlin, who had been Number Six of the seven swarthy brutes at the sun dance. Bradlin had planned to drive up-State to-day—probably was on his way now—to join Molly's brother Tony, who was campaigning for him. A good man, deadly enemy of the Albans crowd, Bradlin had a better-than-even chance of being called "senator" and sent to Washington.

The handwriting on the letter and that on the strip of soiled paper was the same. "Where's the rest of this letter?" Jim Dodd demanded.

Pakeman looked for it, shook his head. "Must be in my office."

Jim thrust the letter back. "It looks as though Bradlin hired those mugs to beat me up, to scare me out of town—doesn't it?"

"That's for you to figure out. I'm only showing you who wrote——"

"Sure. Thanks." Jim looked at Ennis. "Still want me to hang around here?"

Ennis nodded.

"Call me then," Jim said sourly, "when you're alone. I'll have something to show you."

He was called ten minutes later and entered the office to find Ennis alone at the desk, studying Bradlin's letter and the strip of paper. He closed the door, stood in front of the desk and scowled when the chief looked up at him. "I've got things to do. I can't do them if you keep a rope on me. Now that you've ordered me to stick around, that lets you out, doesn't it?"

"Well—yes," Ennis said.

"Here, then. Read this. It's my report on the case and it's very interesting. It will keep you absorbed."

Ennis took the proferred sheets of paper, spread them on his desk and studied them. Jim Dodd quietly opened the door, grinned, and walked out. He was not called back. He took a cab to Waterfront Park.

The body of Jonathan Weldon had been removed from under the big stage. Sunlight filtered through crevices between the boards and painted a yellow pattern on the damp ground beneath, on piles of raked-up refuse. Out on the infield an Italian was singing lustily while driving a mower. Other workmen were tearing down the grand stand.

Jim Dodd looked around and up, then dropped to hands and knees and began exploring. He had patience, needed it because there was a lot of ground to be covered. After a while he stood up, stretched his knees, brushed mud off his trousers and lighted a cigarette, but then went right on searching again.

When he was positive that the thing he sought was not on the ground near where Weldon had died, he picked up a stick and poked through the piles of refuse. A glittering object caught his eyes. He dropped a handkerchief over it, gingerly picked it up and put it in his pocket.

While hiking back under the grand stand he passed two men who focused hard stares on him. One had an arm in a sling; the face of the other was disfigured by a strip of yellow adhesive tape running from eye to ear. He went by them, stopped, turned. When they turned, too, he was sure that they were two of the men who had attacked him.

He took the cigarette out of his mouth, flicked it to the ground and trod on it. "Why not try again in daylight?" he challenged.

They didn't answer. One took a step forward, scowling; the other grabbed him and pulled him back.

Jim Dodd snorted, walked away.

He got into his car and drove leisurely uptown, stopping at the first drug store to use a phone. He called Edmund Pakeman's office. When a girl's voice answered, he said: "I'd like to speak to Mr. Pakeman, please."

She came back with: "He's not in. Who's calling?"

"You sure he's not in?"

"He is not in."

"Cut it, sister. I was told to ring him at this time. Put him on. He'll know who's talking."

She didn't hesitate. She said: "I'm sorry, but he really isn't in. I don't expect him back until two."

He hung up. He'd wanted to be sure that Pakeman had not returned to his office. With Pakeman out, the coast was clear, except for the girl. The girl could be taken care of.

He ordered a drink at the soda fountain and was so deep in thought while sipping it that the clerk's "Sweet enough, sir?" went unanswered. Sliding the glass away half full, he strode out and climbed back into his car. The hands of a sidewalk clock said eleven twenty. Traffic was thick. He had to drive two streets past his destination to find a parking space.

HE WALKED BACK, turned in at the Pegler Building, and, ignoring the elevator, hiked up four flights of dark stairs. It was an old, dirty building, and the numbers on the doors were barely legible, but he had been here once before and now paced straight along the fifth-floor corridor to Pakeman's office.

He opened the door without knocking, walked in.

A sugary blonde sitting at a desk had one slim leg crossed over the other. She uncrossed it, stared a moment as if trying to place Jim Dodd's face, and then said "Mr. Pakeman's not in," as if that settled everything.

The place was small and there were no partitions or railings—just two desks, two chairs, two phones, a wastebasket, a washbasin and a coat rack. It was small, but it was important. The taxpayers who thought that their city was being run from city hall would be surprised to know how important a joint like this could be.

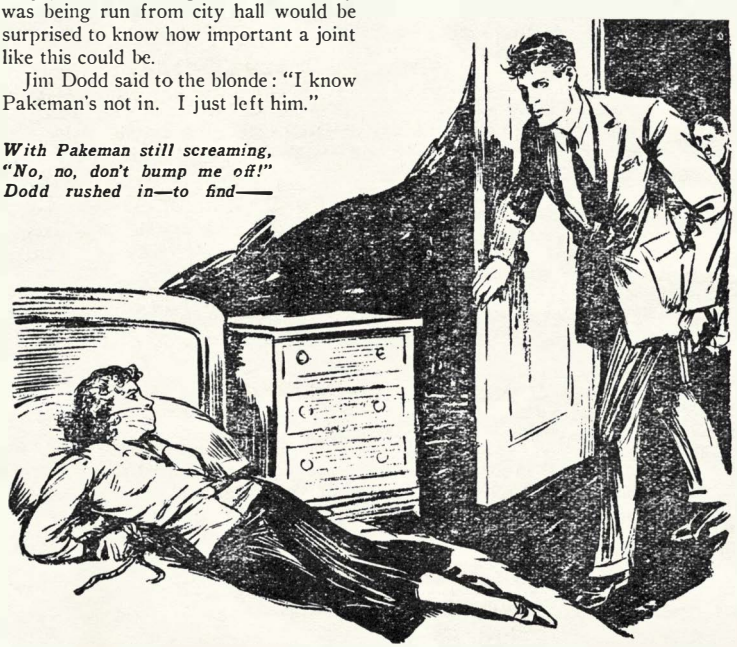
Jim Dodd said to the blonde: "I know Pakeman's not in. I just left him."

She looked puzzled.

"He wants the letter Bradlin wrote him last week. He says it ought to be in the desk, and for you to find it."

She was in no hurry. A wooden cigarette case lay on the desk; she tapped one out of it, lighted it, blew smoke and watched the match burn down in her fingers. Working for Pakeman had evidently taught her all the tricks—or maybe she had known them before coming here. She looked him over again. "He tore the letter up. I was here when he did it."

"So you don't believe he sent me? O. K., sister." Jim Dodd shrugged his big shoulders and reached for the doorknob. "It's none of my worry. Your boss wants a letter; he sends me for it; and you play dead. You and him can square accounts later. It don't bother me."



With Pakeman still screaming, "No, no, don't bump me off!" Dodd rushed in—to find——

She said: "Wait a minute."

"Oh, so you——"

"How do I know Pakeman sent you?"

"How do I know how you know? I'm tellin' you, that's all. Call him on the phone. He's at Jolly's joint, and if he's had any more than two drinks since I left he won't be able to talk to you, anyhow."

She hesitated, apparently unable to make up her mind. Jim Dodd's right hand hovered over his coat pocket, and if she reached for the phone she would find herself looking down the barrel of a gun. He was willing to roll the dice, but nothing except a natural was going to count.

"O. K.," the blonde said. "I'll look."

She went to Pakeman's desk and pawed through three or four drawers. He leaned on her own desk, near the phone, and watched her. She threw a pile of papers onto a chair, wet her thumb and went through them, jerked one out of the middle and tossed the rest back. Turning, she said: "Here."

Jim Dodd took it from her and studied it. "Where's the strip off——"

"You can ask Pakeman," she said.

He pulled his head up slowly and looked at her. She was standing with her back to the desk. She had reached behind her with her right hand and lifted a gun out of the top drawer. The gun was an automatic. She knew how to hold it and she apparently knew how to use it.

"I'll take back the letter," she said. "Drop it."

He dropped it.

"Now, Mr. Wise Guy, stand over there by the coat rack where I can keep an eye on you. You're smart, but next time you tell me Pakeman is at Jolly's place make sure he didn't call me a minute before that from somewhere else."

Jim Dodd narrowed his eyes and walked backward to the coat rack. The muscles of his face were working and his tongue was out, licking his lips. He stood there while the blonde kicked her chair around and sat on the arm of it. She kept an eye on him while reaching for the phone.

SHE took the combination transmitter and receiver off its cradle, placed it on the desk and dialed a number. When the receiver croaked a voice at her she said loudly: "Get me Mr. Pakeman." Then she said: "Listen, Mr. Pakeman, there's a suspicious-looking character here who came in and said you sent him for that letter Mr. Bradlin wrote. Did you? . . . I thought so. I took the gun out of your desk and stuck him up with it. . . . What? He's big, good-looking sort of. He looks like he was in a fight recently. . . . All right—but hurry, will you?"

She put the phone back on its cradle and said: "Pakeman will be here in five minutes. He says for me to shoot you in the stomach—only he used a less elegant word—if you try to walk out. And don't think I won't. Keep your hands up high."

"They ache," Jim Dodd growled.

"I don't care if they drop off."

"For resisting an officer, a girl like you could get a long stretch behind bars. Think that over."

"So you're an officer?"

"I am."

"You said you were a friend of Pakeman's," she said wisely. "Far as I'm concerned, that's all you are. I work for a lawyer. Toss me in jail and see how fast he gets me out."

Jim Dodd swore softly and thereafter kept his mouth closed. The room was hot. The business of reaching for the ceiling dampened his face with sweat and put a sullen ache in his shoulders. He counted the minutes and wished Pakeman would hurry.

The girl slid off the arm of her chair and picked up the letter he had dropped. Opening a drawer of Pakeman's desk, she poked the letter in, closed it again and glanced at her watch. She looked nervous.

"You'd think this was one time he wouldn't be late," she said.

Jim Dodd said quietly: "How long have you worked for Pakeman?"

She stared at him. "Shut up and keep your hands up," she snapped.

The door opened noisily. Pakeman slammed it shut behind him.

He had come in a hurry. His expensive hat was tipped back, and the exposed section of bald head was agleam with perspiration. But when he saw that the situation was still nicely under control, he relaxed, leaned against the closed door and dipped his hands into his pockets. His face had been reddened by the exertion of hurrying, but it was normal again before he spoke.

"You, Dodd," he said, nodding. "I thought so."

"May I," Jim Dodd asked patiently, "put my arms down?"

Pakeman paced forward, patted the detective's pockets and removed a gun. Backing up with it, he slid it under some papers on his secretary's desk and took the automatic out of the blonde's hand. "Take a walk for half an hour, Miss Malloy," he said. While she was lifting her hat and coat off the rack, he nodded to Dodd. "You can relax."

Jim Dodd exhaled heavily and lowered his arms. The girl went out, shooting him a quick, contemptuous glance. Pakeman said: "So you were looking for Bradlin's letter."

"Yeah—the part you didn't bring to headquarters."

"And to you that was worth getting in trouble for. Why?"

"I play hunches."

"You're too late, Dodd." With the front sight of the automatic, Pakeman dug a long, thin scratch in the desk. "You're out of this now. I know your angle, of course. You're in love—whatever that is—with Molly Benson. Her brother and Bradlin are close friends. If Bradlin gets in trouble on your account, Tony Benson goes in with him, and there'll be a rift between you and your girl. Well, forget it. She's free."

Jim Dodd scowled and said: "What?"

"The woman who took care of the costumes for the sun dance," Pakeman declared, "walked into police headquarters half an hour ago. One of my men brought the story to me at the bookie's office, where I was when Miss Malloy phoned me. Within an hour or so, no matter how far up-State he is, Bradlin will be in custody. The gadget that killed Albans and Weldon was found in a pocket of his costume."

Jim Dodd frowned, stuck his head out and put his hands on his hips. "Is that a fairy tale for my special benefit, Pakeman?" Answering his own question he shook his head, muttered: "No. No, you wouldn't have brains enough to figure out one like that." Then, abruptly: "What kind of gadget?"

Pakeman had an oily smile on his face. Evidently the idea of a political opponent's being tagged for murder appealed to him tremendously. "Like a pick you use strumming a guitar," he said. "It fits over the thumb like that. It has two thin blades pressed together, and when they cut they spread apart, letting the poison run out of a little rubber bulb. I haven't seen it myself. Henn—my man—told me."

It might be on the level. Bradlin could have done it. In Molly's number on the sun-dance program, he'd been Number Six of the seven swarthy brutes lined up on the steps. Albans had stood next to him. With the sort of gadget described by Pakeman, Bradlin could have reached out just as Albans seized Molly——

Yes, it dovetailed. Albans had ac-

cused Molly of slashing him with a knife. Maybe he'd thought so, when Bradlin reached out and cut him.

"I guess you can see now why Bradlin wanted you out of town," Pakeman said, nodding. "You have a pretty good reputation. He was afraid of you."

Jim Dodd nodded, walked to the desk, slid his gun out from under the papers and put it in his pocket. He had nothing more to say. He closed the door behind him and hiked down the hall to the elevators.

III.

HE DROVE to police headquarters. Hennessey, they told him, had driven Molly home. "And say," Ennis growled, "where have *you* been? I told you to stay——"

Two of Ennis' superiors were present and were scowling. Jim Dodd said humbly: "I skipped out for a shave and something to eat."

"Well, you're clear now, only next time remember——"

Jim Dodd walked out, suppressing a grin, and got behind the wheel again. Drops of rain smeared the windshield as he drove across town. He'd see Molly first, then there was a little matter to be taken up with Ennis. It had to do with the gadget found in the costume worn by Bradlin, and Ennis had better hear it without an audience.

The drive to Molly's house consumed twenty minutes because traffic had slowed down with the rain. When he thumbed the bell, her mother answered.

"This time," Jim Dodd said, smiling, "she *is* home, hey?"

Mrs. Benson smiled back at him. "Wrong again. She isn't."

"But I was told at headquarters——"

"A policeman drove her home," Mrs. Benson said, "and ten minutes later he came back for her. He said they wanted to ask her just a few more questions, but there was nothing at all to worry about. You can wait, Jim."

"The cop's name was Hennessey," Jim Dodd said heavily. It was not a question, but a statement of grim fact that seemed to pour out of his lowering eyes, out of the creases on his face. "Hennessey. Already I've promised to break his teeth. Now I'll break the whole of him—into little pieces."

Molly's mother, puzzled, said: "I don't know if his name was Hennessey, Jim. He was a big man, rough-looking ——" She frowned. "Aren't you going to wait?"

"No," he said, hiking down the steps. "You wait. I'll work." He yanked the car door open and dragged it shut again as the machine careened away from the curb. His face was white, his lips muttering invectives. He took the corner on two wheels, and traffic gave him a wide berth as he roared back to headquarters.

When he piled out of the car, a tow-headed youngster blocked his way, saying: "Are you Mr. Dodd?"

"Yes, I'm Mr. Dodd."

The youngster stuck out a grimy hand. The hand held a grimy envelope. "A man said you'd give me fifty cents if I delivered this to you."

Jim Dodd snaked a sheet of paper out of the envelope, unfolded it with a jerk and read penciled words. The words were lettered, not written, and there was no signature. There was only:

YOUR GIRL IS AT 4401 MANTON STREET. BE ALONE WHEN YOU COME, OR ELSE——

"Hey, mister! You owe me fifty cents!" the youngster wailed.

Jim Dodd jerked back, pawed a bill out of his pocket and slapped it into the kid's hand. The kid gaped and was almost knocked over as Jim got into the car. The car roared away.

Rain was coming down hard. It cleaned the mist on the windshield and sprayed through an open window to

whip sharp and cold against Jim Dodd's face. Driving with one hand, he took the gun out of his pocket with the other, broke it, thumbed the cylinder, and replaced it. His face was hard as stone and his foot was heavy on the gas pedal.

He drove straight up through town, out across the railroad tracks and left along Manton Street, which curled around through a section occupied by Negroes. 4401 was new to him, but 3988 was a bookie's establishment under a dance hall, and the other address must be in the next block. Passing the bookie's, he turned into a side street, then into an alley, locked his car and went the rest of the way on foot.

THE NUMBER he wanted was an odd one, and odd numbers ran on the right side of Manton Street. He stayed on that side, close to the wall, where he would not be spotted by any one watching at a window. When 4401 was behind him, he took the next right and walked back through an alley, counting the buildings.

It was a tenement house occupied by Negroes. Colored shirts hung on a wire clothesline in the back yard. He had to stoop under them to get to the door. The lock was broken and the door opened when he turned the knob.

He drew his gun and closed the door behind him, tiptoed forward past a baby carriage and stopped to listen at the foot of a dark flight of stairs. The place reeked of human odors, and there were no windows to let in air. A bulb dangled from the cracked ceiling, but the switch on the wall had been removed and two outjutting wires were taped together. Behind a door at the end of the short hall a baby was crying.

He put one hand on the stairway banister and went up the stairs slowly, turning after every few steps to shoot a quick glance into the hall below. At the top he stopped and again stood listening, but there was nothing to listen to except the squalling of the infant beneath. On bent legs, Jim Dodd prowled along the corridor.

Molly was here. She'd been released from headquarters and driven home by Hennessey, who had called back and driven her off again on the pretext that she was wanted for further questioning. She'd been wanted because they wanted Jim Dodd.

He listened at two doors, and there were two more ahead of him as he went forward. After that there was another floor above this. The neighborhood was ugly. Most of the houses were owned by Edmund Pakeman.

He stopped at the third door and heard voices. Then a voice behind him said: "You're covered, Dodd. Drop the gun."

His back was toward the speaker, and he was so close to the door that the doorframe prevented him from making a short swing around to the left. The swing to the right was too much; he'd be drilled before completing it. Trapped, he let the gun slide down his leg and thud to the floor.

"O. K., Dodd. Clamp your hands behind your neck," the voice ordered. "Kick the door with your foot."

Jim Dodd obeyed and heard the floor creak behind him as the owner of the voice came closer. When he kicked the door, some one inside said, "Who's that? Whitey?"

A gun dented Jim's back. The man with the gun answered, "Yeah, Whitey. Open up. I got a surprise for you."

It was Hennessey who opened the door. Still wearing his cop's uniform, he rocked back on his heels and forked his big hands against his hips. He began laughing. "So the boy scout sneaked in the back way like we expected," he said. He stepped aside, bowing, and swept one arm out in a gesture of mock formality. "Come right

in, Dodd. To this very hour I remember what you said about punching my teeth out."

Three other men stared at Jim Dodd as he paced forward with his hands clamped behind his neck. He felt foolish and knew that he looked foolish. Hennessey pulled back a chair for him, bowed him into it. Hennessey said, "O. K., Whitey, wait outside," then closed the door and walked around to where he could better enjoy Jim Dodd's discomfort.

One of the other three men was Edmund Pakeman. He said: "Keep your hands where they are, Dodd."

The others were the two hoodlums encountered by Jim Dodd at Waterfront Park—one with an arm in a sling, the other with a face disfigured by adhesive tape.

The room was small and dirty. Shades were drawn at both windows. There was no furniture other than the table and four cheap chairs.

A door in the left wall led apparently to a closet.

PAKEMAN put his elbows on the table and flicked ashes from his cigarette by working his lips. He wore no hat, and his bald head gleamed under a cheap chandelier. "I made a mistake when I let you out of my office," he said. "I figured you hadn't seen Bradlin's letter, but Miss Malloy told me different. I might have overlooked that, because it would be easy enough for me to tear up the letter and call you crazy, but on top of that I find out you were in Waterfront Park this morning, snooping. Keep your hands up!"

Jim Dodd turned his eyes toward the two hoodlums and let an epithet push his lips apart. He said grimly: "You don't get a thing out of me, Pakeman, until Miss Benson is safe at home."

"Behave yourself and you can escort her home yourself."

"She goes home first."

Pakeman laughed. He was enjoying himself. "You don't give the orders around here, Dodd. I do. You're a wise guy without relatives. I guess maybe there'd be few questions asked if you were to disappear entirely."

A noise behind the closet door stiffened Jim Dodd in his chair.

"Sit still!" Pakeman rasped. "Keep your hands up!"

"You'll have a hard time explaining this, Pakeman."

"Maybe I won't do any explaining. You get me sore, and I won't need to." Pakeman knocked ashes on the table and blew them away with a gust of breath. He had the upper hand and knew it. With the two hoodlums watching Dodd's every move, and with Hennessey standing by to guard the door, he could afford to feel his way along and take his time about things.

"I want that piece of paper, Dodd."

"Sure you want it. It's part of Bradlin's letter. When you ordered your bulldogs to chew me up, you thought it would be a good idea to let me think Bradlin was responsible. So you tore a hunk out of his letter and had it pinned to me."

"Never mind the details," Pakeman said. "I want the paper."

"Sure. What good is it to me?" Jim Dodd unclasped his hands and reached toward a pocket of his coat.

Swift as a snake, Pakeman leaned forward, caught the hand before it was level with the table.

"You're too anxious, Dodd."

"Well, you told me to——"

Pakeman slid a groping paw into the pocket toward which Jim Dodd's hand had been descending. He tossed a pack of cigarettes, a book of matches, a loose broken cigarette and a strip of paper onto the table. Nodding, he fingered the paper loose and looked at it. "Fine!" he said.

"O. K." Jim Dodd stood up and started toward the closet door. "I'll take Miss Benson and——"

"Sit down."

He turned slowly, scowling. Four pairs of eyes were watching him, and Pakeman was grinning like a well-fed cat. Downstairs a baby was crying—the sound came faintly through floor and walls—and outside in the street a fish peddler was calling his wares.

"I thought you said——" Jim Dodd began.

"What I said and what I meant are two different things. You're not dumb, wise guy. You know well enough you weren't snared here for a hunk of writing paper."

"No?" Jim Dodd walked back to the table but remained standing, his hands at his sides. "Well, what?"

"You were in Waterfront Park this morning."

"Sure I was."

"The boys here"—Pakeman meant the two strong-arm men beside him, but made no gesture toward them—"went there to look for something around the place where Jonathan Weldon died. They didn't find it. You were there first, and maybe you found it."

Hollows formed in Jim Dodd's wrists when his fists clenched. His brows bunched over glinting eyes and his big body grew an inch as he pulled breath into his lungs. "You're crazy, Pakeman," he said.

"Am I?" The smile slid off Pakeman's face. He kept his gaze on Dodd, but extended one arm sideways and, with a bent forefinger, motioned Hennessey to come closer. "Search the guy," he ordered softly.

Hennessey said: "Sure!" Then: "Hoist your arms, wise guy."

Jim Dodd raised his arms away from his sides, fell back a step to give the cop room. The face that swam close to his own was one in which he had long wanted to place a fist; the leering mouth was full of teeth that he had promised to knock out. But he stood stiff, staring indifferently at Pakeman.

Pakeman, leaning on the table, intently stared back—at Hennessey's hands.

"Look out you don't get bit," Jim Dodd muttered. "I carry rat traps in my pockets."

THE COP'S right hand dug deep into a pocket, closed over something hard and sharp that had been wrapped in a handkerchief. Jim Dodd's big body corkscrewed sideways, the movement timed to a split second. Hennessey, shrieking, withdrew his hand and stared with widening eyes at a gashed thumb.

"I'm cut! My Lord, I'm cut!"

It was Jim Dodd's big chance. He had made it; he took it. His right fist came up in a wide haymaker and crashed against the cop's mouth, fulfilling part of his promises to empty the mouth of teeth. Without waiting for Hennessey to fall, Jim Dodd heaved into him, hurled him against the table and pawed with both hands at Hennessey's belt.

Local cops holstered their guns for the cross draw. The butt of Hennessey's police .38 angled forward from the hip. Jim Dodd grabbed it, yanked the gun loose. He dropped to his knees. Hennessey, out cold, fell across him, and a forward lunge took Jim Dodd under the table.

Pakeman and the two thugs were out of their chairs. The table reared on Jim Dodd's broad back, tipped against Pakeman's knees and dumped him. He had an automatic in his hand and it went off twice, spraying the ceiling. Rolling, he cursed in a shrill, wailing voice and stopped a bullet from Jim Dodd's gun while struggling to stand erect.

Dodd rose like a horse, stumbled sideways to avoid a chair in the hands of one of Pakeman's strong men. The chair hit the table, crashed. The man lost balance, came at Jim Dodd head-first and kept going, his skull split by the descending gun in Dodd's fist.

Across the room, the man with one arm in a sling had turned sideways, set himself in the proper stance for target shooting, and was lining Jim Dodd's chest on the ivory bead of a special .45.

The man's head jarred back on his shoulders as Dodd fired. He whined through his nostrils, sat down hard and clubbed the floor with his feet. Wet hair hanging in his eyes, Jim Dodd swaggered forward, kicking the broken chair aside, and stood over Pakeman.

"I ought to bump you off, Pakeman," he said.

Pakeman's hand stopped pawing a shattered shoulder and came away dripping blood. He stared with terrified eyes into Jim Dodd's face and moaned: "No, no, Dodd! You can't. I was going to let you go!" He cringed as Jim Dodd raised a foot and balanced it over his blubbering mouth. "No! Don't!"

Without touching him, Dodd strode across the room and yanked open the door of the closet. It wasn't a closet; it led to a smaller room beyond, and Molly Benson lay there, bound and gagged, imploring him with her eyes to release her.

HE DID SO and, with an arm around her waist, walked back to Pakeman. "I know the whole lousy set-up, Pakeman. If you don't think so, you'd better change your mind; otherwise you'll be chasing after me and get yourself in a mess of trouble." A glance assured him that Pakeman's strong men would not bother him while he talked.

"You and Albans planned to get rid of Adrian Bradlin—he's strong in this State and figures to be senator. You wouldn't murder Bradlin; killing him would only arouse public sympathy for what he stands for, and another man would take his place. You'd work it a different way. Albans demands a spot in the sun dance. Seven men are lined up on the steps. Albans is one and Bradlin another.

"The idea is—Albans will murder Molly but no one will know how it happened or who did it until the instrument of murder is found in Bradlin's costume. The murder is advertised beforehand—plenty of publicity through death threats—so the whole State will hear about it. Bradlin will be accused of murder and the blight will strike his whole party. Molly will die, and Albans will be even with Tony Benson for that fiasco at the wrestling match."

Pakeman stared, started to mumble denials, but licked his lips instead.

"Either you or Albans or both of you figured out the method of killing," Jim Dodd snarled. "The weapon was small. Albans was supposed to drop it through a crack in the staging after he used it. Only the gag back-fired. Molly was nervous. When Albans grabbed her in the dance, she stumbled against him. He tripped, cut himself. Even then he dropped the poison gadget as he was supposed to, and was rat enough to accuse Molly of cutting him. Correct me if I'm wrong, Pakeman."

Pakeman squirmed, kept his mouth shut. Molly Benson clung to Jim Dodd's big body and trembled.

"All right—there's a gadget on the ground under the stage and there's another one, a dummy, in Bradlin's costume." Jim Dodd used his hands to help him talk, and the gun in one hand waved over Pakeman's face, scaring him into violent shudders. "Jonathan Weldon comes along. Either he knows something or suspects something, and he's looking for the little thumb thing under the stage. He finds it in the dark and it bites him. He dies. The police

take away his body but they don't find what killed him, because they don't look long enough. It's there in a pile of junk. Weldon died in agony and threw it there. I find it—and, like a fool, Hennessey digs his hand into my pocket to take it away from me."

Pakeman looked across the room at Hennessey, shut his eyes abruptly and moaned.

"So I'm walking out of here with my girl," Jim Dodd said. "If there was a charge of murder against you. I'd take you with me—but Albans killed himself, so did Weldon, and so did Hennessey—and no one's alive to say you helped Albans plan a murder. I'm walking out of here, Pakeman. You can explain this mess here the best you know how, and——"

The hall door opened and Molly Benson screamed. With words still tangled around his tongue, Jim Dodd spun on one stiff leg. He saw a man and a gun in the doorway. The man was the one they had called Whitey.

A sweep of Jim Dodd's right arm sent Molly crashing against the table, out of the line of fire. He dropped, fired while dropping. He tore his left foot loose from Pakeman's clawing hands, which had suddenly closed over his ankle.

The man in the doorway stumbled, but kept squeezing the trigger as he reeled into the room. He fired four times before sagging to his knees, fired again while pitching forward on his face. The last bullet splintered the floor under the muzzle of the gun, but the ones preceding it spanged around Jim Dodd like hornets, and one of them went through his coat and bored a round white hole in the face of Edmund Pakeman.

With a surprised look on his face, and with one hand still reaching for Jim Dodd's ankle, Pakeman made whispering sounds with his tongue and lips and lay back, still. The man named Whitey had not moved after falling. Jim Dodd's one bullet had bored his brain.

Jim Dodd, face white and trembling, stood up and looked around him and said: "Lord! Looks like a war." He strode forward and, pushing the table aside, helped Molly to her feet, adding: "But the war's over. Let's get out of here."

She put her arms around his neck as he carried her down the stairs. Outside, the rain had stopped; the sun was shining and dust motes danced in the light. It seemed a long time since the girl in Jim Dodd's arms had been Aphrodite dancing for her lover.

"And I did knock some of Hennessey's teeth loose," Jim Dodd mused. "I did at that."

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"I am Tortilla, the bad man of the border. Yes?"

$50.00 Prize Story for October

TORTILLA

by Alfred L. Garry

ME AND MY PARDNER run a clip joint just over the border, near Tiajuana. We've got the usual line of stuff, any kind of liquor you want, faro, roulette, crap, and out in back, on an electric-lighted track, we've got a dog-racing layout.

We pay that movie star, Rex Barry, a thousand bucks to bring down a few parties from Hollywood, and get our place a rep as a movie folks' hang-out. We sure do a land-office business with the tourists and suckers who like to rub elbows with the actors, and are raking in a pile of jack.

You see, our games are—what shall I say—controlled. Our faro dealer's able to pull 'em out of the air when he wants 'em, and our wheel's got a little magnetic rig on it that's worth a couple of grand a week. The dice, well, rub 'em on your vest buttons, dash 'em against the curb, and let 'em roll, but just the same, the house comes out all right. My pardner thinks of all those things.

I look after the dogs. Now, whippet racing is a great racket when you know how to work it. We got the build-up system. When one of our pups has won a couple of races, we start building him up, and the customers grab the

odds on him. When the pooch has paid a few times, and the betting's about right, me and my pardner go out and put all the money we can on one of the long shots.

Then I buy a dime's worth of sandpaper, and put the race in our bag. I sandpaper the pads of the fast pup's front feet until they're tender. I do the same, more or less, to all the other whippets, except the long shot we have our dough on. Hounds with tender front paws don't reach out so far in their stride. And, boy, on that Saturday night do we make a killing!

But once in a while, a cleaned sucker gets sort of curious and hostile. That is where Tortilla, the scourge of the border, our greaser bouncer, comes in. He sure makes them sing low plenty pronto. It was Rex Barry, the actor, who first gave us the idea of using this Tortilla hombre for a bouncer.

"A perfect type, perfect type!" Barry hiccups one night, sizing up Tortilla, who is swamping out the joint.

"What do you mean?" I ask.

Barry waves a glass toward Tortilla, who is emptying a spittoon, and explains, "He's a killer type, a greaser heavy, a Pancho Villa! All that hombre needs is a few flashy duds! Sling a couple six-shooters around his lean hips, and he'll register the rôle. He's a sinister! A perfect type, man! A perfect killer type!"

I look again at this janitor we'd called Tortilla because his pay-roll name was too long. Barry is right. He's sure one villainous-looking hombre. Tortilla may be thirty-five, or he may be fifty. You can't tell, because, snake-hipped, he moves smooth and silky, like a middle weight in his prime—his long, flat, catlike muscles rippling smooth under his mocha-colored skin. He's tall for a peon, standing five foot eight or so, in his bare feet, having no sox—or shoes.

But it is his face that gets you. It ain't flat and dull, like most of the peon's. No Yaqui showing in it, either. He looks like the old gents in them paintings of ancestors you see in the haciendas. He has a hooked nose, smoldering, shoe-button black eyes under heavy brows, and a fine set of even white ivory in a good chin.

So far, so good. But, there's a long white scar, like a badly tended saber cut, running slantwise across his forehead and down over his high cheek bone. It gives him a dangerous, fiendish expression, like he'd slit a throat for two bits. But around the place, Tortilla is as meek and mild as the watered whisky we pass out to the customers who are too far gone to be particular. That's why we nicknamed him Tortilla. He's flat and spiritless as a Mexican pancake.

Barry says our joint needs some local color, whatever that is, and suggests that we rig up this Tortilla like a border bandit. So the next time I go to Los Angeles, I take Tortilla along. In a place that supplies outfits to the movie studios, I have him togged out.

His eyes shine like a tenderfoot's with a royal flush as they try on his new clothes. I go the limit, buying him one of them big Mexican sombreros all full of silver conchæ, a short, dark velvet jacket with red braid, a knock-'em-dead yellow silk shirt, and a pair of wide-bottomed velvet pants that fit him around the hips like they'd been shrunk on. We shoved his calloused feet into a pair of fancy riding boots with big, jingling, silver-mounted spurs.

He's strutting proud when I take him over to the gun counter and fit him out with a couple of .45 revolvers in low-cut, embossed holsters that tie down against his thighs. But when the clerk breaks out a box of blank cartridges and starts to fill the belt loops, Tortilla's face falls.

"*El diablo,* no!" he objects, showing more spunk than I'd ever seen him exhibit. "Real ones, señor boss! Please, real ones!"

Well, after seeing the almost childish eager look on his evil-looking pan, I cave, and we stuff every loop in his cartridge belt with stubby, businesslike .45 shells.

FROM THAT DAY ON, Tortilla carries himself with the haughty, dashing air of a romantic caballero. Them duds sure make him. From the first night, he's a sensation. He waits until the place is pretty well filled, and then, suddenly, appears out of the darkness and leans gracefully against the door jamb. Frosty and calculating, in the half light, he looks like the hell-born, throat-slitting brother of Pancho Villa himself.

Like when one stacked domino clicks against another, some cash customer spots Tortilla, nudges his neighbor, and a sort of breathless gasp runs around the joint. When every eye is on him, Tortilla panther-glides across the room, his spurs jingling loudly in the expectant hush, and seriously shakes hands with me and my pardner.

Just for a rib, we introduce him around to the suckers as Tortilla, the scourge of the border, a famous bad man and killer. He wows the ladies, flashing his white teeth, clicking his heels, and sweeping his sombrero across his toes as he bows low from the hips. We let him get away with it. It makes the tourists feel hellishingly romantic to think they've met a Mexican bad man in a border gambling joint.

We stake Tortilla to a little jack, and the boys at the tables always see that he wins plenty. It looks good to the customers. They ain't wise that Tortilla shuffles, bare-footed and bare-headed, into my office the next morning and returns his take before he starts brooming out the joint.

It's a treat to see how Tortilla handles a sucker who howls because he's been clipped in one of our games. He glides up to the jay like a cat stalking a bird, drops his lean hands to his holstered guns, and fixes the fellow with his glittering, beady, snake eyes.

Leering sardonically, he purs in a voice that holds an electric threat, "Señor, you are say too much about my *amigo bueno!* Vamose!"

It's too much for the tinhorns. They wilt, grab their hats, and take a run-out.

BUT the easy money is too good to last. Early one night three mugs come into the place and bust right into the office where me and my pardner are going over the records.

"We're from Chi," the leader, a big, hard-boiled guy says out of the corner of his crooked mouth. "We want to talk business with you!"

"To hell with you!" my pardner says.

But I take a quick step between him and a sawed-off shotgun we keep in the office. I don't like the looks of the two rat-faced trigger dopes who are with the guy. They got their hands in their pockets.

"Say your piece." I shrug.

"We're musclin' in on you," the guy says. "We got a drag. For our protection you're cuttin' us in for a third of the take, see?"

"Oh yeah!" I say.

"Gettin' smart, eh?" The big fellow leers. "Try not to have our help, an' see what happens! We'll be in Monday for our gravy. Have it ready—or else!"

Well, Monday morning, sure enough, them mobsters come back. My pardner goes hog wild. He busts unexpected out of a side door, throws down on them with the sawed-off, and boots all three of them out the front door.

All during the week we are nervous and jumpy as cats for fear the dopes are going to pineapple us, or give us a working over with their typewriters.

SATURDAY NIGHT, or rather, Sunday morning, we are going full blast. Beside the usual run of tourists,

there's a big Hollywood crowd—dames in low-cut gowns with ropes of sparklers, and gents in evening suits, all spending their dough free. The house is taking it away from them hand over fist. We cleaned up big on the dog races, and have the ten grand tucked away in our safe. We are plenty uneasy about having so much dinero around.

Sure enough, just as my pardner has the safe open to let me put away some of the take from the tables, I look up to see a guy covering me with a black automatic. Outside, the orchestra peters out to a ragged stop. There is a breathless hush. A woman screeches. The whole joint is stuck up!

The trigger in front of me's got a mask over his pan, and the way he holds his rod on my vest buttons shows he ain't no amateur. Me and my pardner grab some sky, and the mug herds us out to where his playmates have the customers and help lined up three deep against the back wall. Two guys hold guns on the crowd, while the other two go down the line, tearing off necklaces and twisting off rings and bracelets. From the yelps of the dames and the curses of the men, I know them two rats ain't none too gentle.

Out of the corner of my eye, I spot Tortilla. Like a cougar stalking a fawn, he's creeping on all fours along the back wall behind us. The second the mobster's eyes are shifted away, he slips a few inches, until he's reached the end of the line. He crouches tense, muscles bunched like a sprinter's before the gun. His thin lips are curled back in a nasty snarl, and his glittering black eyes are narrowed, thin slits.

A jasper comes out of the office lugging a gunny sack full of our hard-earned money. Their get-away man slides a big car up to the entrance. The five stickups, loaded with loot, start backing for the door. The leader glances back over his shoulders, his eyes off the crowd for a bare flash.

It is the break Tortilla is waiting for. *"Mafetas!* Skunks!" He jumps clear of the crowd, running a few steps to draw their fire.

The stickups swing their rods on him, smoking. Tortilla weaves, his hip-held guns blasting a deafening, rolling thunder as he triggers first one and then the other. One gangster crumbles. Another takes a step forward, and is lifted off his feet by the twisting slug that takes him square in the chest.

One rat starts to run, pitches on his face, his gun sliding across the room on the polished floor. The fat leader drops to his knee to steady his aim. Suddenly he rises on his toes, staggers forward screaming, wrapping his arms about his middle in writhing agony. A spot, like a crushed raspberry, leaps between his eyes. The scream in his throat rattles. He sags to the floor, limp as a feather pillow.

The remaining two bolt for the door. One never gets through it. The other reels, and rolls off the porch. The get-away man in the car lets in his clutch, racing the motor. Snarling like a catamount, Tortilla streaks to the doorway. His heavy revolvers roar twice, flames lancing the darkness. We hear a rending crash as the speeding car rolls over into the ditch. It's all over in a few seconds.

Tortilla turns into the doorway, reloads his guns with flying fingers, holsters one, and sweeps his sombrero across his toes with a wide, theatrical gesture.

"Tortilla has come to his own!" He smiles, showing his even white teeth to the dazed throng. "Tortilla is Resaca Rojo!"

"Great stuff, Tortilla!" I say, starting forward. "Cut out the show-off and get some blankets to cover these!" I point to the dead stickups.

"Señor boss will stop!"

Tortilla bows stiffly from the hips toward me. Formal as hell!

"Be yourself!" I say.

"So?"

The muzzle of Tortilla's hip-held gun points right between my eyes. He flashes me a haughty smile, purring like a cat, "You forget, señor boss, I am Tortilla, the bad man of the border. Yes? You have said so yourself! No?"

He stoops, takes the sackful of our money from the hand of the dead holdup, and melts into the darkness.

As he fell, his hat was whisked away by the storm.

DEATH Tips His Hat

by John M. Kiskadden

THEY WHOOPED and yelled, threw their hats in the air, seized hands and danced around crazily in the blazing desert sun.

Wizened old "Dad" Benton had lost the composure and reticence that had set him apart from his fellows for twenty-five years. His young companion, "Big Bill" Fengler, was fairly bereaved of reason by his first sight of the riches they had uncovered in the desert butte.

"She's a dinger! Jewelry gold, by dang! She'll go $25,000 a ton—mebbe more," cried Dad, hefting a piece of the heavy rock shot through with yellow specks and threads. "Been lookin' fer this kind o' stuff fer thirty year! Bill, we got to get to the county seat an' file this here claim quick!"

Dad got a piece of an envelope and a stub of a pencil from his pocket, and drew a rough sketch of the country. "So's we won't have no lost mine," he told Fengler. He folded the map and placed it inside the sweat band of his hat.

Dad was proud of that hat. He'd bought it just before starting this prospecting trip—his first new hat in years.

It was Fengler's first desert trip, so Dad led the ninety-mile tramp toward Gila City. Dad smiled happily as he trudged along with his thoughts.

Now his niece Ettie wouldn't have to work in that hot Oasis Café any more. He'd see to that. Yes, and he'd get a new brown suit of store clothes and go to Los Angeles for a spell, and stop at the Natick Hotel.

Fengler, walking behind, gloated over a piece of the ore he carried in his hand. The yellow specks glinted mockingly in the sun. With a lot of that stuff he could have all the liquor and women he wanted. He wouldn't go broke and have to quit the poker game, and he could travel on when he got tired of a place. But all that would take a lot of money, he reasoned.

What if it was only float and the vein would pinch out? They hadn't un-

covered much of it. Maybe there was only enough for one! Hadn't he furnished the grub? Why shouldn't he have it all? To hell with Dad! The old fool wouldn't know what to do with a lot of money. Besides, he was old enough to die and wouldn't need it, Fengler argued with what little conscience he had.

Suddenly a deadly hate for Dad possessed Fengler. His little, beady, close-set black eyes flashed venom at the prospector's old bent back. His fingers worked spasmodically as his gaze fixed on Dad's thin, wrinkled neck. Just one grip of those big, dirty hands—but that wouldn't do, he realized. There mustn't be any marks; it would have to look natural.

"Dad's past sixty-five," mused Fengler, "and the little old fool couldn't be very strong at that age. It was hot—130 anyhow. Even a husky guy like himself couldn't make Gila City without food or water. So——"

"Guess we'd better stop fer the night an' get an early start before sunup," said Dad, after they had tramped more than ten miles. "I'm pretty well tuckered out, what with the excitement an' everythin'."

They ate and were ready to roll in their blankets, when Fengler asked craftily, "Where does Gila City lay, Dad?"

"See that butte over northeast 'bout five mile," said Dad. "We go 'round the upper end of the hill an' then she's a straight streak east. She lays right under the big notch in the mountain on th' fur side of the desert."

WHEN DAD AWAKENED next morning he sat up and gazed around, bewildered in the half light.

He was alone. The grub and water were gone.

"Why the dang thievin' coyote!" exclaimed Dad. "Took everythin'—even my new hat with that map. Anyhow, he left his old 'un. Puts me kind of in a fix. Well, I been in 'em before. I can't catch him, an' I can't make Gila City. Let me figure a bit."

Dad got up and took his bearings carefully. He knew that part of the desert pretty well.

"'Pears to me that south highway swings over this away to get 'round them there big dunes the wind shifts 'round," Dad muttered. "Can't be more'n twenty, twenty-five mile an' there's a mite of water over there 'bout ten, twelve mile. I can just 'bout make her. She goes the wrong way fer me to hit Gila City, but she'll get me to grub an' a telephone."

Dad started off. After the sun came up he noticed the eastern sky taking on a brassy appearance. Little gusts of wind had sprung up.

"She's goin' to blow like Sam Hill over east," he ruminated. "She'll catch Big Bill over there somewheres. If he ain't got sense enough to hole up till she quits, no tellin' what'll happen."

FENGLER had slipped away from Dad early in the night, and by daybreak was several miles east of the butte. Soon after sunrise the wind freshened. It grew stronger; dust devils began to rise and whirl ahead of him. Dad's hat was too small for Fengler; he had to hold it on his head when the wind became strong and gusty.

Soon a gale was blowing, making walking difficult. It swished sand past Fengler in clouds. Fifteen minutes later he was in a maelstrom of wind and sand, unable to see and scarcely able to breathe in the storm's fury, while the sharp sand battered and stung him savagely.

Gasping for breath, and groping about for a sheltered spot, he plunged suddenly down a ten-foot bank into an arroyo. As he fell his hat was whisked away by the storm, disappearing instantly in the murk. Fengler managed to untie his blanket and huddle under-

neath it against the arroyo wall, until evening, when the wind abated.

After eating and taking a brief nap, Fengler resumed his journey, walking throughout the night.

Next day, as the sun grew hot and beat down on his unprotected head, he soon had a severe headache. As the heat increased, a dizziness seized Fengler which frequent swallows of water failed to alleviate.

Cutting a square piece from his blanket he knotted the corners, fashioning a crude cap. But there was no air space, and in a little while the pain in his head became intolerable. Finally, crazed by his suffering, he flung the cap away and stumbled on, nearly blind in the blazing heat. Several times he fell, but got up and struggled along, carried on by his indomitable will. Finally, he was groping ahead on hands and knees when he sank down, struggled briefly to get up, then became still.

MEANWHILE, Dad, who had been touched by the edge of the storm only, just managed to reach the highway, where he collapsed at the side of the road. A little while later he was picked up by a motorist, given water. At a roadside stand several miles farther along, he obtained food. When they had reached De Anza Junction, Dad had about recovered from his exhaustion.

He decided to rest there overnight, telephone his old friend Sheriff Morgan at Gila City, and start for that place the next day.

"If that thievin' Fengler ain't reached your place by noon to-morrow you'd best send out some one to hunt him. Hard to tell where he went in that storm," said Dad, in concluding his story to the sheriff over the telephone.

Next afternoon Deputy Sheriffs Tom Moody and Charley Marks rode out of Gila City with a spare horse, in search of Fengler. They found him the following morning where he had fallen in the sand, only a little more than twenty miles from his destination.

"What do you suppose knocked this gunnie over?" asked Marks, after examining the body closely. "There ain't a mark on him. He's a big husky guy and he had plenty of grub and water left. He should have made it easy."

"Yeah," replied Moody, "if he hadn't lost his hat."

SNOW

by Brahm Pieter

SNOW! How he hated it! The cursed stuff filled the air all around him; it got down his back and seemed to form icicles on his shivering spine; it blew into his eyes, his ears, his mouth; it froze on the barrel of his rifle and glued his mittened hands to the icy metal. And it was ruining his first hunting trip in ten years.

Dave Spannet hunched down farther into his sheepskin coat. He clenched and unclenched his numbed toes in the leather boots, trying to bring back a little feeling to them. His freezing body cried out for warmth-giving exercise; but he only thrust out his jaw and sat immovably on the fallen log. If you want to get deer, you have to be quiet, or else you're just wasting your time.

A more experienced hunter could have told Dave that he was wasting his time sitting on a runway during a snowstorm.

When the cold winds drew an icy veil over the high Poconos, the deer lay in their beds under the windfalls and the thick protection of the pines and spruces dotting the slopes of the mountains. Nothing short of an intrusion by man would force them to leave their cozy shelters until the storm had subsided.

But Spannet didn't know this. As a boy he had gone with his father on trips that were few and far between, so he hadn't learned much about the fine points of hunting. But those brief trips had imbued him with a passionate love for the long, quiet days spent in a world of green and yellow and scarlet of gorgeous autumn, and the dead stillness of a winter-held wilderness.

The sudden, paralyzing whir of the sprung grouse; the stealthy advance on the whistling quail in the brown fields of shocked corn; and the hurried, shivering shots at gray, ghostly silent forms flitting through the star blue underbrush —though he'd known them but seldom —had left him with longing memories during the interminable years spent in college and in the stifling closeness of dirty cities.

He had finally wangled a week's vacation from his company. From the fourteenth of December to the twenty-first. A whole week to do nothing but hunt! But he'd forgotten that the Pennsylvania deer season closed on the fifteenth of December. When this information was given him by the license clerk in the courthouse, he'd been dismayed, but had determined to get at least one day's hunting.

Only one day, and now this snow was ruining it! All afternoon it had fallen, and the thick drifts reached knee high. The whole world was dissolving in a torrent of milk, as the storm grew worse. Now he couldn't see more than five yards in front of him.

Dave resignedly shrugged his shoulders. He'd have to quit. Ten years' waiting, and this!

"Get goin'! Don't come back if you want to stay whole."

HE GOT UP stiffly and stamped his feet. After a few minutes of exercise, he struck off toward the car a half mile away. His route lay between the thick growth of scrub oak that stretched for miles down the mountain. He tramped forward slowly, cursing to himself, and entered the brush.

A sudden commotion on his right swung him around. A huge brown shape got up with a mighty bound, and Spannet had a startled glimpse of a white flag high in the air, as the deer leaped the windfall under which he had been waiting out the storm. Seemingly of its own volition, the little .32 jumped to his shoulder. He fired without even taking aim, and, to his amazement, the deer dropped, kicking. Goosefleshed and shaking, he jammed back the lever and fired again. The kicking ceased. He had him!

Spannet ran over and looked at the animal. A beauty! Oh, a beauty! Twelve points! Hastily, he took out his knife. How did they do it? Let's see —you cut his throat. No, that would ruin the cape. You stick it! That's it, stick the blade into his jugular, way down near the breastbone.

With ten trembling thumbs, he

plunged the knife into the white patch near the thick chest. Claret spewed forth onto the snow. He waited till the stream of blood had stopped then started to cut the animal open.

He was so occupied with the work that he failed to hear the footsteps crunching the snow behind him. A heavy kick in the back sent him sprawling. A hand grabbed his rifle and threw it into the brush. Outraged and stunned, Spannet tried to get up. Another kick, this time in the chest sent him back into the snow. He stared at his attacker.

"Nice deer, mister," said the tobacco-stained mouth in the bearded, leering face. "It sure was nice of you to clean him up so good for me." The big man laughed. "Get goin'," he said, "and don't come back if you want to stay whole." He motioned with the single-barreled, twelve-gauge shotgun. "Scram!"

DEER THIEVES! Spannet had heard something about that curse of the lone hunter in the Pennsylvania mountains.

He'd been a fool for not asking some one to accompany him. Alone, he would just be committing suicide by putting up a fight with the skunk who stood there sneering at him; for the man, undoubtedly, had companions somewhere in the brush.

"All right, I'll go," said Spannet slowly, "but can I have my rifle?"

"Scram!" the man repeated. He laughed again and spat tobacco juice. It landed on Spannet's face.

Hot anger flooded Spannet's neck and ears. He took a step toward the man.

"The other way, guy, the other way," warned the thief.

"Listen——"

The thief was getting angry. He strode over to Spannet. "Get going—fast!" He emphasized his command with a kick.

Spannet's hand shot out and grasped the oncoming foot; he shoved. Taken off guard, the man stumbled backward. Spannet dived. The shotgun dropped from the thief's hand and landed in the snow as the thief grabbed for the smaller man's throat.

It was an uneven battle. The thief weighed well over two hundred pounds, and he tossed the hundred-and-thirty-pound Spannet about like a child. But Spannet clung to him like a leech. His hand shot up, and he stabbed a finger into his assailant's eye.

The man swore horribly as he clutched at his bleeding eye. Spannet dropped to the ground, free. But a mighty kick sent him flying against a small stump. His head crashed; a million lights flashed on and off. Feebly, he struggled to rise.

From far off, he saw the thief reach for the gun lying in the snow. Through the blinding lights he watched him straighten up, aim. A muffled roar filled the universe as consciousness fled.

GAME WARDEN LYLE lighted his pipe and placed his feet more comfortably on the polished oak desk in Captain Birce's office. He gazed thoughtfully out of the window, watching the traffic slopping through the slush in front of the State police barracks, and continued his report:

"—so when I got there, this young Spannet was starting to come around. He was cursing the deer, the mountains, the snow and everything he could think of. Boy, how he did swear, especially at the snow!" He paused and chuckled.

"Well," said Captain Birce, "go on. What killed this Anderson guy?"

"Snow, captain." Lyle chuckled. "Snow clogged that shotgun when Anderson dropped it. When he pulled the trigger, the explosion damn near blew his face off."

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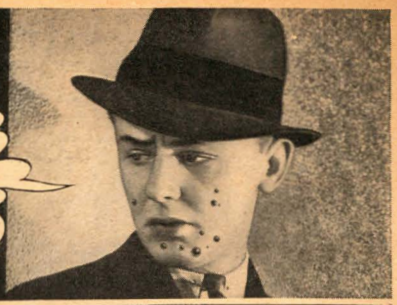
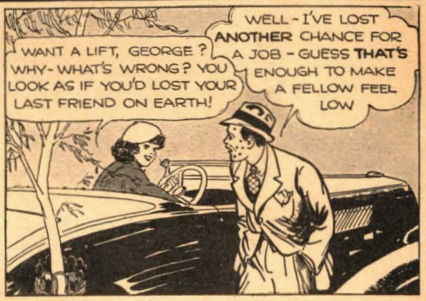
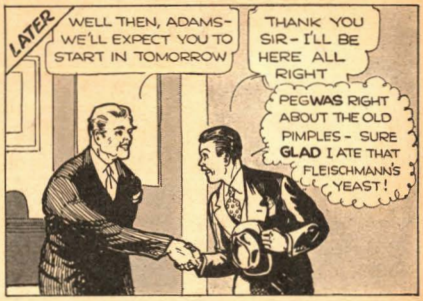


A PIMPLY SKIN CAN SPOIL ANY BOY'S CHANCES FOR A JOB





—clears the skin

by clearing skin irritants out of the blood

Don't let Adolescent Pimples keep YOU from getting a start

FIRST IMPRESSIONS are important, and —a pimply skin is a real drawback to *any* boy or girl seeking a job.

But pimples are very apt to occur after the start of adolescence—from about 13 to 25. At this time, important glands develop and final growth takes place. The entire system is disturbed. The skin gets oversensitive. Waste poisons in the blood irritate this sensitive skin and cause unsightly pimples to break out.

Fleischmann's Yeast clears these skin irritants out of the blood. Then, the pimples go! Eat 3 cakes a day, one before meals—plain, or in a little water—until skin clears. Start today!

Smoke to Your Throat's Content

Many smokers have chosen Lucky Strikes simply because they *taste better.* Then as the days go by they sense that Luckies make *smoother going* for their throats—that they are a Light Smoke. Certain acids and other heavy, harsh irritants naturally present in all tobacco are removed by the famous process—"It's Toasted." *Only* Luckies are "Toasted." Smoke Luckies to your throat's content.

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