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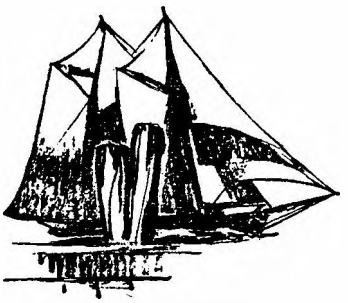

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Part I

D'ARTAGNAN

From a Fragmentary and Unpublished Manuscript

By ALEXANDRE DUMAS

This story augments and incorporates without alteration a fragmentary manuscript whose handwriting has been identified as that of Alexandre Dumas, and as such authenticated by Victor Lemasle, the well known expert of Paris. So far as can be learned, it has remained unpublished hitherto.

The Thounenin will, whose existence in a French collection of old documents possibly suggested the story to the author, has been secured and is in the possession of the publisher. This sheet of old vellum, stamped with the arms of Lorraine and signed by Leonard, hereditary grand tabellion of

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCING A QUEEN, A SOLDIER AND A ROGUE

ON THE second Thursday in July, 1630, the ancient city of Lyon had become the second capital of France. The king and cardinal, who had been with the army in Savoy, had returned to Grenoble; the court and the two queens had come to Lyon. Paris was empty as the grave, and between Lyon and Grenoble fluctuated all court business, since Marie de Médici, the queen mother, acted as regent while Louis XIII was on campaign.

On the south side of the Place des Terreaux, overlooking the Saône to the left and the Rhone to the right, stood the vast convent of the Dames Benedictines.

A Stirring Sequel to "The Three Musketeers"

Translated and Augmented by

H. BEDFORD-JONES

that province, is in itself a curiosity.

In here presenting a complete story, the writer has no apologies to offer. Nothing can be discovered about this tale from the life or literary remains of Dumas. The child about whom it centers will be recognized as the Vicomte de Bragelonne, hero of the later novels of the series, whose parentage is very plainly set forth by Dumas in "Twenty Years After". The publisher, who is the owner of the manuscript in question, is of course fully informed as to what portion of this novel is from the pen of Dumas, and what from the typewriter of

—H. BEDFORD-JONES

This massive building, of which today only the refectory remains, rang loud with voices and glittered bravely with gay costumes and weapons. Musketeers guarded the high gates, coaches thundered in the paved courtyard, and at the river bank below the fair green gardens waited gilded barges; in truth, at this moment two queens of France were residing within its walls.

In an upper room, beside a tiny fire that burned in the wall hearth to dispel the chill of morning, sat a woman who read a letter in some agitation. Despite the tapestry adorning the walls, and the handsome curtains of the bed, the room bore an air of severity and plainness which spoke of the conventual surroundings.

The woman who sat in this room was

about thirty; that is to say, at the height of womanly perfection. The velvety softness of her skin, her powdered chestnut hair and her beautiful hands combined to make her appear much younger. Pride mingled with a gentle sadness in her features; a certain lofty majesty in her mien was tempered by kindliness and sweetness. Her eyes were quite brilliant, yet now a cloudy phantom of terror was gathering in their liquid depths as she read the disturbing phrases of this letter:

Though it grieves me to trouble you, yet you must be placed on guard. Knowing this goes direct to your hand, I write plainly and trust you to destroy it at once.

In 1624, six years ago, one François Thoumenin was a curé at Dompt; he there made his will. In the following year he was transferred to Aubain, near Versailles, by the influence of my family, of which he was a relation. Two years ago he died in this same village of Aubain. Before dying, being on a visit to Dompt, he made a codicil to his will; it was incorporated with the original document deposited at Nancy. This addition, made in the fear of death, concerned a certain child. We knew nothing of the codicil, naturally. Thoumenin died soon after it was made and, learning of this, we arranged for the child.

This will has been taken from the archives. The fact was learned at once, pursuit was begun, and I have every reason to believe that the document will be recovered and destroyed. That it concern you were impossible; yet I fear, my dear friend, lest it be made to concern you! I am closely watched; my friends are suspect; it is difficult for me to do anything.

If possible, send me a messenger whom you can trust. I may have no other chance to write you by a sure hand, yet it is imperative that you be kept informed of danger or—of security. Adieu! Destroy this.—MARIE.

The woman who wrote this letter was Marie de Rohan, Duchesse de Chevreuse, the most able and determined of Richelieu's enemies. The woman who read it was Anne of Austria, Queen of France, the most beautiful and helpless of Richelieu's victims.

When she had read the letter, the queen let it fall upon the flames in the fireplace; in another moment it had become a black ash lifting upward on the draught. Her head falling on her hand, the queen fell into agitated reverie.

"Good God, what can this mean—what is it about—what will they attempt next against me or my friends?" murmured Anne of Austria. Her beautiful eyes were suffused with tears. "And what can I do—whom can I send—in what person can I trust, when I am allowed to see no one in private except by express permission?"

AT THIS instant a tap at the door roused her, caused her to efface all trace of emotion. Into the room came Doña Estafania, the only one of her Spanish attendants now remaining at her side. She curtseyed to the queen from the doorway.

"Your Majesty, the courier is here for the dispatches. Madame the queen mother requests that if yours are ready, they be sent instantly."

"They are lying on my secretary," said the queen. Guessing from the formal address that the messenger was waiting, she added, "This courier, he is at hand?"

"Yes, madame," said Doña Estafania. "He is M. d'Artagnan, a gentleman of the Musketeers—"

"Ah!" murmured the queen. "Wait—"

At the mention of this name a swift pallor leaped in her cheeks and then was gone in a suffused red half concealed by her rouge. Perhaps she remembered this name; perhaps other days came before her eyes in this moment; perhaps the memory of dead Buckingham pierced her sharply.

"He is alone?" she asked quickly, impulsively.

"Yes, madame."

"Ask him to enter. Get the letters. Close the door. You may remain."

Next instant d'Artagnan, booted and spurred, knelt above the queen's hand and touched it with his lips. Smiling, she looked down at his eyes, brimming with devotion.

"M. d'Artagnan—you depart for Grenoble?"

"With dispatches for his Majesty, madame."

"Mine are ready; give them to me, Doña Estafania, if you please."

From her lady she took the sealed letters and handed them to d'Artagnan, who bowed and placed them in his pocket.

"Monsieur," said the queen, her voice a trifle unsteady, "would you serve me?"

D'Artagnan looked at her in astonishment.

"With my life, madame!" he exclaimed eagerly.

"I believe you," she said. "Indeed, I think that I have some reason to believe you. I am accused of forgetting many things, M. d'Artagnan; but there are many things I only seem to forget." Once more a slight pallor came into her face. "M. de Bassompierre has declared openly that he served the king, his master, and holds it to be the duty of a gentleman to recognize such service as superior to any other."

D'Artagnan bowed and his eyes flashed a little.

"Madame," he responded vibrantly, "thank God I am M. d'Artagnan, and not M. de Bassompierre! A marshal of France serves the King. A simple gentleman serves a lady. If your Majesty has the least need of service, impart it to me, I implore you. It is the greatest happiness of my life to lay my service at your feet, holding you second only to God Himself!"

Truth shone in the eyes of the young man; sincerity rang in his voice.

"Ah, M. d'Artagnan!" exclaimed the queen softly. "If only you were in the place of M. de Bassompierre!"

"Then were I unfortunate, madame, since he is with the army and not here."

The queen caught a warning gesture from Doña Estafania. Time was short.

"Good." From her finger she took a ring and extended it. "Take this to Dampierre, give it into the hand of Madame de Chevreuse, tell her I sent you. That is all. She will give you a verbal message for me, I think. Go when you can, as you can obtain leave; return when you can. I am powerless to help you. If I tried, you would fall under suspicion."

D'Artagnan came to his knee, kissed the fingers she proffered him and rose.

"Madame," he said simply, "my life is yours, my honor is yours, my devotion is yours! For the trust you confide in me, I thank you."

The next moment he was gone. The queen relaxed in her chair, trembling a little, looking at her one faithful woman with frightened eyes.

"Ah!" she murmured. "I acted too impulsively, perhaps— I have done wrong—"

"You have not done wrong to trust that young man, madame," said Doña Estafania. "His uniform answers for his courage; his face answers for his devotion. Be at ease. He will go to Dampierre."

The queen bowed her head.

D'ARTAGNAN, whose horse was waiting saddled in the courtyard, had no time to see Athos, who was at the Musketeers' quarters. The letters from Anne of Austria and Marie de Médici, the queen mother, were of imperative haste, admitted of not a moment's delay. Their importance might be judged from the fact that they were confided to an officer of the guards instead of to the post courier. D'Artagnan, therefore, had no choice but to mount and ride for Grenoble, where the king and the cardinal were stopping. It was now past noon; he must reach Grenoble before the following midnight.

In five minutes he was leaving the convent in the Place des Terreaux; in ten minutes he was passing the gates of Lyon.

As he rode it seemed to him that the very few moments in the chamber of the queen must have been a dream—but no! He wore a ring to prove them real, and glanced at it. The ring was a large sapphire surrounded by brilliants; obviously it was no ring for a cavalier to be wearing. Beneath his shirt d'Artagnan wore a scapulary which his mother had confided to him upon her deathbed; he loosened the chain of this scapulary, threaded the ring upon it and replaced it. As he had said,

the service of the queen came indeed next to the service of God.

"Well, I have leave due me; I can ask for it, take Athos, depart for Dampierre!" he thought with eagerness. "How things work out, eh? Excellent! And to think that I have seen her, have twice kissed her hand, have looked into her eyes—to think that she remembered me, after all! That she had not forgotten! Ah, cardinal that you are, to persecute this angel from heaven!"

He rode on, blind and deaf to all around him, lost in an ecstasy of blissful reverie.

France was at war with the empire—with Spain, Italy, Savoy, with all the countries that comprised the empire of the Hapsburgs. Richelieu and the king, who had been together with the army and had conquered all Savoy, were returned to Grenoble; the two queens had brought the court to Lyon, and Louis XIII besought his mother to come to Grenoble, hoping thus to patch up the bitter enmity between her and Richelieu. Marie de Médici refused, and this refusal was being borne to Grenoble by d'Artagnan.

Since he was not riding his own horses, he changed at every post house and spurred them hard. Because of the rains the roads were in places almost impassable, and despite all his efforts d'Artagnan could not make great speed. His only consolation was that another in his place would have made no speed whatever.

WHEN darkness fell on the following day he was still six leagues from Grenoble, had been unable to get a fresh horse at the last station, and was in despair.

"Die, then," he muttered, seeing a long rise ahead, and put in his spurs. "Die if you must, but reach Grenoble ere midnight!"

Thin fantastic moonlight touched and glimmered on the dark Lizere River to the right, filled the trees to the left with strange shadows, broke clear and white on the sharp dust of the highway ahead. The road pitched upward here, then broke down through a long descending ravine flanked by dark tree masses.

At the rest of the rise d'Artagnan drew rein; next instant a cry of dismay came to his lips. The quivering gasp breaking from the horse, the animal's shudder, told him the truth. The poor beast was dying on his feet.

Abruptly the sharp crack of a pistolet burst from the darkness ahead. This was followed by the fuller roar of an arquebus, and the loud cry of a man in mortal agony.

The cavalier reached for a pistolet and would have reined in, but the dying horse was now plunging forward, the bit in his teeth, his breath whistling, his hoofs thundering down the declivity and re-echoing from the trees. Sharp cries of alarm sounded ahead; men called one to another; then came the clatter of hastily departing riders.

"Robbers, *pardieu!*" muttered d'Artagnan, peering forward. "And they must have caught some one just ahead of me."

His horse quivered, uttered one strange and awful cry, then came to an abrupt halt with feet braced wide apart, head hanging to the very road, its whole body trembling. The poor beast was dying.

D'Artagnan dismounted. He perceived that his approach had frightened the robbers from their victim. Ahead of him in the open moonlight a man's figure was outstretched; he still gripped in one hand the reins of his horse, which was standing over him. The horse turned its head and gazed questioningly at the approaching d'Artagnan.

THE MAN on the ground was senseless. D'Artagnan hastened to him, disengaged the reins from his hand, raised his head. The unfortunate traveler had been shot through the body; his clothes were drenched with blood, and he was dying. The moonlight brought out the details of his face, and his rescuer could not repress a gesture of repugnance; this face was brutal, treacherous, with heavy black brows meeting above the eyes.

"A lackey in his master's clothes,"

muttered d'Artagnan, "or a rascal—"

As though the sound of human speech had penetrated his brain, the dying man opened his eyes and stared vacantly upward. His lips moved in faint words.

"I have discovered everything—everything! Bassompierre—du Vallon—that false priest d'Herblay—the evidence! The document was sent to London for safety; it will reach Paris in a week—We have them all! And above them all, she—she herself—"

The voice failed and died. At these names d'Artagnan started violently. His face changed. One would have said that sudden terror had come into his very soul.

"Du Vallon—Porthos!" he muttered. "And d'Herblay—Aramis! Ah, ah, what is this, then? Is it possible? Am I dreaming?"

Abruptly the dying man clutched at his sleeve, tried to come erect. Now his voice rang out in anguished tones, clear and loud with the unmistakeable accent of death.

"Père Joseph!" he cried out. "I can report everything. Betstein is the guardian of the child! A false birth certificate was forged by the priest Thounenin—the child is in the abbey of the Benedictines at St. Saforin. The prior knows the ring. I had the copy made! I have a letter from d'Herblay—he was wounded, du Vallon was killed—took papers—his Eminence must know—send Montforge to Paris—to Paris—"

The man coughed terribly, groaned, then relaxed from the spasm. Perfect consciousness came to him. He fastened wild eyes upon the face above.

"Where am I?" he muttered. "Who are you?"

"I am M. d'Artagnan, lieutenant of—"

"Ah, Jesus!" groaned the man, and shuddered as death tore out his soul.

D'ARTAGNAN rose. In one hand he held a plain gold seal ring, incised with a device unknown to him. In the other hand he held two letters and a small packet of papers, sealed heavily. He looked at the seal in the moonlight; it was the seal Aramis had habitually used.

Aramis—Porthos! Bewildered, dazed, doubting his own senses, d'Artagnan looked at the two letters. One he could not read, but he could recognize the tiny, perfect, beautiful script of Aramis. The other was a heavy scrawl, its words standing out clearly enough in the rays of the moon; the short message covered a whole sheet of paper, so black and pregnant was the writing:

M. l'Abbé d'Herblay:

Write me no more. See me no more. Think of me no more. To you, I am dead forever.

—MARIE MICHON

"What the devil!" exclaimed d'Artagnan. "Marie Michon—that's the lady love of Aramis, then! Chevereuse, no less. Oh, fiend take it all—what I have uncovered here!"

He became pale as death, recalling what the dying man had said. Porthos dead, then; Aramis wounded! Athos had received a letter from Aramis only a month previously; Aramis was then bound on a journey to Lorraine for reasons unstated. Porthos had left the service, had married, was somewhere in the provinces.

WITH a swift motion d'Artagnan tore the letter of Marie Michon into tiny fragments and cast them on the breeze. The packet he stowed carefully away. He must destroy this sacred packet, still under the seal of Aramis. The first letter he studied again but could not read in the pale moonlight, and this he pocketed also. The ring he slipped on his finger.

"Singular!" he reflected with agitation. "What secret did this miserable spy carry to the grave? Bassompierre, the greatest noble in France, lover of a thousand women—my poor, stupid, honest Porthos—my crafty, shrewd, intriguing Aramis? And she—she herself—what did the rascal mean by those words?"

A terrible conjecture flashed across his mind. The dead man was obviously one

of the spies of the silent Capuchin who was Richelieu's secretary, who had organized his system of espionage, without whose advice Richelieu seldom acted—his gay Eminence, Père Joseph le Clerc, Sieur du Tremblay.

"She herself!" D'Artagnan repeated the words as though stupefied by their import. "Above them all—she herself! His tone, more than his words—What had he discovered, then? To what woman did he refer? Who is the child? Who is Betstein?" He passed a hand across his brow; it came away wet with cold perspiration. "Well, at least he spoke the truth; he has now discovered everything in life and death itself!"

He turned, glanced around, went to his own horse. The poor beast stood in the same fashion, feet wide apart, head low, dying on foot. D'Artagnan took from the saddlebags the dispatches he carried, thrust one of the pistols through his sash, then went to the horse of the dead spy.

"An excellent animal!" he observed. "Evidently this is one of the dispensations of Providence the clerics so often mention. That rascal fell among other rascals at the exact moment my horse gave out; he obligingly told me his mind and went his way to the greatest of all discoveries. I step into his stirrups—and my letters reach the king by midnight, after all! Decidedly. Providence is tonight acting much more gracefully toward Louis XIII than toward his minister of war, the amiable Richelieu!" .

D'Artagnan mounted; but, finding himself in the seat of a much taller person, it was necessary to adjust the stirrups.

"Now," he said, as he worked at the leathers, "if the good Athos were in my place, he might think it his duty to carry word of all this to his gray Eminence—hm! It would be most polite of me, no doubt; but what the devil can be in this letter from Aramis? It's not like our clever Aramis to confide his neck to a letter! Why is the name of Porthos linked with that of Bassompierre? Most mysterious of all, who is Betstein, and whose child does he guard in conjunction with a Benedictine prior? Undoubtedly M. de Richelieu might answer all these questions; but I prefer to seek elsewhere."

Again recurred to his mind those significant words: "above them all, she—she herself!" It was as though he spoke of the highest of women—but no, that were leaping too far at a venture! Besides, there were two queens in France. More likely some intrigue of Bassompierre was concerned. The marshal had just emerged from a scandalous three year suit before the high court of Rouen, and his intrigues with great ladies had resulted in more than one pledge of affection. At this thought d'Artagnan brightened.

"*Vivadiou!* I'm making much out of little." He glanced down at the dead man, crossed himself, and gathered up his reins with a sigh. "If only you had uttered a few words more, my good rascal! However, I give you thanks. Your secret is safe with me. Away now—to Grenoble!"

And driving in his spurs, he was gone in a whirl of moonlit dust.

CHAPTER II

PROVING THAT NEITHER KING NOR MINISTER RULED FRANCE

IN THE summer of 1630 all France was bubbling with war, treason and civil strife.

True, La Rochelle was fallen, the Protestants were crushed, England was brought to terms; this was yesterday. Today, Richelieu was leading the army in Savoy to victories against the Empire; yet he was standing on a precipice, and at his back all the winds of France were gathering to blow him over the verge.

He was just discovering the fact, as he was just learning that the deadliest enemies of France were within her frontiers.

Louis XIII, son to Henry of Navarre, was nominal ruler of France. Marie de Médici, widow of Henry of Navarre, could not forget that her husband had actually

ruled France. Armand du Plessis, the virtual ruler of France, intended that France should rule Europe. Here were three sides of a triangle—extremely unequal sides.

Louis was a king at once cruel, jealous and ambitious to be known by posterity as "The Just." He feared the personal power of Richelieu the man, trusted the statecraft of Richelieu the cardinal, and did not hesitate to place his armies in the hand of Richelieu the minister. The king was afraid of his mother, detested his brother the Duc d'Orleans, distrusted the great nobles about him, and was wise enough to let responsibility rest on worthier shoulders.

And the queen mother also hated Richelieu furiously and vindictively. She hated him for having stripped her of power and destroyed her influence over the king; she hated him for carrying war into her beloved Italy; she hated him because he did well what she had done so badly; she hated him because he was Richelieu and she was Marie de Médici. And most of all she could not forget that in the beginning it was she herself who had raised him from obscurity. So around the queen mother gathered all the festering rancor of enmity, supported by the princes of the blood and the nobles of France.

Richelieu, on the third side, began to realize his insecurity. He had subdued the queen mother, humiliated the queen, Anne of Austria, crushed the Vendômes, stamped out the Huguenots and driven Chevreuse into exile. He was the victor, but he was not the master. The storm of envy, hatred and malice was checked, but it was secretly gathering force against him.

The sole strength of Richelieu was that none guessed his strength. The princes had lands and wealth and rank; the great nobles had positions of power; the Duc d'Orleans, heir to the throne, had immunity; Richelieu had only a man, a simple Capuchin friar. It was keenly significant that this Père Joseph was confidential secretary to the cardinal, while his brother, M. Charles du Tremblay, commanded the Bastille.

This friar was the only man in France who wanted nothing, who refused everything, who could be given neither reward nor place because he accepted none. He served Richelieu; this was his sole honor, dignity and ambition. Nothing was done in France without his approval, and everything that he advised was brought to pass. The minister depended on the friar's diplomacy; the cardinal depended on the friar's sagacity; the general depended on the friar's knowledge of men and armies. The cardinal who wore the red robe depended on the friar who wore the gray robe.

IN THE quarters occupied by Richelieu at Grenoble the two men were alone together.

This Père Joseph who had caused the siege of La Rochelle, who had written a commentary on Machiavelli and who was the mainstay of his master, was large, well built and marked by smallpox. Once his hair had been flaming red; learning that the king had an aversion for this color, he became white before his thirtieth year. His eyes were small, brilliant, filled with hidden fires.

Richelieu, far more imposing in appearance, was at this time at the height of his physical powers. He was handsome, and knew the worth of this quality to the full; he was proud, and used pride as a mask when need was; above all, he was sagacious—and his sagacity was best proven by the fact that his relations with his secretary were never ambiguous, never strained, never open to misunderstanding from either side. Just now his aristocratic features were thoughtful; the penetrating gaze he bent upon Père Joseph was disturbed and melancholy.

"My friend and father," he said, "I believe that affairs are too threatening for me to remain away from Paris. The queen has not provided an heir to the throne; intrigues are rife; the king insists on joining the army. I shall plead ill health, give the command to Créquy

or Bassompierre, and return to the capital."

Père Joseph was used to these sudden decisions.

"Excellent, your Eminence, excellent!" he returned in his dry, phlegmatic voice. "The king's confessor writes that you should take this action. It would be your best possible course. Unfortunately it would not particularly advance the interests of France."

"Do the interests of France then demand that I should be deposed from the ministry?"

Père Joseph, who had been writing at a secretary, pushed away the papers from before him, folded his lean, powerful hands on the desk and regarded the cardinal.

"Your Eminence has been too much occupied in the field, perhaps," he said smoothly, "to take thought to other matters. Have I your permission to expound them?"

"Proceed, preacher!" Smiling, Richelieu settled himself in his chair.

"Then consider." The voice of the Capuchin came as from a machine, unemotional, steady, inflexible. "In making war upon the house of Austria, as we now do, your Eminence picked up the threads of policy dropped when Henri IV died; very good! Personally, I consider that the welfare of France demands that you retain your present position. I argue from this base."

Richelieu inclined his head slightly, as though to signify that this base was entirely acceptable to him. The Capuchin went on:

"Those who would depose you—the two queens and certain great houses—are more bitter enemies of France than her external foes; because, like the Duc de Rohan, they set personal affairs before the good of their country. It becomes plain, Monseigneur, that France must no longer be a house divided against itself."

"Provided these enemies of France can hurt her."

"They can. With your Eminence leading the army, one serious reverse would be the signal for them to strike."

"Granted," said Richelieu, "if there were danger of such a reverse."

"Within two months it will happen."

The cardinal gave his secretary a look of startled astonishment.

"Casale is under siege by the imperial forces," continued Père Joseph. "Our relief army is insufficient; the city must infallibly be taken. This will be a serious blow to France, and a more serious blow to your Eminence. A certain policy has occurred to me—" and he touched his pile of papers—"toward which end I have drafted a scheme for your approval."

"Tell it to me," said Richelieu. "The ear is less liable to deceit than the eye."

"VERY well. In the first place, something occurs next month which every one in France has forgotten. The Imperial Diet will meet at Ratisbon."

"That I know", and Richelieu frowned slightly, intently. "What of it?"

"By law the emperor is strictly forbidden to make peace except with the approval of the Diet."

"Peace? Who has talked of making peace?" exclaimed Richelieu.

"I trust your Eminence will find it worthy of consideration. I have every reason to believe the emperor would find an immediate peace with France highly acceptable—if the matter were rightly presented at Ratisbon. Everything depends on the presentation."

"It would," said Richelieu dryly. "The Diet would refuse."

"Your pardon; the Diet could be made to accept," said Père Joseph. "On the other hand, I find that Gustavus Adolphus, who is the deadliest foe of Austria—"

Richelieu started.

"The arch-heretic! The arch-enemy of Holy Church!"

"And the arch-general of all Europe," added the Capuchin. "He might welcome a treaty of alliance with France, provided it were rightly presented—as before. In other words, France makes

peace with the House of Austria on the one hand, and on the other, an alliance with the bitterest foe of the House of Austria."

"And gains—what?" demanded Richelieu.

He knew well that the four secretaries of Père Joseph were closely in touch with the entire political and religious affairs not only of Europe, but of the whole world.

"Time to order her internal affairs, Monseigneur. A humiliating reverse in the field is avoided. By the end of summer the minister is in Paris again—and none too soon for the welfare of France. His Majesty insists on being with the army. The army is notoriously unhealthy; even now it is being decimated by fever and sickness."

"Ah!" Richelieu's brow knotted. "Ah! If the king should die—"

"God forbid!" exclaimed the Capuchin piously. "If the king should die, then monsieur his brother would rule France."

Richelieu stared at him in a singular manner. The Duc d'Orleans on the throne meant the Cardinal de Richelieu in the Bastille.

"And all these possibilities," said the minister slowly, "might be averted—"

"By proper attention to the sitting of the Diet at Ratisbon."

"The king would never consent."

"Let his Majesty command the victorious campaign in Savoy, and he will consent to anything. Besides, the influence of the Queen, Anne of Austria, will here come to our help."

Richelieu remained thoughtful for a space. He began to perceive the value of this advice, though he knew that any treaty with Austria must be galling in its terms. Peace with the emperor would mean external peace for France.

"SUCH a peace could not endure," Richelieu muttered.

"Monseigneur, we ask only that it endure until spring."

"True."

"Also, no one in France would believe that peace could be obtained. And it could only be obtained by the right man."

"True again. We have the right man—Bassompierre. He has served as ambassador to Spain and England," murmured the cardinal reflectively. "He is wealthy, popular, of the highest attainments. He is beloved on all sides—"

"Greatly beloved," corrected the other dryly, and Richelieu smiled.

Bassompierre had been the rival of Henry IV more than once; and if the Duchesse de Chevreuse had bored princes, Bassompierre had bored queens.

"True, Bassompierre is attached to the queen mother," said Richelieu slowly, "and—"

"He is the second captain in France, your Eminence being the first."

"But he is not ambitious. He would perform this duty admirably."

"Most admirably, Monseigneur, since he has lately been secretly married to the Princesse de Conti."

"What!"

Richelieu started out of his chair, stared at Père Joseph with incredulous eyes.

"The sister of Guise? Impossible! Secretly married?"

"To the princess who bore him a son some years ago."

The minister lowered himself into his chair again, almost with a gasp, as he perceived the gulf opening before him. Bassompierre, marshal of France, who laughed at dukedoms and was content to be colonel general of the Swiss Guards, content to be the greatest gambler, lover and spendthrift in France—if this man were no longer content, then beware.

King's favorite, devoted to the two queens, yet fully trusted by Richelieu, the Marshal de Bassompierre was the first and most powerful gentleman of France, ever holding aloof from intrigue and plot. Now that he was secretly married to the sister of the Duc de Guise, all was changed. He was instantly suspect. The princes had won him over to their side.

"Bassompierre," went on Père Joseph,

"has in his house six caskets of letters, and the keys of these caskets never leave him. This, Monseigneur, is significant. He is a Lorrainer by birth. His influence is extraordinary. True, he has never been ambitious, and therefore has never been feared. But now—"

"But now!" The red minister roused himself. "I see. Who then can go to Ratisbon? Who possesses the acumen to fool the German princes, play with them, wind them around his finger?"

"That is for your Eminence to say, if the proposal meets with your approval."

Richelieu gave him a sharp look.

"Peace is imperative?"

"At any cost, Monseigneur."

"Very well. You shall go."

Père Joseph assumed intense surprise.

"Monseigneur, you jest! In my simple robe, to present myself among princes, electors, ambassadors, illustrious men? No, no! I am too humble a person for such a duty."

IT WAS characteristic of Richelieu that he would hear this man to the end, would weigh his advice and judgement, would accept his findings, and then exercise his own eagle swoop of authority and thought.

The revelation of Bassompierre's marriage to the Princesse de Conti had startled him, alarmed him, roused him. That Bassompierre had been her lover, that she had borne him a son, meant nothing; that he was now allied to the House of Guise meant everything. With a flash Richelieu perceived how urgent was the danger enveloping him. Everything else must be abandoned; he must lay aside his statecraft and tend every effort to meet the threat from inside.

He knew only too well that the envoy to Ratisbon must be a consummate juggler, or all was lost. Peace would not be easily won. The German princes, who dreamed of crushing France, would not readily consent; Louis XIII, who dreamed of being another Henri IV would not readily consent. Richelieu could handle the business at home; but the man handling it at Ratisbon must be another Richelieu abroad.

"Enough!" he exclaimed. "My friend, you go to Ratisbon. Bulart de Léon, now ambassador to Switzerland, will go as envoy; you'll be associated with him, and the work will be placed in your hands. Let Bulart de Léon glitter among the princes; let the written treaty come from your pen and brain. You are the man."

"As your Excellency desires," said the Capuchin humbly.

His eyes glowed with a flame at thought of the intrigue to pass between his hands at Ratisbon. This man, who could read the very heart and thought of other men around him, could have asked nothing greater than the chance to hoodwink all the princes of Germany.

"And the treaty with Gustavus Adolphus?"

"Is in your hands as well," said Richelieu impatiently. "Come! This means that you'll be at Ratisbon for weeks, perhaps months; you must depart at once, and I'll secure full authority for you. Fortunately Bulart de Léon is now at Lyon with the court. We must send for him. But—but—"

The minister's voice died away. His energetic eye became thoughtful; his long, slender fingers tapped on his chair arm. He had always apprehended that in any approaching crisis, which would certainly come some time, from some unexpected angle, when hidden enemies were exerting every intrigue against him, he would be cut off from the man who had arrested the Marshal d'Ornano, humbled the Duc d'Orleans, discovered the conspiracy of Chalais, and who was openly accused of having caused the murder of Buckingham. How could he dispense with this man, at this moment?

When Richelieu was roused his decisions were swift.

"My friend—" and his eye flashed once more—"everything hinges on Ratisbon; it is in your hands. You'll be given full powers to sign for France. As for matters here at home—well! The one thing is

settled. Let us now proceed to other things. Your advice?"

"Is simplicity itself."

The brilliant eyes of the friar, alight with exultation, once more became narrowed, thoughtful, penetrating. His steady and inflexible voice showed no emotion; he might have been expounding theological points which admitted of no dispute.

"Only one person can dismiss ministers—the king."

"Granted."

"Therefore, the king must not dismiss you. If necessary you must dismiss yourself."

"Understood."

"He must realize clearly that his power depends upon you."

"He does."

"You must become friendly with the queen mother."

"Impossible. Marie de Médici will hate me to the death."

"You must love your enemies. She is great, because another queen is allied with her—the queen of France. The Austrian and the Italian are together against you."

A hint of pain shot through the eyes of Richelieu. He had humiliated the queen of France, he had humbled Anne of Austria—but he loved the woman.

"Marie de Médici is the central point or enmity against me," he said slowly. "She would like to see Gaston d'Orleans on the throne. While they live—"

"Gaston is a greedy fool," said Père Joseph. "He yields to bribes."

"Marie de Médici yields to nothing."

"What does not yield can be broken," said Père Joseph, and now the cardinal looked at him attentively, expectantly. "Louis does not love his mother, but he fears her. He does not love his queen, but he listens to her. Your safety demands two things; first, that the queen mother and the queen be separated. Second, that the king be left without these insidious voices always whispering against you. It is possible to exile Marie de Médici. But with Anne of Austria..."

RICHELIEU lifted his head, and his glance was stern.

"What do you dare suggest?" he demanded in a sharp, angry voice. "When one speaks of the queen of France—"

"One speaks of a woman, Monseigneur," said the other, and added, "who hates you."

There was a little silence. Richelieu was struggling with himself, but these last words stung him deeply. He knew that behind all this advice was something definite.

"A woman who hates," he said gloomily, "can not be reconciled."

"She can be deprived of all power to injure, now or later."

"Eh!"

The cardinal started slightly, and his gaze rested on the Capuchin for a moment. Then he made a slight gesture as of assent. Another man would have hesitated, but Père Joseph obeyed the tacit command.

"By chance, your Eminence, my attention was drawn to the royal abbey of Benedictines at St. Saforin," he said in his inexorable voice. "The prior of this abbey is one Dom Lawrence, of the Luynes family, an excellent man, most discreet. When M. de Bassompierre was ambassador to England Dom Lawrence accompanied him as chaplain. This, if you will recall, was before the taking of La Rochelle, while the Duke of Buckingham still lived."

At this name Richelieu's face slowly drained of its color. Before him seemed to rise the phantom of dead Buckingham, that handsome, proud, reckless man, who doomed to disaster every one and everything he touched. The minister made an impulsive gesture, as though exorcising this specter. The terrible look he bent upon Père Joseph would have made a prince tremble, for a prince would have had much to lose. Père Joseph, who had nothing to lose, received it calmly.

"Be careful, my friend," said the minister in a low voice. "I do not choose to hear idle conjectures."

"Monseigneur," returned the Capuchin imperturbably, "I have only facts to offer. When one speaks the truth alone the care belongs to God. If you desire me to be silent—"

"Speak," said Richelieu.

Père Joseph laid his hand upon a number of written reports enclosed in a vellum cover.

"I utter only the truth, here written, your Eminence; I leave conjectures to you alone. *Imprimis*, Dom Lawrence is prior of St. Saforin, at which place is a school for the children of the provincial nobility. In this school is a boy of about four years. This boy was left with the prior last year by a lackey, whose master also left a sum of money for his care, and who promised to send from time to time to ask after him. Any communication regarding the boy is to be sent to M. Betstein, in care of a jeweler in Rue Gros, at Paris."

A smile touched the lips of the cardinal.

"One must admit," he said ironically, "that M. de Bassompierre provides well for the gages of devotion."

"I have not said that M. de Bassompierre was providing for any one," said the Capuchin. "I am stating only facts, Monseigneur; and now I must remind you of another fact for some time overlooked. On the night of October 8, 1626, while M. de Bossompierre was in London as ambassador he paid a secret visit to York House, where the Duke of Buckingham then lived. He went unaccompanied, without lights, and remained for a long time closeted with the duke."

Richelieu was silent for some moments, as though searching the meaning behind these words.

"Your catalogue of facts, my dear Père Joseph, seems very unconnected," he said.

The Capuchin bowed his head in assent.

"Undoubtedly, your Eminence. Let us return to the boy. His name is inscribed on the abbey rolls as Raoul d'Aram. His family is unknown. I found there were certain marks on the clothing he wore when he came to St. Saforin. By means of these marks, commonly placed on garments by the makers, we found that the boy came from Aubain, a village near the royal forest of Verrières, on the southern road to Versailles."

"You appear to have extraordinary interest in this boy," said the minister dryly.

"The interest, Monseigneur, would appear to have extraordinary justification."

"Expound."

"At Aubain the name of d'Aran was unknown," continued the Capuchin. "I found, however, that such a boy had been in care of the curate of Aubain, who died a year ago. His housekeeper, who had taken charge of the boy, died about the same time. The boy was then taken to St. Saforin. The curate was a distant relative of Mme. de Chevreuse—a man named Thounenin, of Dompt."

"Ah!"

The gaze of the cardinal at once became alert, attentive. He had no more bitter enemy than Marie de Rohan, Duchesse de Chevreuse, now exiled to her estates.

"Your Eminence may recall," pursued the Capuchin, slowly choosing his words, "that some four years ago her Majesty the queen was very ill of a fever at the Château of Versailles."

"I recall the fact perfectly." Richelieu was now all attention. "She caught this fever from Chevreuse, whose life was despaired of, but whom it pleased God to spare."

"For further mischief," added the Capuchin. "Good. I have only one more fact to present—rather, I allow you to present it to yourself, and if there are any conjectures to be drawn, I leave them to you. I beg you to recall the precise date of the secret interview which took place in the gardens of Amiens between her Majesty and the Duke of Buckingham. That is all, Monseigneur."

THE PALLOR of Richelieu's thin features became accentuated. For a moment he sat absolutely motionless, then a deep and angry rush of color swept into his face. Step by step he had followed the exposition of fact; and now

that he had the clue, he was speechless. He rose from his chair, paced up and down the room with quick and nervous tread, then swung on his secretary.

"Monsieur, this is absolutely incredible!" he exclaimed. "It is an impossibility!"

"I am not aware to what your Eminence refers," came the cool response. "However, I assure you that when a man—or woman—is well served, nothing is incredible or impossible."

Richelieu made a brusk, impatient gesture.

"This is important—no rhetoric, if you please!" The harsh and bitter ring in his words told how deeply he was stirred. "I remember now. Madame de Chevreuse was the devoted nurse of her Majesty at the time! She herself barely recovered from illness—ah! If this be true—if it be true—"

He stood silent, staring at the tapestried wall, his long fingers intertwined in a grip that whitened the knuckles. His face was tortured by a thousand emotions. Suddenly he turned.

"Look you," he said crisply. "The intimation that this is the child of her Majesty—it is blasphemy! Worse, it is impossible. The child could not have been carried unobserved; it could not have been born unobserved! It could not have been disposed of—"

Upon his agitated words struck the inexorable voice of the Capuchin like a bell of steel.

"Your Eminence, consider. You have surmised a certain conclusion from my facts. It is not at all impossible. Chevreuse is a very able woman. Surely she could contrive what any fish merchant's daughter could contrive?"

"Bah! The queen is the center of a thousand eyes—"

"For which Chevreuse could manufacture a thousand blindfolds. Besides, this curé received the child from her own hands; his silence was bought. On his deathbed he added a codicil to his will which stated these facts."

"What!" The cardinal bent a sharp, astounded gaze upon him. "Does such a will exist?"

"It does, at Dompt. So, at least, I have been informed. The will was abstracted from the archives; the loss was discovered—it was sent to England for safety. It is now on the way here, is possibly in Paris at this moment. Provided your Eminence is sufficiently interested to hear the steps I have taken, I may place all the threads of this affair in your hands."

RICHELIEU resumed his chair with a nod of assent. The slightly satirical accent of Père Joseph delighted him; this secretary was by no means humble except in public, for Père Joseph knew his worth and stood firmly upon it. Richelieu liked this sort of man—in private.

"There is a woman named Hélène de Sirle, daughter of a gentleman killed at La Rochelle; a most able woman, devoted to your Eminence. You may have heard of her?"

The cardinal's brows lifted slightly.

"I have heard something of such a person. What was it—she lives alone—hm! I have forgotten."

To Père Joseph it was perhaps obvious that his Eminence had forgotten nothing.

"Who lives alone in a small château in the Parc du Montmorenci outside Passy; quite so. She has means. She has relatives in Lorraine. She is never in the public eye, yet she has an extensive acquaintance."

"Indeed!" said Richelieu, veiling the bright flash of his eye. "Such a woman should be of use, upon occasion."

"She is," said Père Joseph dryly. "We dare not employ the usual channels in regard to that document; it is to be delivered to her upon reaching Paris. Further, she has undertaken to gain information about the child at St. Saforin."

"For what purpose, and from whom?" demanded Richelieu.

"In the event that we desire to take possession of the child. From a gentleman who has twice visited St. Saforin and

spoken with the child, who is suspected of being in constant correspondence with Chevreuse, and who is known to be a friend of Bassompierre. One Abbé d'Herblay, at one time, I believe, a Musketeer."

"Ah!" said Richelieu. "D'Herblay—one of the Inseparables, they were termed! I remember the man. When will you have more definite information?"

"A messenger from Mlle. de Sirle should have arrived today; he will certainly arrive tonight, said Père Joseph. "He will bear full details verbally, and any documentary evidence that has been procured."

Richelieu nodded thoughtfully.

"After all, it is not impossible," he said. "Bassompierre and Buckingham were warm friends. He, acting for Buckingham; Chevreuse, acting for *her*—hm! No, you are right; where one is well served, anything is possible. Ah, some one is arriving below—"

"Our messenger, no doubt."

FROM the courtyard came the sounds of a rider being admitted, greeted, welcomed. The minister struck a bell, and a lackey entered.

"Find out who has just arrived. Bring him here."

In two minutes the lackey returned.

"Your Eminence, M. d'Artagnan, Lieutenant of Musketeers, has just arrived with dispatches from the court at Lyon. He will be brought here immediately."

The lackey withdrew. Richelieu waited, a slight frown upon his brow. A knock, and d'Artagnan entered, saluted, stood at attention.

"Ah, M. d'Artagnan! We are happy to have you with us again!" said the cardinal affably.

The Musketeer bowed.

"Your Eminence does me too much honor. It is I who am proud to find myself again near the person of your Eminence."

"I think, Père Joseph—" and Richelieu turned—"you desired to ask M. d'Artagnan something?"

"Ah, yes, perhaps, monsieur, on your way from Lyon you encountered a gentleman named M. Connetans?"

"I have never heard the name," said d'Artagnan, "and I encountered no one upon the road except a dead man, some leagues from here."

"A dead man?" The Capuchin was suddenly agitated. "Describe him, if you please—"

"Gladly, monsieur. He was unknown to me, and had not long before been attacked and shot by robbers, evidently. His horse was close by; mine was dying. I took his animal and came on—"

"His description?" interrupted the Capuchin anxiously.

"A tall man, since I had to shorten his stirrups. He had a rather brutal face marked by very black brows meeting above his eyes. I could do nothing for him, and did not delay."

Père Joseph seemed overcome, and Richelieu intervened.

"Thank you, monsieur," he said, with the graciousness he could so well summon at command. "You are, I believe, attached to duty with the court?"

"Yes, your Eminence. My company has the honor of acting as her Majesty's guards at Lyon."

"Then I shall see you again, I trust. We will not detain you further. Good night, monsieur!"

D'Artagnan departed. The Capuchin lifted a suddenly tortured face.

"My man waylaid by robbers. Ah, destiny is unkind!" he exclaimed.

The cardinal affectionately laid his hand on Père Joseph's shoulder.

"You complain of destiny? I shall make destiny complain of me, I promise you!"

"Then, Monseigneur, you find my facts worthy your interest?"

"All facts are worthy of interest," said the cardinal. "And they may even make conjectures worthy of interest, my friend and father! By the way, you did not chance to notice the gold ring upon the

hand of M. d'Artagnan—graven with the arms of—"

"I noticed nothing," confessed Père Joseph. "I was agitated, Monseigneur. The ring—whose arms did you say?"

Richelieu told him. The two men looked at the other for a long, silent moment.

CHAPTER III

MENTION THE DEVIL, AND HE APPEARS

HIS DISPATCHES delivered, d'Artagnan found himself taken in charge by Comte de Moreau, a gentleman of the king's household. Moreau carried d'Artagnan to his own quarters, bedded him on a couch in his own room, wakened him in the morning, and insisted on accompanying him to a nearby tavern for the morning draught. At any other time this pressing hospitality would have delighted our lieutenant of musketeers, but at the moment he found it devilishly inopportune; he had a letter in his pocket which he was burning to read, and could find no opportunity of perusing it in private.

He did, however, deposit the sealed packet upon the fire in their quarters, and watched it go up in flames. Whatever might be in that packet was evidently the secret of Aramis alone; the letter was a different matter.

His Majesty and the cardinal are quartered in the Hotel des Lesdiguères," said Moreau, when they had dispelled the remnants of slumber with good wine of the countryside. "If you wish to attend the king's levée—"

"Not I," said d'Artagnan. "With all the thanks in the world, my friend, I beg to decline the honor. I've had nothing but risings and beddings for a month past; dressings and undressings, paintings and powderings. Plague take it! I hoped our company would go with the army; instead, we dance attendance on two queens and court officials."

Moreau laughed.

"You're in good company at all events; how Bassompierre would envy you! And seriously, you're in luck. Fever is widespread in the army, and before the summer's over we'll hear more of it. Then you'll not come?"

"Not for a bit," said d'Artagnan. "I'll show myself later. Don't let me detain you if duty calls, I beg of you!"

Moreau departed. At this instant a group of officers entered, and d'Artagnan sighed in vexation as they came to the next table, close by. He ordered another bottle of wine, resolving to outdrink them; his uniform made him conspicuous in the streets, and he strongly desired the privacy of the tavern in order to read the letter in his pocket, the letter from which he hoped to get some explanation of the strange and tragic words of the dying man.

Then, as he waited, he grew interested in the talk at the next table. One of the officers had come from Lyon to join the king; the other three had come in the suite of the cardinal from the army, and gossip was rife from both directions.

LISTENING, d'Artagnan, who never despised current knowledge, learned a number of things. Bassompierre was expected to arrive here any hour, any day. The marshal was extremely annoyed because he had shared the command of the army with Schomberg and Créguy, and had complained hotly to the king, but without result.

Everywhere intrigue was raising its head, against every one in sight. Chiefly it arose from Marie de Médici, who took the part of Savoy. She was furious because Richelieu had conquered practically the entire dukedom, and now it was said she intended to prevent the king from rejoining the army.

"Bah!" exclaimed one of the Cardinalists. "The Italian woman hopes that Casale will fall; then she'll blame Richelieu and stir up trouble. Ten to one she'll flatter Bassompierre and try to disaffect him!"

"Well, if she has a pretty maid of honor to do the flattering, she may

succeed!" observed another, and there was a laugh. "What's this about the queen mother coming here, eh?"

"Rumor—" and another shrugged. "I hear that his Majesty has sent for her, hoping she'll come and patch up matters with his Eminence. Not likely, with Marillac at Lyon! That rascal hates everything red—"

"Your pardon, gentleman," spoke up the king's officer with dignity. "M. de Marillac is the keeper of the seals and a high official of France. I do not care to sit and hear him thus miscalled; what is more to the point, he a relative of my family."

"Your pardon, M. Constant; we did not know that," came the response in chorus, for every one was in too good humor to stand on punctillo. One of the officers lifted his flagon. "A health to all the royal family, ministers, officials and whatnot in France! And damnation to the enemy Austrian!"

"Which Austrian?" cried another, laughing. "The enemy in France or the enemy in Austria?"

The mustaches of d'Artagnan began to quiver.

"Whichever you like!" returned the officer. "*Peste*, gentlemen, where's the difference?"

"Difference enough, Montforge!" came the laughing response. "Confidant of our good Père Joseph, conducting private campaigns in Paris while we're conducting public ones with the army—faith, you may not know there's a difference, but we do! Ill talk, my friend, ill talk! I don't believe half this gossip about imperialist intrigue going on at court—"

"The devil you don't!" exclaimed Montforge. He was a large and powerful man, very handsomely dressed and armed. "I'll wager M. Constant here can bear me out; he's fresh from Lyon! Eh, my friend? Isn't it true that the Austrian in France is more to be feared than all the Austrians in Italy and the Empire put together?"

"I'm afraid I don't quite get the point, gentlemen," said the king's officer with an air of embarrassment. "There are no Austrians in France."

D'Artagnan's eyes were very bright and gleaming now.

"*Peste!*" said Montforge with a guffaw. "Come, come, talk's free on campaign! You know well enough that the Austrian in the Louvre fights against us—"

A SUDDEN deluge of wine stopped his words, choked his voice, filled his eyes and face and dribbled down over his fine apparel. With an amazed and angry oath he leaped to his feet and wiped his eyes.

D'Artagnan bowed profoundly.

"My compliments, gentlemen, my compliments!" he exclaimed gravely. "Upon my word, this is a most unfortunate occurrence! You see, gentlemen, I was sound asleep, and thinking that I heard some one traduce her gracious Majesty—"

"Devil take you!" roared out Montforge. "Enough of this pleasantry! You confounded little rogue of a Gascon, is this some jest?"

D'Artagnan twirled his mustache and inspected the cavalier critically.

"Just what I was asking, indeed! Do you know, monsieur, I begin to believe that it was?"

In the eyes of the Gascon, in the steady, implacable gaze, Montforge read the truth. He became deadly pale and bowed slightly.

"Very well, monsieur. I perceive that you belong to the Musketeers; you will, therefore, have no compunction in rendering me satisfaction?"

"With all my heart, monsieur!" replied d'Artagnan. "I am M. d'Artagnan, lieutenant in the company of M. Rambures. May I have the honor of knowing with whom I speak?"

He perceived instantly that his name had created an impression.

"This is M. le Comte de Montforge," said another officer, and introduced the group. "You have friends here, monsieur?"

"Undoubtedly," said d'Artagnan, "but

since I arrived only last night, I'm somewhat at a loss whether to direct you. I—I—I—"

A species of stupefaction descended upon him. His voice failed. He staggered back a step and remained staring, his jaw fallen.

Into the inn room had just entered a man of large build. His boots, cloak, garb, all bespoke recent arrival. He was indeed covered with dust from head to foot. He flung hat and cloak upon a settle, raising a cloud of dust, and showed that he bore his left arm in a sling.

"Wine!" he cried out, in a voice that reverberated under the rafters and rang back from the copper kettles about the fireplace. "Wine! Food! Name of a name of a name—must I die of thirst and hunger and fatigue because you lazy dogs of scullions can't—for the love of the good God! Am I dreaming or—or—"

His eyes had fallen on the group about the tables. The group in turn were gazing at him, following the petrified stare of d'Artagnan, who thought he was looking at a ghost. The large man's mouth flew open and stayed open. His eyes protruded. Then, just as d'Artagnan moved to cross himself, he took two enormous strides across the room and swept an arm about the Musketeer.

"D'Artagnan!"

"Porthos!"

For the moment all else was forgotten—the scene around, the group of officers, the furious and livid Montforge—in this genuinely amazing meeting.

PORTHOS, living or dead, was the last person d'Artagnan expected to see in Grenoble. In the previous year M. du Vallon had left the service, marrying the 800,000 livres of Madame Coquenard, and had disappeared from sight. And here he was, dust covered, huge, tears on his cheeks at sight of d'Artagnan, not a ghost at all, but indisputably alive.

Tears were likewise on the cheeks of d'Artagnan, though not from the same cause. The one armed hug of Porthos came near to crushing in his ribs.

"While this," observed Comte de Montforge mockingly, "is extremely touching, it is aside from the matter under discussion."

Porthos released d'Artagnan and turned. His naturally haughty countenance took on a look of ineffable scorn.

"And who," he inquired, "is this insect passing commentaries upon us?"

"This, my friend," said d'Artagnan, "is M. le Comte de Montforge, who also dislikes my fashion of passing commentaries, and who is about to do me the honor of teaching me his own manner with the sword point. Gentlemen, I am happy to present my friend M. du Vallon, late of the company of M. de Tréville. If you will arrange the meeting with him, I shall be very glad, as I am eager to have speech with him before presenting myself to his Majesty. Time presses."

However bewildered he might have been, Porthos was quick to comprehend the situation, and with his most magnificent bow, assumed the duties of second.

"At your most humble service, gentlemen!" he exclaimed. "I am sorry to say that my left arm is disabled by the knife of a scoundrelly rascal, but—"

"This is between me and M. de Montforge alone," interposed d'Artagnan, and sat down again to his wine.

"The devil!" he ejaculated to himself. "Am I going to have a chance to read this letter or not? Still, if I do it now, it will lend me the appearance of being entirely at my ease—"

He glanced around. Porthos had joined the companions of Montforge and was talking with them. Montforge was drinking and inspecting the winestains on his magnificent doublet. Removing the letter from his pocket, d'Artagnan looked at the superscription. He read, in the very fine, beautiful writing of Aramis:

Mlle. Hélène de Sirle
Parc de Montmorenci

"Hm! Parc de Montmorenci—that might be anywhere," reflected d'Artagnan, "but it must be the one at Passy.

Therefore, Aramis is at Paris. *Vivadiou!* Something learned."

He turned over and unfolded the letter. Before he had glanced at the writing, a heavy step interrupted him, and he looked up as Porthos approached.

"Ha! At once, all together, to a spot nearby. Agreed?"

"Agreed," said d'Artagnan, and sighed as he pocketed the letter. "Decidedly," he said to himself, "if this devilish interference proceeds much farther, I shall have to kill some one!"

THE SIX men left the tavern in company and in silence. A hundred yards away was the College of the Recolets. Behind the rear wall of this enclosure was the Rue du Dauphiné, and across the street was the charming little park and garden where Marie de Médici had been triumphantly received on her way from Italy to marriage with Henry IV. At this hour of the morning the park was entirely deserted, and few were passing along the street.

"Admirably concerted, this spot!" exclaimed Porthos grandly. "In the city yet not of it, eh, my dear d'Artagnan? A pretty spot for footwork! What excellent clipped grass!"

The party halted. D'Artagnan turned to the court.

"My dear M. de Montforge," he said, "it were a pity if any misapprehension of my own should cause vexation. It may be that you had no intention of casting aspersions upon a lady whom I am very honored in serving."

"A truce to politeness, monsieur!" exclaimed Montforge angrily. "What you heard, you heard. What you did, you did. The devil fly away with apologies! *En garde!*"

"*En garde, messieurs,*" echoed Porthos.

"One moment, gentlemen!" interposed M. Constant, the king's officer, looking a trifle nervously from d'Artagnan to Montforge. "I must say that if this difficulty could be composed, it were much the better course, in view of the edict against dueling. M. de Montforge's remarks—"

"Have nothing to do with it!" snapped that gentleman angrily. "M. d'Artagnan emptied his wine cup in my face. There's the crux of the whole thing!"

"Good! Excellent! *Via crucis, via crucis!*" boomed Porthos, who was proud of his scanty Latin. "*En garde, messieurs!*"

The two swords crossed. The two men parried, feinted, tested each the other.

In this moment a singular prescience seized upon the soul of d'Artagnan. Perhaps the astounding meeting with Porthos had set a spark to his imagination; perhaps his agile mind was somewhat disturbed at finding Montforge an absolute master of his weapon, whether in French or Italian style. He did not know Montforge, had never heard the man mentioned among the skilled blades of the court; and this was singular in the extreme.

Over the crossed steel he saw two blazing black eyes, intrepid as his own, proud, as his own, confident as his own; in them he read a determined enmity. Ere this he had looked into eyes afire with the intention of killing; he knew as he stood there that Montforge meant to kill him. Across his mind flashed the memory of other men; of Jussac, of Count de Wardes, above all, of Rochefort the implacable.

Another Rochefort here. From some unguessed source it came to him that he had here entered upon something deeper than he knew, something that must go farther than he wished, unless he killed the man before him.

"Kill this man; kill him swiftly!" the mental warning fairly screamed at the ears of his soul.

D'Artagnan fought with his back to the street. He was entirely absorbed in his adversary. He saw nothing save those savage black eyes; he felt nothing save the pressure of blade against blade; he heard nothing save the sharp click and slither of the crossed steel. Still wet with morning dew, the grass underfoot sent up a sharply sweet fragrance as it was crushed by their stamping boots.

ANGERED by those flaming eyes, d'Artagnan suddenly abandoned the defensive and began to exert himself. He worked into a shrewd and merciless attack, so agile, so vibrant with energy, as to be irresistible. He saw a look of intense astonishment and dismay sweep into the face of Montforge, saw his enemy give back, saw him slip suddenly in the grass and go all asprawl, his blade flying afar. With an effort, d'Artagnan checked himself midway of a lunge and drew back.

"When you are ready, monsieur," he said calmly, sure of himself now.

Montforge came to one knee, then paused, staring. No one had moved to pick up his rapier, nor did he reach out for it. D'Artagnan glanced surprisedly at the others, saw Porthos agape, the image of consternation, saw the others apparently paralyzed, saw they were not looking at him or at Montforge, but at a point behind him, on which every eye seemed fixed with a species of stupefied fascination.

"The devil!" exclaimed d'Artagnan, and turned.

"Not in person, at all events," said a man who had approached behind him, a man who had turned into the park from the street and who was accompanied by two gentlemen.

This man was Richelieu.

"Well, gentlemen," said the cardinal, sweeping an icy eye over the group, "I confess that you have conspired to present me with a surprise this fine morning. Montforge—d'Artagnan—Constant—"

His gaze rested on Porthos for an instant as though he half recognized the large man. Porthos bowed.

"M du Vallon, your Eminence, late of the company of M. de Tréville."

"Ah!" said the cardinal. "I remember you."

Porthos paled at these ominous words. Montforge rose, in some agitation, and drew out a handkerchief with which he wiped perspiration from his brow.

"Your Eminence," he said, "I beg that you will absolve these gentlemen; any blame connected with this scene rests upon me alone, for I challenged M. d'Artagnan."

"Ah!" said d'Artagnan to himself, throwing Montforge a glance of admiration. "I could love this man, if he did not hate me!"

"Yes?" said Richelieu dryly. "Each of you, no doubt, imagined that the other was an enemy of France—eh, gentlemen?"

D'Artagnan bowed.

"Exactly, Monseigneur."

"Your Eminence has discerned the truth," said Montforge, his dark face slightly pale.

None knew better than he that Richelieu was most to be feared when he jested.

There was an instant of silence while the cardinal looked from one to the other. Then he spoke slowly, gravely, as though the affair were to be held in abeyance, not forgotten.

"Justice, gentlemen, is said to be blind. It is my desire that you two gentlemen shake hands and end this matter."

Blank astonishment greeted these words.

"So!" thought d'Artagnan, with the rapidity of light. "Our honest cardinal has something to be gained by not hanging us!"

Sheathing his rapier, which he was still holding, he turned and held out his hand to Montforge.

"Come, monsieur!" he said with a smile. "This gentleman is our superior in rank, since he is minister of war. He is our superior in intelligence, since he is a cardinal. And certainly he is our superior in wisdom, since he gives us very practical advice which had occurred to neither of us! Upon my word, monsieur, I think we should grant his desire!"

"With all my heart," said Montforge, and shook hands heartily. But the look he gave d'Artagnan belied his words.

"EXCELLENTLY done, gentlemen!" said Richelieu. "M. de Montforge, I desire your company in my cabinet within ten minutes, if you please. M. d'Artagnan, may I inquire whether you return to Lyon?"

"I do not know, your Eminence," said d'Artagnan. "I have not yet presented myself to his Majesty."

"Then, if you will have the kindness to present yourself to me in an hour's time," returned the cardinal, "I should be very happy to have the honor of a little conversation with you."

D'Artagnan bowed profoundly.

When the cardinal had departed Montforge approached d'Artagnan, who was adjusting his uniform cloak, and regarded him intently.

"Monsieur, I trust we shall have the pleasure of a future meeting?"

D'Artagnan's smile, which could add so much charm to his features, leaped out straightway.

"By all means, monsieur. Let us leave it to the finger of destiny! I only trust you will not suffer for your very frank avowal of blame."

Montforge shrugged, as though it were of no moment.

"Very well," he said, and bowed. "We shall then meet again."

D'Artgnan noted that this was uttered as a statement of fact predetermined.

"WHERE to?" asked Porthos, as they came to the street together.

"To the tavern, *pardieu!*" said d'Artagnan. "We're an hour together, at all events. Well, old friend, I see that the red minister remembers you, eh?"

"Yes, devil take him!" said Porthos, twirling his mustache complacently. "He remembers that little scene on the road outside La Rochelle, eh? Come, you're with the king here? I thought your company was at Lyon with the court?"

D'Artagnan whistled to himself.

"You did, eh? And who put that thought into your head, I wonder? Cautiously, here—cautiously!" he reflected to himself.

Aloud, he replied:

"It is, it is—I arrived here last night with dispatches. When I've seen his Eminence, I'll probably know my future plans. But have you repented matrimony? You must be going to join the army, since you're here—and whence comes your wound?"

"From the devil," said Porthos seriously. "By the way, here's your handkerchief. You must have dropped it when his Eminence appeared. I retrieved it."

"Handkerchief? I haven't one to my name," said d'Artagnan. He took the bit of cambric which Porthos handed him, and stared at it, while the giant clapped him on the back.

"Ha! Up to the old tricks of Aramis, are you? I know a lady's kerchief when I see it, comrade! And deuce take me, but it's got a monogram! Here, give me a look—"

"Go to the devil," said d'Artagnan, and laughed as they turned in at the tavern entrance. He thrust the kerchief swiftly away, for he had perceived one thing, and remembered another.

He remembered that Montforge had wiped his face with a handkerchief. And on this bit of cambric he perceived the monogram "H de S."—the initials of Hélène de Sirle. Montforge had dropped this handkerchief, therefore—therefore a hundred conjectures! He thrust them all out of his bewildered brain and bent his thought on the more important thing, the letter in his pocket, as yet unread.

Porthos, finding himself thick and grimy with dust, departed to the pump. He was bursting to talk, but disgust at his own condition was stronger, so he left d'Artagnan to order the wine. Alone for the moment the Musketeer drew the letter from his pocket and unfolded it, and now there was none to interfere. He read:

> Dear Mademoiselle: The bearer of this letter is a friend to be trusted. I have received terrible news, and I am ill. Meantime, my friend will serve you as would I myself, had I the honor to be at your side.—D'HERBLAY.

"So!" D'Artagnan pocketed the letter with some dismay. "Nothing learned. Who is the friend of Aramis from whom that rascal took this letter? Ah, the

ring! I'd be a fool to present myself before the cardinal— *Vivadieu!* But I was wearing that ring last night—ah, well, he would not have observed it."

None the less, as he put the ring in his pocket, his face was a little pale at remembering how he had appeared before the cardinal and Père Joseph on his arrival; he had certainly worn the ring like a fool! And uneasy conscience whispered that the conversation desired by Richelieu might be on the subject of the dead spy. Now Porthos came stamping in, seized a flagon and emptied it at a draught. When he sat down the bench groaned beneath him.

"AH! AH! Embrace me, d'Artagnan!" he exclaimed gustily. "This is good, this is like old times—wine and sword of a morning, and a hard night's ride behind! Why the devil have you degenerated into a post courier? You, a lieutenant, bearing dispatches?"

"A courier to the king, with letters from the two queens."

"That explains it. Our noble Athos—where is he?"

"In Lyon. He talks of leaving the service, drinks his Spanish wine as usual, and has the devil's own luck at dice. If you knew our company was with the court in Lyon, why didn't you drop in to see us?"

This confused Porthos, who seized a bottle and emptied another flagon. D'Artagnan began to watch him closely, though without seeming to do so.

"I wasn't in Lyon ten minutes," said the giant, and bellowed at the host for more wine and food. "Listen, comrade! Last week I came to Paris. Madame du Vallon is thinking of buying a property in Picardy; she went to look it over. I came to Paris to handle a certain business for her. There—what think you happened to me? Guess!"

"Certainly not a love affair, to the husband of eight hundred thousand livres!"

D'Artagnan laughed. He was all on the alert now; he had a conviction that Porthos was not entirely confiding in him. This rendered him curious, probing, too cautious to tell what he himself knew.

"Something different—I was robbed," declared Porthos, reddening with anger. "Robbed! Three men set upon me, got a noose about my neck, strangled me. I pounded one on the head and felt his skull go smash; I kicked a second, and he was dead the next minute. But the third—ah, the third! The abominable rascal! The black browed scoundrel! What do you think he did? He sat on my back and used a knife on me, tried to murder me! True, it only tore the flesh of my arm, but between loss of blood and the strangulation, I became unconscious. He robbed me and fled."

"Not to Grenoble surely?" exclaimed d'Artagnan.

"Exactly; you have guessed it. Listen! By good luck I saw him leaving Paris that same night. I called for a horse, followed him. I have money, you understand! I rode after him like a madman; the horse died under me. I got another horse. Mile by mile, inch by inch, I gained upon him. I entered Lyon not five minutes after him—upon my word, it is the truth! Instead of stopping there the unspeakable devil changed horses and had gone when I got to the post house. My horse was done up; there was not a fresh animal to be had. I took a tired one, and the brute went bad on me halfway here, has been limping in since midnight. The man's here ahead of me. You must help me find him, trace him!"

"With all my heart," said d'Artagnan. "Who was he?"

"I don't know. He was a tall man with the face of a rogue. He had heavy black brows that met above his nose—eh? What? You've seen him?"

D'Artagnan started.

"Black brows that met, *diantre!* Did he ride a piebald horse? Did he have a cloak of dark blue or black slashed with silver?"

Porthos leaped from his seat.

"You know him? Come! Take me to him this moment! Up!"

"He is dead," said d'Artagnan. "Sit down, sit down, comrade, your man's dead! You should have seen him lying in the road as you came, for I must have been just ahead of you. He died in my arms—"

"*Pardieu!* I saw nothing of him!" cried the amazed Porthos, and then sank back on the bench with an expression of utter dismay and consternation. "*Mon Dieu*, I am ruined, ruined! Now what shall I ever say to Aramis?"

CHAPTER IV

A MARSHAL ARRIVES; A LIEUTENANT DEPARTS

"SO YOU have seen Aramis?" asked d'Artagnan quickly.

Porthos swallowed hard and turned a wild gaze upon the Gascon.

"I am a fool," he said thickly. "I have said too much. I promised—"

"I think, my dear Porthos," said d'Artagnan coolly, "that you and I have been somewhat in company in other days, and I have never heard you complain of having trusted me too much. If you have no confidence in me—"

Porthos began to swear horribly.

"For the love of the saints, give me time, give me time!" he cried out in despair. "My dear comrade, you don't understand! Listen to me. I met Aramis in Paris. He was in terrible straits; he had been flung into the depths of despair; he spoke of killing himself—Aramis! Can you fancy such a thing? He was gloomy as the foul fiend! I don't know exactly what had caused it."

"I think you do," said d'Artagnan to himself. Aloud, "Yes?"

"Well—" and here Porthos began to flounder—"Aramis gave me a packet of money to deliver—a sum he had collected for some lady. I know not what it was. I promised to take it to her. He made me swear not to breathe his name."

D'Artagnan laughed. He saw that the giant was genuinely overwhelmed at being unable to confide in him, and he was melted instantly.

"So the robbers took the money, eh?" he asked. "Anything else?"

"No, it was some gold in *rouleaux*," said Porthos, but reddened a trifle as he spoke. "The devil of it is that I don't know the exact amount. They sprang upon me just after I left poor Aramis."

"He was not wounded when you left him?"

"He? Wounded?" Porthos stared. "Not in the least, except in spirit."

With an air as if he were glad to escape further questioning for the moment Porthos applied himself to the food and wine that was set before them.

D'Artagnan whistled to himself. He began to see a good many things. Aramis had received a letter from his Marie Michon, which had stricken him. He sent Porthos to Mlle. de Sirle, whoever this might be; not with money, but with a letter. Porthos was attacked, robbed, left for dead; Aramis was then attacked, wounded, robbed, and the black browed spy set forth for Grenoble.

But now—Porthos was still lying about it! Very well, then, he would not get his letter back very readily. In what net of intrigue had Aramis enmeshed this huge man with a child's heart? D'Artagnan felt a twinge of anger at the thought. It was all very well for Aramis to indulge his own bent for intrigue, but it was not right for him to ensnare poor simple, honest Porthos.

"Tell me what you know of this man; you say he died on the road in your arms?" said Porthos. "Tell me, I conjure you! Did you get my *rouleaux* of gold from him?"

"I did not look to see if he had any," said d'Artagnan dryly, and with truth.

Since Porthos stubbornly concealed all mention of the letter, the less said the better. Aramis, he reflected, has drawn our big comrade into some conspiracy; since Porthos is the worst possible conspirator, let him now remain out of it for his own good.

D'ARTAGNAN told of finding the dead man in the road, taking the fresher horse and coming on to Grenoble, exactly as he had told Richelieu. Upon hearing this tale Porthos was plunged into the depths of despair. He himself had seen nothing of the dead man or of d'Artagnan's horse and the inference was plain.

"The robbers returned to their prey after you had passed," he said gloomily. "They plundered the man, flung him into the river and took your horse away. Ah, miserable wretches! If I had you under my hands I'd wring your cursed necks! My friend, I am ruined."

"Why?" asked d'Artagnan.

"Because the lady was to confide a mission to me in place of Aramis," said the other. "I swore that I would take the money to her, accept an errand from her—and now I am ruined."

"On the contrary," said d'Artagnan, "you are saved."

"Saved?" Porthos stared at him. "In what way? How do you mean?"

"Eat, drink, fortify yourself, my friend," and d'Artagnan gestured toward the file of scullions bringing further dishes and platters. "Talk when alone."

The magnificent bellows of Porthos had set every one to running, and now were produced capons, a brace of ducks, the excellent sausages for which Grenoble was renowed, pastries, venison; dish followed dish, bottle pursued bottle, and in between details of the service d'Artagnan expounded details drawn largely from his own fertile imagination.

"You need not hesitate over confiding in me, my friend," he said confidentially. "Perhaps I know more of the whole affair than you suppose—more, perhaps, than you yourself know! Picture our Aramis, now, engaged in helping a great man, a friend of his, a marshal of France, now with the army. You comprehend?"

"Ah—ah!" cried Porthos in amazement. "You know about that? Then Aramis wrote you, eh? He said I must be most particular not to mention the name of Bassompierre."

"Then don't mention it," said d'Artagnan, twirling his mustache complacently. "Aramis receives a letter from his lady love; it throws him into consternation, into despair! Everything pales before this. Nothing matters. He is disheartened, talks of suicide, entering a monastery, taking the vows and writing a thesis for ordination."

"Upon my soul, his very words!" exclaimed the staring Porthos, but for all his amazement he did not forget to attack the fortifications now before him.

"Well, then, Aramis encounters you. He knows your valor, your disregard of odds—he has reason to know them! But he also knows your modesty, your hesitancy at undertaking anything of dubious nature, your reluctance to push yourself forward, is it not?"

Porthos deftly removed half the breast of a duck, placed it in his mouth and nodded complacently. Being anything but modest, he loved to picture himself possessed of this virtue.

"Would Aramis mention these qualities?" pursued d'Artagnan. "No! He feared lest you beg him to select a braver, abler man. Instead, he merely asked you to do him a small favor—deliver a sum of money to a lady, and accept a commission from her. He parts from you. A few moments afterward you are set upon, brought to earth like a Hercules assailed by base foes, and you are robbed. Why? Because you had been spied upon. It was suspected that he had given you this money. In fact, no sooner had you parted than he in turn was assaulted, attacked, badly wounded, and plundered also. You comprehend?"

THE EYES of Porthos opened tremendously but, his mouth being filled with duck breast, he could only nod amazed comprehension.

"You killed two of the rascals," pursued d'Artagnan. "The third escaped, went to attack Aramis, thinking you were dead. He presently took to the road. He had the best of horses waiting everywhere for him, he was known wherever he went—"

"Who—who the devil told you all this?" blurted out Porthos, stupefied.

"I reconstruct, my friend. Now, this man was fleeing from you, as you think. On the contrary he was hastening to reach another man, riding like mad to bring this other man the money he stole from you, the papers he stole from Aramis—you comprehend? They were vitally important. He stayed not to eat nor sleep, but rode, leaped from horse to horse, spurred from hill to hill, never looked behind! At Lyon he inquired the road to Grenoble, climbed into the fresh saddle and was gone. Why? Because he was bringing his loot to a man here."

"Eh?" Porthos, who had just drunk an entire bottle of wine at a draught, set down his flagon and started afresh. "A man—here? Bringing them—*pardieu!* I never thought of that! Who told you so?"

"The man to whom he was bringing them," said d'Artagnan placidly. "Last night when I arrived he asked after such a courier, whom he was expecting hourly. He described the man; I recognized the dead man in the road—"

The veins swelled in the forehead of Porthos. His nostrils distended; a flood of color rushed into his face. He brought down one fist on the board and the impact smashed half the crockery.

"His name!" he thundered. "Who is this man? I'll attend to him! His name, instantly!"

"Armand, Cardinal de Richelieu."

This name froze Porthos into stone. He did not move; his eyes remained fastened upon d'Artagnan; but the color slowly drained out of his face.

"Ah! Ah!" he said slowly. "But that is impossible! That—that would mean—would mean—"

"Exactly," said d'Artagnan. "That would mean your assassin was a spy who no doubt supposed you to be engaged in some intrigue against the cardinal."

"I see it all," said Porthos, and his head fell in dejection. "I am lost."

"How so?"

Porthos paused, gulped at his wine. Still he lacked the imagination to confess everything and obtain a spiritual absolution from his friend.

"The money," he said, wiping his lips, "without it, I could not reach the lady. It was my ambassadorial letters. Now I can not place myself at her service in the stead of Aramis. And you heard what the cardinal said to me, my dear d'Artagnan? The tone of voice in which he spoke? Yes, his spies must have been on my trail. He remembers me, indeed! Leave me, d'Artagnan; leave me, for I am a lost man. I may be arrested any moment, taken to a royal château—Jont St. Michel, the Bastille, Vincennes!"

THE GLOOM, terror, utter despondency of Porthos drew a slight smile from d'Artagnan.

"My dear Porthos," he said calmly tasting his wine, "did you ever know me to deceive you, to feed you with false hopes, to desert you?"

"You are the soul of honor and of friendship," said Porthos unhappily.

"Did you ever know me to break a promise to you?"

"The thought is inconceivable."

"Good. Then I bid you hope. I promise you that in this matter you are no longer alone. I must go to the cardinal at once. Well, I shall ask for leave, which is overdue me, both for myself and for Athos. Your assassin is dead, your gold is gone; instead, you gain two friends. Aramis is wounded in Paris. That man told me so before he died in my arms. He uttered your name—dead—and that of Aramis—wounded. You see? At Paris, I swear to you upon the faith of a gentleman, that we shall gain access to the lady, we shall convince her that we are to be trusted, we shall make good for you all you have lost. Do you believe me?"

Having the means of access to the lady now inside his pocket, d'Artagnan could very well make this promise.

Porthos lifted his head, stared incredulously at him.

"D'Artagnan! You would do this for me?"

"All for one, one for all!" exclaimed d'Artagnan. "You would do as much for me. Agreed?"

Porthos sprang to his feet, seized d'Artagnan in a warm embrace, and tears started from his eyes.

"My friend, my friend!" he cried out with emotion. "Ask of me what you will. I am yours! What you will—anything—"

D'Artagnan freed himself from that dangerous embrace.

"Then I ask that you remain here until I return from my conversation with his Eminence," he said coolly. "If leave is granted me, we may have to depart at once. You need sleep?"

"I need nothing since I have found you," exclaimed Porthos. "That is to say I need everything; but I can do without anything. Go with God, my friend. I await you!"

D'ARTAGNAN caught up his cloak and departed in some haste for the palace.

He was at once uneasy and at rest mentally. He was at rest on the subject of Aramis, for he was confident that he had pieced the truth together. He was uneasy on the subject of Richelieu, for now it seemed certain that the cardinal would desire further details regarding the dead man in the road. He cursed his own impudence for having borne that ring on his finger the previous night; whatever the ring was, whatever it meant, he should have exercised discretion.

"What a devilish imbroglio!" he reflected, as he made his way to the Hotel des Lesdiguères. "Aramis is wounded. Porthos receives a letter from him, to Hélène de Sirle, whoever she is; he is robbed of it. I take it, and the papers of Aramis, from a dead man. Conte de Montforge, evidently a Cardinalist agent, loses a handkerchief which bears the initials of this same lady. Richelieu, instead of clapping a penalty on us for dueling, sweetly commands us to be friends—and summons us to his cabinet! Decidedly this affair is going to take some very careful stepping."

As he came to the entrance of the palace, a horseman came dashing out of the courtyard and passed d'Artagnan with a wave of the hand. It was Montforge, booted and spurred.

WHEN the Musketeer was ushered into the presence of Richelieu, he found Père Joseph present as on the previous night. And at the very first moment a cold shiver passed over d'Artagnan, for he thought he saw both men glance at his left hand, where he had worn the ring. However, the cardinal seemed anything but angry, greeted him affably, took his arm and walked with him to the window that overlooked the courtyard.

"Look, M. d'Artagnan, and tell me what you see."

D'Artagnan looked down.

"Your Eminence, I see guards on duty. I see a very handsome jennet being groomed by the stables. I see a superb horse being saddled—ah, what an animal! A horse fit for a king, indeed!"

He fell silent in admiration. Richelieu pressed his arm and turned.

"That animal belongs to you, M. d'Artagnan. Come, I wish to ask you something. Do you by any chance recall how you happened to receive a commission as lieutenant?"

D'Artagnan felt fate upon him.

"Certainly, Monseigneur; from your own hands, a kindness for which I have never ceased to be grateful."

"In ten minutes I go to the king," said Richelieu. "I am going to ask him something else for you."

"For me, your Eminence?" stammered d'Artagnan.

Richelieu regarded him with a smile, and did not fail to read the caution behind his amazement.

"Of course, with your permission only. If—"

His voice died. He flung a glance through the window and now stood silent, looking down at the courtyard; the affability of his features was instantly changed to alert tenseness. A sound of

voices rose to the room—shouts, greetings, cheers, the resounding hollow smash of pike butts grounded on the stones. D'Artagnan, looking, saw a file of dusty guards drawing up in line, while a number of handsomely dressed cavaliers rode into the courtyard, headed by a slightly stout gentleman with a large nose, a gay smile and magnificent armor. He was saluted on all sides with respect and hearty cordiality, and the cardinal's guards presented arms.

"Père Joseph—here!" exclaimed Richelieu.

The gray secretary was already approaching the window, and now laughed shortly as he glanced out.

"So Bassompierre arrives! Monseigneur, you need not hasten to your audience."

Richelieu drew back, made a gesture.

"Leave me with M. d'Artagnan, if you please."

WHEN they were alone the cardinal turned from the window and looked at d'Artagnan.

"Monsieur, I suppose you wonder whether I go to ask the king for a *lettre de cachet* or a captaincy on your behalf? Come, confess! We have met before today."

"I am entirely at the service of your Eminence," said d'Artagnan, with a composure he was far from feeling. "If I have done nothing to merit a cell, certainly I have done nothing to merit a captaincy."

Richelieu regarded him steadily for a moment.

"No evasions, monsieur. We are alone. Shall we be frank?"

"If your Eminence pleases, most gladly."

"With your permission, I shall ask the king to grant you an indefinite leave, in order that you may perform certain services for me. Do you wish to accept?"

D'Artagnan bowed, partly in order to hide the relief in his face.

"I am honored by the choice, for in serving your Eminence, I serve the king—"

"A truce to compliments," interrupted Richelieu bruskly. "I know you of old, M. d'Artagnan. I desire a man who is attached to his Majesty, a gentleman of *finesse*, of discretion—I might almost say that I desire the service of an enemy rather than of a friend."

"Then I can not have the pleasure of serving you, Monseigneur," said d'Artagnan. "I am not your enemy. Even had I the wish, I could not aspire to such a height."

The eye of the cardinal was penetrating.

"You are aware, perhaps, that Madame de Chevreuse is exiled from Paris to her estates at Dampierre. You are aware, I imagine, of a good deal that can not be put into words, that princes are ambitious, that mortal life is frail, that those who are great and wealthy and respected today may be in chains tomorrow."

D'Artagnan trembled inwardly, more at the half mocking tone of Richelieu than at these words.

"Gossip runs to that effect, your Eminence," he returned cautiously.

"A dispatch now awaiting his Majesty's signature goes to the keeper of the seals at Lyon," pursued Richelieu.

He was in a dangerous humor this morning, as d'Artagnan perceived; this man who ruled France could not always rule himself. He had even been known to strike Cavoie, the captain of his guards, as he had been known to take the chancellor of France by the throat.

"From Lyon you will seek Madame de Chevreuse at Dampierre, to whom you will deliver a verbal message. You will then return to Paris and deliver a letter for me. After which, you will be free—that is to say, if you accept."

D'Artagnan bowed. He did not miss the indescribable tone in which those singular final words were uttered, nor the piercing regard of the cardinal.

"I am most happy to serve your Eminence," he said quietly.

"I must warn you, monsieur," said Richelieu slowly, "that in delivering this message to Madame de Chevreuse you will find it a dangerous matter."

A disdainful smile touched the lips of d'Artagnan.

"The danger, Monseigneur, is for those who oppose me."

"Ah, Gascon!" Richelieu broke into a short laugh. "Yet there is greater danger in the delivery of the letter. It goes to a lady so beautiful that all who know her fall in love with her at once!"

This touched d'Artagnan's all but mortal hurt and spurred him to audacity.

"From such risk, Monseigneur, you and I are alike immune; you by reason of the cloth, and I by reason of a loss I have not forgotten."

THE CARDINAL was silent for a moment. Perhaps he, too, had not forgotten Constance de Bonacieux; perhaps he had not forgotten Milady, who, as his agent, had poisoned the unhappy Constance and torn d'Artagnan's heart asunder. After a moment he lifted his head, moved to his secretary, sat down before it and wrote a few lines. Sanding them, he folded and sealed the letter and addressed it. Then he extended it to d'Artagnan.

"The letter; a personal matter for which I give you thanks."

"I am honored, Monseigneur. And the verbal message?"

The cardinal spoke reflectively, with a certain air of savage and cruel assurance.

"You may say that you had it from my lips, but couch it in these terms: 'His Majesty has learned all and is taking the child under his own protection. Be very quiet during the next six months. If you indulge your liking for letters and visitors you are lost.' That is all. Repeat the message, monsieur, if you please."

D'Artagnan repeated it word for word, but he could not keep a note of astonishment from his voice. Richelieu, watching him narrowly, smiled as though gratified by the effect of his words.

"You think, perhaps, I am sending a warning? No, monsieur, I am sending a threat."

This was true. Richelieu never sent warnings. His purposes were guessed only after they were accomplished.

"Pardon, your Eminence," said d'Artagnan. "I do not think regarding such matters. They pass directly from ears to lips, without reaching my brain; and they are then forgotten."

"Very well, monsieur. When can you start?"

"The moment I receive my dispatches."

"They will be ready in five minutes. Wait below. The horse standing there is a present for you, a token of my gratitude for your kindness. You ride alone?"

"With a friend, Monseigneur—a M. du Vallon, formerly of the Musketeers, whom I encountered this morning."

"Ah, yes, Porthos, is it not?" Richelieu smiled, and this smile struck terror into d'Artagnan, so singular was its quality. "You will, perhaps, want to have a word with M. de Bassompierre, who has just arrived from the army?"

"I, Monseigneur?" D'Artagnan looked surprised. "Not at all. I am not one of M. de Bassompierre's gentlemen. I know him very slightly indeed."

"Indeed!" echoed Richelieu. "Very well; that is all, monsieur."

D'ARTAGNAN bowed and departed. When he found himself outside the room he was trembling, as though he had just emerged from some terrible danger.

Scarcely was he gone when Père Joseph entered the room and addressed the Cardinal.

"Monseigneur, his Majesty awaits you. He is being barbered now."

"Good. And Bassompierre?"

"Is, I think, going to Paris at once."

"So? My friend and father—" and Richelieu tapped his arm affectionately—"I have accomplished two things within a very few minutes. First, Chevreuse is eliminated from whatever may happen within the next few months."

"Then your Eminence has accomplished a miracle."

"Second, that dangerous young man who wore a ring yesterday and does not

wear it today, will cause no further trouble."

"So?" The Capuchin looked doubtful. "He is a better man than Montforge. He may—escape."

"In which case he will fall into a pit from which there is no escape. See to it that he is provided with a purse when the papers are sent him."

There Joseph looked astonished at this unwonted liberality, for at this period Richelieu was niggardly with money. He had twice received Marion de l'Orme, the most famous hetaira of Paris; he received her most magnificently on each occasion; after the second time he sent her a purse by his lackey Bournais. She opened it, found a hundred pistoles, threw them into the street, and told the story to every one.

GOING directly to the courtyard, d'Artagnan paused to peep at the letter given him. All his curiosity had been keenly aroused. He glanced at the superscription. This letter was addressed to Hélène de Sirle, at the Parc du Montmorenci.

With a bewildered air, d'Artagnan went to the horse that a groom was holding and mounted with scarcely a glance at the superb animal. He sat, waiting, a thousand conjectures flashing across his mind. One thing was clear—his mission ended with the delivery of this letter.

"Therefore," he reflected, "once my errand's done I'm free to help Porthos. And the cardinal sends me to the same point, to the same person, as the queen! Now, if I had Athos to advise me in this—ah, fool, that I am!"

It had just occurred to him that since Athos was at Lyon, there was nothing to prevent him from taking Athos with him. And at this admirable inspiration, d'Artagnan could scarce control his eagerness to be off, pick up Porthos, and depart.

Abruptly, as he sat there, a terrible memory rose before him. The words of the dying man occurred to him with sinister emphasis—

"Above them all, she—she herself!"

She herself! A child in the abbey of St. Saforin, guarded by an unknown Betstein; Aramis and Bassompierre and a plot. What was it all? How did a child enter into it? Was this the same child mentioned in Richelieu's message? Sudden relief came at the thought.

"Ah!" he murmured, wiping a trickle of sweat from his eyes. "Then it's a question of Chevreuse, not of the queen. Excellent! And here, I see, are my dispatches."

A secretary approached him, handed him a packet of letters and a purse.

D'Artagnan turned his horse and twirled his mustache as the magnificent animal bore him from the courtyard and the guards at the gates saluted. He returned the salute, and two minutes later was on his way to rejoin Porthos.

CHAPTER V

FOUR LETTERS ARE SENT—ONE ARRIVES

AT THE moment d'Artagnan and Porthos left Grenoble the affairs of France were in divers hands and conditions. The Imperialists had captured Mantua by assault and Casale was under siege; on the other hand, the army had swept all before it in Savoy and Piedmont, hence the queen mother was more than ever furious against Richelieu.

Both the king and the cardinal had left the army for the best of reasons—the plague. Louis XIII, never a robust man, had come to Grenoble and paused there, with illness creeping upon him. He had intended to rejoin the army, but it began to look as though he would rejoin the court instead. The queens were at Lyon, and Paris ruled itself.

Bassompierre arrived at Grenoble more in the guise of a triumphing Cæsar than a grumbling general. He found the king at his levée, and was received most joyfully by Louis, who was at the moment in the hands of his hairdresser.

"Ha! Our beloved marshal foregoes the pomps of war to rejoin us!"

exclaimed the king, as Bassompierre knelt to kiss his hand. "Come, François, tell me something! I hear that when you entered Madrid as our ambassador, you rode a mule. Is that true?"

"Faith, sire, entirely true!"

Bassompierre chuckled. He was extremely handsome, and was wearing superb armor, expressly donned for the occasion. His hearty, genial laugh, his air of breezy frankness, swept into the room like a freshening breath of morning.

"A mule of the finest Andaluzian strain, sent me by the emperor; a mule to make a bishop weep with envy—"

"Well, well," interrupted Louis, "I never thought to see the day when an ass was mounted upon a mule!"

Those around broke into laughter. Bassompierre swept the king a low bow.

"True, very true," he rejoined. "But all things are possible to those anointed of the Lord. Upon that occasion I was, naturally, representing your Majesty."

The superb audacity of this reply delighted the king, who burst into laughter that ended the business of his hairdresser.

"François, you have a tongue in a thousand. I love you for it!" he cried gaily. "They say you would sooner lose a friend than a good jest, François! Be careful you do not lose a friend in me!"

"God forbid, your Majesty," said Bassompierre devoutly, "for then I should have to seek a friend in his Eminence."

"Impossible, Betstein, impossible!" Louis laughed heartily, and according to his custom used the German form of Bassompierre's name, as a token of familiarity. "Our good cardinal has no maids of honor at his court."

"In such case," said the audacious Lorrainer, "let us both return to Lyon, sire, and be at our ease!"

Louis chuckled at this thrust. It was no secret that the king was madly but virtuously enamored of Mlle. de Hautefort, maid of honor to the queen. Leaning back in his chair, Louis resigned himself again to the hands of his hairdresser. He was handsome, in his thinly cruel fashion, but his temper was extremely uneven; he rose to a certain largeness of spirit only with Bassompierre.

THIS man, who alone could jest with the king on even terms, moved among the gentlemen present, his impressive personality dominating them all, even his enemies. Of these he had not a few. The polished and imposing presence, the very force of character which so contributed to his success as courtier or gambler, lover or ambassador, assured him the solid testimonial of envious foes.

One of these gentlemen, who fancied the raillery of the king betokened a change in the marshal's fortunes, thought the occasion opportune to intrude a suave hint of intrigue. He turned to Bassompierre.

"So, monsieur, we are to judge that you have joined the party of Guise?"

"Eh?" said Bassompierre, astonished. "I? And why should you think that, monsieur?"

The other shrugged.

"Why not, indeed, after the tender manner in which you embrace his sister, the Princesse de Conti?"

"Ho!" Bassompierre inflated his cheeks in hearty laughter. "Nonsense, my dear monsieur, nonsense! I assure you that I have embraced your wife with far greater warmth—and I do not love you any the more because of it!"

The king broke into a roar of mirth in which all his gentlemen joined, and in the midst of this mirth the cardinal was announced. Richelieu entered, saluted profoundly, kissed the king's hand and greeted Bassompierre very warmly. Now, as it chanced, Louis remembered d'Artagnan and asked where he was.

"He has just departed, sire," said the cardinal. "He received your letters for the court, and was next moment in the saddle."

"Ah! A pity I missed him!" said Bassompierre. "I like that young man. He is impetuous, he is afraid of nothing, he is a good officer. Above all, he is faithful."

"You admire faithful men more than faithful women, eh?" jested the king.

"Faith, sire, it's all one to me!"

Bassompierre's laughing brown eyes twinkled, and he twirled the waxed points of his mustache. Then, meeting the eye of Richelieu, he sensed a coming attack, and fell silent with disconcerted surprise. How he had offended the minister he could not conceive.

"M. le Maréchal wears armor," said the cardinal smoothly. "Surely, sire, he does not fear the weapons of enemies here?"

An ominous hint. Bassompierre was too old a courtier to show his astonishment, however; the king, rising from the chair, took his arm affectionately.

"Eh, Betstein? Surely you have no such fear in our presence?"

"Alas, sire, I have great fear of assassination," admitted Bassompierre, who was no man to refuse a challenge from the cardinal or any other.

At the word there was a stir. The king's hand fell; his face changed. Those around stood frozen, and Richelieu's eye held a satiric gleam of triumph. With that word, Bassompierre had wrecked his future—all felt this to be certain.

"Assassination!" echoed Louis. "In our presence? Explain yourself, monsieur!"

Bassompierre bowed.

"Sire, his Eminence is, as usual, entirely right. Regard this corselet, expressly made for me, never worn until this morning! You will observe, sire, the remarkable gold inlay, the supreme lightness yet excellence of the steel!"

"It is indeed magnificent," said the king coldly. "I doubt whether its like is in our own armory. But, François, if you seem to doubt our ability to protect—"

IT WAS coming. Another instant, and Bassompierre would be dismissed, sent to his estates, ruined! He intervened, coolly.

"Pardon, sire—you misapprehend. Assassination is indeed my greatest fear; but not for myself. I wore this corselet in the hope that you would deign to accept it from me, wear it, and so set at rest all the fears that have weighed upon me! This bit of steel is too beauteous for me. Only the son of Henri Quatre could wear it fittingly!"

And with a gesture Bassompierre unbuckled the corselet.

The king was astonished, delighted, charmed as a boy with a new toy. The cardinal bit his lip with vexation. Although slightly large for Louis XIII, the corselet proved a fairly good fit, and the king insisted on wearing it immediately. He discovered that it became him admirably, and was put into excellent humor. So, when Bassompierre requested permission to go to Paris, it was granted instantly.

"As you like, Betstein, as you like," said the king. "But, I order you, tell us her name!"

"Her name, sire, is Chaillot," said Bassompierre, giving the title of the magnificent estate he had recently purchased. "I go to build my home, hoping that some day I may have the honor to entertain your Majesty there."

"See that you build your house upon the rock, my dear marshal," said Richelieu dryly.

Bassompierre smiled at him.

"Monseigneur, it shall be built upon a stone!" he said, playing on his own name.

"When one builds a house," said the cardinal reflectively, "the next step is to bring home the bride. You are not, by any chance, thinking of marriage?"

In these words Bassompierre perceived that his secret marriage had become known to the cardinal. He passed off the question with a jest, but ten minutes afterward he took his leave of the king and retired.

"If I remain here I am a lost man!" he said to his secretary. "The horses, swiftly. Let us ride for Paris!"

He little dreamed that because he did not remain there he was, indeed, a lost man. Those things lay in the future.

WHEN Bassompierre and his princely suite were half a league out of Grenoble there came riding after them a gentleman of the king's household, a distant relative of the marshal. Catching up with them, he drew Bassompierre to one side of the road.

"News for you, monsieur," he said. "Do you know an officer of Musketeers named d'Artagnan?"

"I know of him, at least," said Bassompierre curiously. "Why?"

"He precedes you to Paris."

"That is no news."

"He carries a letter."

"I carry fifty. Did you spur after us to tell me this?"

"To tell you, monsieur, that I was standing in the courtyard when he drew out this letter and looked at the superscription, which was written in the hand of Richelieu."

"Ah!" murmured Bassompierre. "And did it concern me?"

"That, monsieur, I leave to you. I saw the writing; the letter was addressed to a certain Mlle. de Sirle."

Bassompierre became pale as death.

"Impossible!" he ejaculated. "Richelieu never heard of her!"

"On the contrary, monsieur, Richelieu met her at the hotel of the Duc de Montmorenci and is said to have visited her since then."

The pallor of the marshal became a deep and angry flush.

"So! But it is impossible. The cardinal—" he checked himself abruptly, smiled, and held out his hand with a swift change of manner. "My thanks, my thanks! It was good of you to think this matter might concern me, but I assure you it does not. I am sorry you have lost your time and trouble, my friend."

"I have not lost it, monsieur, since I have gained your thanks," said the other, and so turned about and rode back to Grenoble.

Bassompierre continued his way, but with this difference; he now rode at headlong speed.

D'ARTAGNAN and Porthos gained Lyon without pause. Upon reaching the artillery barracks where the Musketeers were quartered, Porthos dismounted, staggered, and was only saved from falling by d'Artagnan.

"My friend," he confessed, "I have been in the saddle four days and nights. I need sleep. I need salves and ointment. For the love of heaven, show me a bed and leave me!"

D'Artagnan took him to his own quarters, then delivered his dispatches, learned that Athos was on duty and sought out M. Rambures, the captain of his company, whom he found at table.

"Monsieur," he said with his simple directness, "as you know, I bore letters to his Majesty at Grenoble. There I had the honor of seeing the cardinal."

"*Peste!*" exclaimed Rambures facetiously. "And you're not in the Bastille, my dear fellow?"

"On the contrary, I'm on my way to Paris at the request of his Eminence, who promised me leave, advised me to make haste and authorized me to do what I liked. Therefore, with your permission, I should like my friend M. Athos to ride with me."

"Gladly, M. d'Artagnan, gladly. But come! To Paris—for the cardinal? Just between ourselves, when did M. du Plessis obtain the services of his Majesty's guards?"

"By convincing the guards, monsieur, that they were acting in his Majesty's interests."

Rambures broke into laughter.

"Good, good! Put in the application. I'll attend to it. Take our good Athos and go when you desire. Sit down and help me finish this bottle of wine; the guard will be changed in ten minutes and you can then gobble Athos and run. What news from the army?"

D'Artagnan made himself comfortable.

"None that I know of. I got into Grenoble late and left early in the morning. By the way, Rambures, do you happen to know a gentleman of the cardinal's household named de Montforge?"

The captain, who was a Gascon like two-thirds of the guards, frowned.

"Hm—yes, I've heard the name! Of course, he's the man who killed Aubain, Guise's fencing master, last year. Isn't he some relative of Mme. de Chavigny? You know, the complaisant lady who—tut, what scandal!" Rambures laughed. "Here's long life to you, and wishing I were going to Paris in your company!"

D'ARTAGNAN knew already that Montforge was an excellent blade; he knew already that the man was a favorite of Richelieu; so, having learned nothing, he presently departed to find Athos, and came upon him just going off duty. Athos embraced him warmly, as though he had been absent four months instead of four days.

"Ha, my son, back already? What news?"

"Every sort imaginable," said d'Artagnan. "Come over to that *auberge* and settle down to talk it out in comfort—"

"Unfortunately," said Athos, "I have been assigned to escort their Majesties, who go riding in the park in half an hour."

"Bah!" D'Artagnan beckoned to another gentleman of the Musketeers, who was approaching. "You are on leave, my dear Athos; you ride to Paris with me. M. de Bret will take your place and be glad to do it."

This proving true, the two friends repaired to the *auberge* across the street.

"To Paris?" said Athos, and then shrugged. "Good! As well one place as another."

Such was the philosophy of the Comte de la Fére at this period.

Since that terrible night on the banks of the Lys, when d'Artagnan, Lord de Winter, and the Three Musketeers had witnessed the execution of Milady, Athos had once more sunk into the depths of his own negligence toward life. He had no ambition. He lived for nothing. He drank huge quantities of his favorite Spanish wine, spoke little, appeared drowned in a dark and mysterious sadness. Yet neither wine nor melancholy affected this man outwardly, this man who, so far as others were concerned, lived as a perfect model of chivalry and honor. His voice retained its soft liquid quality; his features retained their indefinable air of nobility, of sweetness; his wrist retained its marvelous flexibility; all this despite his more frequent turning to the material side of life—to tavern debauches where he uttered scarce a word, to steady drinking until Grimaud took his arm and led him home. It seemed as though Athos had resolved to drown all that lay behind and ahead of him.

AS THE two friends turned in at the tavern a man suddenly appeared in front of them and blocked the way. This man was Grimaud, the lackey of Athos.

Athos motioned him aside, but Grimaud did not budge.

"Well?" asked Athos.

In reply Grimaud drew a letter from his pocket and presented it. This letter was addressed to the Comte de la Fére.

"Who brought this?" demanded Athos in astonishment.

Grimaud, trained to silence, shrugged to indicate his ignorance. D'Artagnan, who knew that Athos never wrote or received a letter, was astonished.

"Bah!" said Athos. "Your news first, d'Artagnan. Come!"

They entered the *auberge* and settled themselves in a corner. When the wine was brought and they were alone, d'Artagnan took the ring and letter from his pocket. He handed the ring to Athos, whose amazing knowledge of heraldry had ere this astonished him.

"Do you know whose arms these are?"

Athos smiled slightly.

"Certainly. They belong to the man who would have been married to the daughter of the old Constable de Montmorenci, had he not neglected the etiquette of paying a visit to the Duc de Bouillon, nephew of the constable. In consequence, she was married to Condé—"

"I am not a historian," interrupted

d'Artagnan. "Whose are these arms?"

Athos drank deeply.

"They belong to the man who refused to be made Duc d'Aumale."

"His name?"

"He has two."

"Devil take you!" said d'Artagnan impatiently.

Athos, seeing that he was in earnest, at once lost his jesting manner.

"Pardon, my son, yet you astonished me by your ignorance! This man is captain of the Château de Monceaux; a knight of the Ordre du Sant Ésprit; he refused a bribe of 100,000 crowns; he played tennis with Wallenstein before Emperor Maximilian; he outdrank the canons of Saverne; he won a wager of a thousand crowns from Henri IV; he was given the honor of having fifty guards; he refused the Duchy of Beaupréau; he was made Marshal of France—"

"Ah! Ah!" exclaimed d'Artagnan in stupefied astonishment. "You can not mean Schomberg—"

"Certainly not. I mean Bassompierre, whose name originally was Betstein, the same name in Germanized form."

D'Artagnan was overcome with stupefaction. Betstein!

"Read this," he said, and handed the letter of Aramis to his friend.

Athos glanced at it, and pushed it away with his hand.

"I have a letter of my own, not yet read," he said. "A gentleman does not read the letters of others, my son."

"A soldier reads the correspondence of the enemy," said D'Artagnan.

"True," said Athos, and picked up the letter.

A slight pallor came into his face, and his eyes darted a fiery glance at d'Artagnan. "A letter—to a lady—and in the hand of Aramis! And you say—an enemy?"

"Read it," said d'Artagnan calmly. "It contains no secrets."

Athos met his gaze steadily for a moment, found it serene and unclouded, nodded slightly and opened the letter.

"I have read it," he said.

"Good. Now, can you conceive to whom it refers? To what bearer?"

The singularly imperturbable eyes of Athos rested on him, and then that sweet and expressive smile touched the lips of the older man.

"Ah, my son! I know the suppressed eagerness burning in you! Were it not impossible, I would say that the bearer of this letter—this friend of Aramis—must be also a friend of ours. Porthos. But that is impossible."

D'Artagnan was seized with wonder at this evidence of insight.

"Athos, you are divine!" he exclaimed. "Porthos is at this moment asleep on my bed. Come! Here is the whole story."

And he poured out all that had happened since he had left Lyon for Grenoble.

ATHOS listened, tapping with his long and beautiful fingers on the letter he had received but had not opened. He showed no astonishment at what he heard; only a miracle could make Athos lift an eyebrow. But, when d'Artagnan repeated the words uttered by the dying spy of Richelieu, the gaze of Athos became singularly penetrating, alert, alive. The names of Porthos and of Aramis still had power for him. When the tale came to the meeting with Porthos, his gaze showed interest. When it came to the interrupted duel it revealed satisfaction.

"Ah, my son, I am proud of you!" he said quietly, and those words thrilled d'Artagnan above all praise from Richelieu or Louis himself. "I have heard of this Montforge—a man of noble blood and ignoble speech and deed. Continue."

D'Artagnan finished his recital, and the eye of Athos began to sparkle. D'Artagnan showed Richelieu's letter to Hélène de Sirle, and was about to repeat the verbal message to Chevreuse, when Athos checked him.

"Tut-tut! That message is sacred!"

"But I have no secrets from you, my friend."

"That is not your secret."

"True," d'Artagnan reflected, "Richelieu said the message was not a warning,

but a threat, and was extremely dangerous to me as the bearer."

A disdainful smile touched the lips of Athos.

"Undoubtedly. Chevreuse is the most daring, the most dangerous woman in France this day, as Richelieu knows to his cost; she stops at nothing, stoops to anything!"

"Well, leave that aside. What do you think of the other matter?"

"I think Bassompierre is facing destruction," and Athos drank an entire goblet of Malaga as though it were a duty.

"No, no, I mean the business of the child! That's why I wanted to repeat the message; it has a vital connection."

"So?" Athos looked thoughtful. "You think Porthos knows all about it?"

"I have not asked him. Theories are wasted time."

"Exactly my opinion. Let's dismiss the whole affair for the moment, ride to Paris, then to Dampierre, or to Dampierre first. We can go by way of Bourg-la-Reine and circle back to Paris. Once there, we deliver your letter to Mlle. de Sirle and Porthos delivers his."

"Or we for him. I promised to gain him admission to her presence."

"You must give him the letter."

"And confess that I kept silent about it?"

"Not at all. Give it to Grimaud." Athos turned and crooked his finger. As though by magic. Grimaud came forward and stood before the table. Athos handed him the letter.

"M. Porthos."

Grimaud had not heard of Porthos in above a year's time, but said nothing.

"The horses, immediately after supper tonight," said Athos.

Grimaud gave d'Artagnan an inquiring look.

"No, I have a new mount," said d'Artagnan. "Go to my room first."

"Ah!" Grimaud started. "Then M. Por—"

"Silence, you villain!" commanded Athos.

DEMANDING pardon with a profound bow, Grimaud departed on his errand. D'Artagnan laughed; he understood perfectly. Grimaud would put the letter in the pocket of Porthos, who would discover it upon wakening.

"So we have money, horses, freedom, and we ride upon business for the queen and the cardinal. Excellent!" said Athos, taking all this as a matter of course. "Aramis is wounded; you destroyed the packet taken from him. Better still, that spy said he had had this ring with Bassompierre's arms made. I wonder why. Bah! No use wondering. Ride and discover."

"Have you forgotten your own letter?" asked d'Artagnan.

With a careless shrug, Athos picked up the letter, found the seal illegible, and tore open the folded paper. It was a very stout paper, a sort of parchment; the letter had been sent on from the Hotel of the Musketeers at Paris.

Reading the letter, Athos did not change his expression, but the color slowly drained out of his face and was replaced by a mortal pallor. He lifted his eyes, looked at d'Artagnan and spoke with visible effort.

"Do you—do you remember a man—an Englishman—" his voice failed.

D'Artagnan, startled, leaned over the table.

"You do not mean Lord de Winter?"

Athos inclined his head and pushed forward the letter. D'Artagnan, stupefied, turned it about and read:

> M. Athos: Lest one letter fail, I send four, to you and to your three friends. I shall be in Paris, at the Hotel of the Marquis de St. Luc, Place Royale, on July 30th.—WINTER.

D'Artagnan looked at the letter, then looked at Athos, then at the letter again, with a puzzled frown. Something was lacking here; he did not know what.

ON THAT fateful night beside the River Lys, two years before when Milady was executed, a fifth man had stood beside the four friends. She, who had been the sweetheart of

d'Artagnan and the wife of Athos, had also been the sister-in-law of Lord de Winter; this woman was dead, but she had left frightful memories behind.

"What does he mean?" Athos passed a hand across his pallid brow. "I do not want to see him. Why should he write the four of us?"

"Ah-ah!" exclaimed d'Artagnan, and lifted his voice. "Host! A lighted candle —name of the devil, be quick about it!" He looked at Athos, his eyes sparkling. "My friend, I have just thought of something. This signature is well below the body of the letter."

The innkeeper brought a lighted candle and departed. When he was gone, d'Artagnan held the letter above the flame. Words appeared, written in the thick paper with secret ink and momentarily shown by the heat:

> He is dead; she remains. Come, if you would save her.

D'Artagnan lifted his head and regarded Athos, who had read the writing.

"He—ah! That means Buckingham. And she—then it's a question of the queen—"

"Silence, foolish tongue!" exclaimed Athos severely. "Of course, of course! This Englishman is faithful and a gentleman. But St. Luc is brother-in-law to Bassompierre! I do not understand this at all."

"Therefore dismiss conjecture, accept your own medicine, and don't waste time!" D'Artagnan held the paper in the flame and watched it burn. "One letter out of four arrived. This is the twenty-fifth of July. We must ride to Dampierre first; that's understood. If we're to be in Paris on the thirtieth—"

"We must leave this evening," said Athos. "Except that Porthos needs sleep, we should leave now, this moment!"

D'Artagnan rose.

"Good. Pray wait for me at my quarters. Make yourself at home there, my dear Athos. I may not return until late."

"Oh!" Athos looked at him with a touch of sadness. "That pretty little lady in Rue de Grenoble, eh? Well, well, I do not repeat my warnings."

D'Artagnan flushed slightly. It was true that Athos had warned him, though for no particular reason; if he had ignored the warning, he had not forgotten it.

"One romance begins: another is ended," he said lightly. "Do not reproach me; the lady has treated me well and I can not leave her like a bumpkin without saying farewell. And, since her husband is the equerry of the Duc de Lesdiguères, and with the army—"

"All is safe," concluded Athos satirically. "Go with God or the devil, my friend! I have nothing to live for except your friendship, so come back safe."

And Athos drained another flagon of Malaga at one draught.

CHAPTER VI

IN WHICH ATHOS UTTERS PREDICTIONS

FOR ABOVE a year d'Artagnan had remained faithful to the memory of his devoted Constance, who had been poisoned by Milady; but when one is young and ardent wounds heal swiftly.

It must be confessed that Sophie de Bruler was an excellent agent of healing. Her little house in the Rue de Grenoble was discreet, charming, even rich; her husband in earlier years had fought in Hungary against the Turks and had brought home two wagon loads of booty. Sophie herself was, like other young wives of elderly warriors, inconsolable in the absence of her lord, and did not rebuff the attempts at consolation which d'Artagnan made. In person she was small, with the most brilliant brown eyes in the world, and her graceful, supple figure was the envy of half the ladies of Lyon. If our hero had in some wise consoled her for the absence of her knightly husband, then she had offered him no little consolation for his own deeper and more bitter loss. D'Artagnan was not in love with her, but at moments he almost deceived himself in this regard.

Although his coming was unexpected,

he did not hesitate on this account. The house being on a corner, there was a garden gate opening on the side street; to this gate d'Artagnan possessed the key.

Letting himself in at this gate, he found the garden empty. The afternoon was late, but darkness was still an hour or two away. Knowing that the little bell attached to the gate gave warning of each arrival, he eyed the windows as he crossed the garden, hoping to catch sight of the fair Sophia. No one appeared, however.

He knocked at the door, which was instantly opened to him by the *femme de chambre.*

"Come in, monsieur," she said. "Madame saw your approach and sent me to tell you that she would not keep you a moment. She is engaged with her notary. Will you enter the little salon?"

Giving her his hat and cloak, d'Artagnan stepped into the tiny reception salon near the entrance—a very handsome little room hung with yellow satin and containing a superb Titan which M. de Bruler had removed from a Hungarian altar.

"*Peste!* Madame is devoted to her notary!" thought d'Artagnan. "This is the third time in two weeks she has been engaged with him."

However, since Sophie was managing the affairs of her absent husband, she had some excuse for her attachment to business.

D'ARTAGNAN, indeed, had not waited five minutes when the *femme de chambre* appeared and said her mistress would receive him.

"She has been suffering all day from a migraine and is in her chamber," she said. "If monsieur will follow—"

D'Artagnan pressed a coin into her hand.

"You need not show me the way," he said eagerly. "I know it already, my good woman—"

And he sprang for the stairway.

Sophie de Bruler, wearing a charming negligée of sky blue encrusted with silver stars, reclined on a *chaise-longue* near a table on which were documents, ink, quills and sand sifter. The walls of the room were covered by that magnificent set of tapestries designed by Rubens and representing the rape of Lucrece and fall of the Tarquins, for which M. de Bruler had refused 40,000 crowns.

The room was in disorder, as was invariably the case. The curtains of the tall carven bed in one corner were drawn. On the tables was heaped a medley of bottles and boxes and toilet articles—pomades, mirrors, perfumes, powders; clothes were everywhere, flung about carelessly. The one quality lacking to Madame de Bruler was neatness.

D'Artagnan parted the curtains, stood on the threshold an instant; then, with the rapidity of light, he was across the room and kneeling beside her.

"Ah, in what a state you find me!" she exclaimed. "This terrible room, always in confusion, always at sixes and sevens! I am ashamed, my dear d'Artagnan."

"Let love assoil your shame then," he returned quickly. "I ride to Paris and beyond, my fair one—a long journey, a long errand! I may not return. Before leaving, I stole an hour or two to see you, to mingle my tears with yours, to protest my devotion—"

"Ah, horror!" she exclaimed. "You leaving? Impossible! Cruel that you are, to greet me with such words! Here, sit beside me, tell me you are only jesting."

"Alas, would that I were!" responded d'Artagnan, obeying her command. "Are we alone?"

"Absolutely!" she replied, touching his hair with caressing fingers. "Georgette has orders not to disturb us until supper is served. Ah, my hero, surely you were jesting?"

"Jesting? No, unfortunately! So come, let us forget tomorrow in today!"

"Gladly—if you trust me a little!" she returned.

"Eh? Trust you, my source of all happiness?" D'Artagnan was astonished,

and broke into his quick, kindling smile. "With my life!"

"Then why do you go to Paris, after you swore to me you would be here all summer? The court is not leaving."

"Ah!" he exclaimed. "I go because I am ordered, not because I desire it."

"On duty or on errands of love?"

D'Artagnan laughed.

"On errands of state, believe me! Love and duty I leave here."

"Liar!" she said, her brown eyes very merry and bright. "You go to see a lady, I wager!"

"Oh! that is true," said d'Artagnan, disconcerted. "But I also go to see another lady, and I have never seen either of them in my life, so—"

"So," she mocked him, "you'll see them and forget me straightway!"

"No, I swear it!" cried d'Artagnan impulsively. "My sweet love, not for any lady save the queen whom I serve, would I forget you! And to tell the truth, I think my main errand is to be with a man, an Englishman—"

He checked himself abruptly. It seemed to him that the tapestry to one side had waved a little, as though a draught of air were in the room; this trifling matter had the effect of halting the indiscreet disclosure he had been about to make in self defense.

"AN ENGLISHMAN!" exclaimed Sophie, opening her eyes wide. "Not truly! A monster!"

"No," and d'Artagnan laughed. "A nobleman. And besides, I shall not go alone. I shall have with me—"

Something checked him again, some instinct, some inner warning. And, as he released her from an embrace, he saw the tapestry move for the second time.

The blood in the veins of d'Artagnan turned to ice. He scarce realized that Sophie had drawn him beside her, that she was covering his face with kisses.

"So you do love me!" she cried softly. "Foolish woman that I am, I thought your mission was concerned with the will of François Thounenin of Dompt, of whom a kinsman in Lorraine wrote me! Swear to me that you would not imperil yourself in that affair!"

With an effort, d'Artagnan collected himself.

"Thounenin of Dompt!" he repeated, astonished. "Upon my honor, I have never heard the name. I know nothing about it!"

Sophie thought him merely amazed at her knowledge. A shallow woman, absolutely unfitted for the part she was playing, she could not see that to this man such an oath meant the exact truth. With an air of making a vast impression, she reached out and took a small paper from the table nearby.

"See, where I copied it from my kinsman's letter!" she exclaimed. "The will drawn up by Thounenin before Leonard, hereditary grand tabellion to the Duchy of Lorraine, on May 29, 1624—the will which is now being so much talked about—"

D'Artagnan, to whom all this talk meant nothing, was staring at the paper, thunderstruck. He did not regard the words written there, but the paper itself. It was an Italian paper, made with an intricate and heavy watermark, the identical paper used by Richelieu in writing Hélène de Sirle. This sheet, therefore, must have come from the very desk of the cardinal at Grenoble.

"My angel, your kinsman is singularly well informed," said d'Artagnan, without the least evidence of his surprise.

"So he should be, my love, since he is one of the duke's gentlemen! I was worried least you become involved in the business and draw down the anger of the great cardinal."

"Be assured," said the young man. "What beautiful paper this is—Italian, I think?"

Sophie shrugged.

"I do not know. It was one of a few sheets my notary left."

She drew d'Artagnan's lips to hers. Under cover of a long embrace, he deftly contrived to fold the fragment of paper in his fingers; then, slipping it into his cuff,

he pressed the perfumed curls of Sophie against his shoulder and covered her eyes with kisses. Looking up as he did so, he again perceived a slight movement in the tapestry, and beneath its edge, at the floor, he caught a glint as of a sword point there.

"Athos did well to warn me!" thought d'Artagnan.

Having no inclination for the rôle of Samson, he glanced swiftly about, not neglecting, however, the beautiful woman who was sighing in his arms.

THE ONLY weapon in sight was a long Turkish poinard, inlaid with gold and gems, It hung by the window, barely a foot from the suspicious point in the tapestry. Since the chamber had, so far as he knew, only the one door, and escape from the window was impossible because of its height above the ground, d'Artagnan realized that he must act swiftly and shrewdly if he were to escape. He no longer doubted that Sophie was acting as a spy, or had a spy concealed behind her hangings. This paper had been given her, doubtlessly in order that she should question him about the will of Thounenin; she had blundered in putting it into his hands. So this was why she had been so curious about his errand!

"My angel, I am about to show my confidence in you," said d'Artagnan, caressing the silken locks that fell about his breast and watching the tapestry narrowly as he spoke. "True, I can have no secrets from you! Know, then, that I have been given an important mission by his Eminence the cardinal."

"Ah!" The lovely arms of Sophie tightened about him. "By Richelieu himself?"

"Himself," repeated d'Artagnan. "A—conspiracy has been discovered at Paris—a conspiracy to kill the king, place the Duc d'Orleans on the throne, and arrest the cardinal. Well, then! I go to seize the leaders of this conspiracy. It is the way of our great cardinal, my angel, to strike when least expected, to foresee the blow aimed at him and launch a stroke which will paralyze it. An excellent fashion, I assure you, and one which I myself endeavor to imitate whenever possible—as, for example—"

While speaking, he had gently loosened the clinging arms that enfolded him. Now, with one sudden and agile spring, he gained the window, grasped the Turkish poinard, ripped it from its hangings, and unsheathing it, thrust it with all his strength at the tapestry.

Swift as he was, his blow was evaded.

The tapestry was flung aside, a man there leaped back from the blow, a sword glittered and drove at the heart of d'Artagnan. One piercing shriek burst from Sophie, but d'Artagnan had no time to look at her. He had missed his blow, but with the dagger he caught and parried the sword stroke aimed at him—and he recognized the man facing him.

It was the Comte de Montforge.

"Ah, villain!" cried d'Artagnan furiously. "Assassin that you are!"

Montforge laughed, pressed in upon him. Having only the poniard, d'Artagnan could scarce hope to defend himself for long against the rapier that sought his throat; he darted backward, holding the longer steel in play. A table overturned with a crash. Montforge struck against a chair, was momentarily flung off balance, and like a panther, d'Artagnan leaped in upon him and struck him full above the heart.

The poinard shattered. Montforge was unharmed.

"Mail!" cried d'Artagnan. "Coward as well as villain—"

He hurled the hilt of the poniard into the eyes of Montforge, gained the door with one leap and slammed it behind him as he darted for the stairs.

HE ENCOUNTERED none of the domestics. Burning with mortification, with fury, with shame, he caught up his sword, bared it, turned and ran back up the stairs to encounter Montforge on an equal basis. When he burst into the room again, however,

Montforge was not there. Sophie lay upon the couch in a faint; a turned back corner of the tapestry disclosed another door, now locked, by which Montforge had evidently departed.

D'Artagnan, raging, retraced his steps, took up baldric, hat and cloak, and in another moment was out in the Rue de Grenoble. Darkness was falling; there were no passers by; the street was empty. Then, recalling the side street by which he himself had entered, d'Artagnan ran to the corner.

"Ah!" he cried out. "Scoundrel—wait!"

At the little garden gate Montforge was just mounting into the saddle of a horse. He gave d'Artagnan one glance, flung a mocking laugh at him and thrust in his spurs. He was darting away before d'Artagnan could reach him, another laugh trailing back. With a furious curse, d'Artagnan put up his sword and bent his steps toward his own quarters.

"The devil!" he exclaimed, torn between bewilderment and chagrin. "Here's our precious notary, then. Ah, Athos, you were right, as always!"

When he came to his own quarters, Grimaud was before the door.

"The horses are ready?" asked d'Artagnan.

Grimaud made a sign of assent, and d'Artagnan went into the room.

PORTHOS was sitting on the edge of the bed, eyes still heavy with sleep. Athos sat beside the window, flinging dice idly with one hand against the other. At sight of d'Artagnan, Porthos uttered a sharp exclamation.

"Ah, my friend! Imagine! I am a fool. I was never robbed at all! I came to myself, found my—my belongings, my rouleaux of gold, inside the lining of my cloak—"

"Wait!"

Athos rose. He had perceived the disordered attire, the changed aspect of d'Artagnan; now, as the latter dropped his cloak, Athos pointed to a slit in his sleeve.

"What has happened? Then my warning was not futile, after all?"

"My dear Athos," said d'Artagnan gloomily, "your warning saved my life. "So you have found your money, Porthos? Good. Listen, my friends!" He broke off momentarily. He had only told Porthos of his mission to Dampierre, not of the letter to Mlle. de Sirle. "First, I must tell you that, besides my errand to Dampierre, M. de Richelieu confided a second mission to me. This was to deliver a letter to a certain Mlle. de Sirle at Paris—"

"Eh? What's that?" Porthos opened his eyes wide. "Why, it was to her that —that—"

"That Aramis sent you? Excellent. We shall kill two birds with one stone. Now listen attentively, my Porthos! And you, Athos—you shall hear how well founded was your warning."

He told them everything that had happened at the house of Sophie de Bruler. Porthos, not comprehending the half of it all, uttered ejaculations of fury and wonder; Athos, who understood everything perfectly, said nothing until d'Artagnan had finished. Then he held out his hand.

"The paper—you saved it?"

"Here it is." D'Artagnan gave him the folded paper.

"Your letter to Mlle. de Sirle?"

From the inner pocket of his tunic d'Artagnan took the cardinal's letter. Athos glanced at it, then returned it.

"Very simple, my friend. This notation is in the hand of Richelieu himself. Montforge had it from him; was probably showing it to Sophie, instructing her what to ask you about, when you arrived. You comprehend? Richelieu suspected you knew something about it, and took this means to find out more. Undoubtedly he suspects you learned something from the dead man in the road."

D'Artagnan felt the sweat start on his forehead. That accursed ring, bearing the chevrons of Bassompierre! It was on his hand now; no harm in wearing it, since the damage was done. Montforge

had come to Lyon and had promised Sophie to make him talk if possible.

"Then—then why should he send me to Dampierre on an errand of confidence?"

"Perhaps he desired to make your errand dangerous."

D'Artagnan wiped his brow, as he remembered that interview with Richelieu —the strange air and narrow looks of the cardinal. And that message about the child—yes, yes! Richelieu had been testing him, had been trying to see whether he knew anything!

"Strange about this will of a Lorrainer," said Athos, frowning. "You know nothing about it, d'Artagnan?"

"Nothing, upon my honor," said d'Artagnan.

"But I do!" cried Porthos.

The others turned to him, astonished.

THE GIANT lifted his head, groaned, flung out his hands like a man forced to a certain confession despite himself.

"Come, come, I lay bare everything—*peccavi*, *peccavi*, my friends!" he said in a hollow voice, looking at them with strained bloodshot eyes. "Aramis mentioned this will to me. It was connected with my errand, I know not how. Nor do I know what it is. He merely mentioned the name. D'Artagnan, my friend, I am a miserable sinner; I lied to you. It was no money that I lost, but a letter to Mlle. de Sirle. I humbly beg your pardon, my friend; you see, I swore secrecy to Aramis, and even though it hurt me, I could not tell you."

D'Artagan could not keep down a laugh, amazed as he was to find the Thounenin will somehow connected with this affair.

"Porthos, I'll pardon you if you will pardon me," he said. "I told you of finding the dying spy in the road. Well, I took a letter from him, several letters, in fact. He carried your letter, and others he had taken from Aramis, bearing our friend's seal. These I destroyed. Your letter was unsealed, and I read it. I did not give it to you, because you denied having lost anything except money. However, I had Grimaud place the letter in your cloak. Are we quits?"

"Ah-ah!" Porthos leaped to his feet and the floor trembled. "Embrace me, my friend! I am a new man. I am ashamed of myself! There are no secrets now between us—among us three—"

"Among us four," corrected Athos gravely. "Listen, my friends! We do not know the position of Aramis in this matter; we do not know in what we are mixing. All we do know is that we are to meet Lord de Winter in Paris on July thirtieth—and I suggest that we wait not another moment in Lyon, but take our horses and go."

"Go—where?" asked Porthos.

"To Dampierre, first. We ride thither with d'Artagnan."

"And why?" queried Porthos, knitting his brow.

"I have an errand there from Richelieu," said d'Artagnan. "And first, I had an errand there for the queen—a secret errand. Now I can guess something of it —a dreadful guess! Yes, my friends, we ride for the queen, I promise you!"

"Ah!" The frown of Porthos vanished. "That resolves everything. Once more we are together, then. Once more, as in the old days—all for one, one for all! Agreed?"

"Agreed." Athos turned to d'Artagnan. "Consider, my son! Who was with you and the queen?"

"Her Spanish woman," said d'Artagnan. "No one else."

"She gave you an errand to Chevreuse, you say? Then the Spanish woman has been bought over by Richelieu, depend upon it. A courier followed you to Grenoble. What did Richelieu do? He pardoned you for dueling. He presented you with a superb horse. He sent you to Chevreuse with a verbal message—and to Paris with a letter. You see his intent?"

"Devil take me if I do!" said d'Artagnan. "He was most gracious to me—and yet all the while I had a premonition of danger."

Athos uttered a short, ironic laugh.

"We who are about to die, salute! You are doomed."

"Impossible! You can not mean that he would send me to be killed."

"My son, my son, did Montforge have sword drawn or not? Answer."

"Yes," said d'Artagnan, and reflected. "Athos, you are magnificent. You always pierce to the truth of things, make them plain as day! Yes, the scoundrel did his best to kill me. But why should Richelieu give me a letter to deliver in Paris, if he meant to kill me *en route?*"

"Our cardinal knows you, my son. If one trap fails, he has another ready. You carry the means of it in your pocket. And in all this affair we shall find, not only Aramis, but the Comte de Montforge, vitally concerned. I predict it! Remember, the handkerchief he dropped; his fury against the queen; his connection with the cardinal's household; lastly, how he came direct to Sophie de Bruler and all but trapped you! That man is dangerous."

"So." D'Artagnan turned pale. "Well, Athos, I can not let you go with me."

"Bah!" exclaimed Athos. "Have you observed in me any great attachment to my life? Nonsense. Porthos, here, should not go. He has married a wife—"

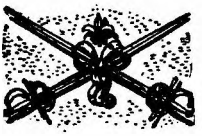
"Name of ten thousand devils!" thundered Porthos, shaking his fist in the air. "You are my friends, that's enough! I go—we all go! And if the cardinal tries to stop us, then so much the worse for the cardinal!"

"Admirable!" D'Artagnan broke into a laugh. "In this sentiment, then, let's be off!"

"None too soon," said Athos. "I make another prediction. I predict that, since Montforge undoubtedly knows your errand, he will be ahead of us."

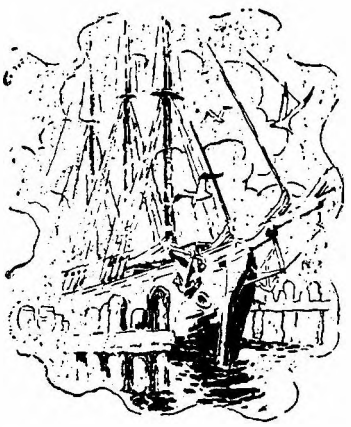
"So much the worse for Montforge," said d'Artagnan in a low voice.

Twenty minutes later, having paused for a bite and a sup, the three friends were mounting and riding forth, with Grimaud behind them.



TO BE CONTINUED

The GRIP of LIFE



A Sawmill Bully Boy Who Yearned for the Sea

By JAMES STEVENS

LOOKING out through the open lower end of the millhouse, the lineup man could see the acres of lumber stacked on the cargo dock, and the yellow outspread booms of a deepwater freighter shining in the morning sunlight.

"There's the boat for the Argentine order," he said. "Docked at midnight, the watchman told me."

Raff Barclay was strapping on his edgerman's leather apron, making ready for the first four hours of Monday labor. He'd had just six hours' sleep since Saturday, but his hands were steady as he buckled the thick straps around his knees and waist, and his eyes were clear as he followed the look of the lineup man and took in the colors and shape of the big freighter.

"Boy, that sight simply lifts me by the eyes!"

"Yeah?"

Raff flushed under the curious gaze of the lineup man. He had spoken without thinking, had spoken from an impulse that had been stirring in him ever since coming to Oldport ten days ago. This was his first tidewater sawmill, his first experience with edging out timbers and boards ordered for lands across deepwater.

Yesterday he had seen the rolling sea, the vast depth of its horizon, for the first time. Then that unfamiliar stir of feeling had surged up in him with such strength that it forced hot tears into his eyes. It came again, at the sight of the freighter that was to load three million feet of Douglas fir for the Argentine. He thought he knew what it was, and he tried to explain.

"Yeah. My people was sea folks away back. Guess some of them still are, what's left in New England. They used to be captains and mates on what they called the clipper ships. That was in the old sailin' days. Me, my old man took to the Maine timber, and then on to Saginaw, where I was born. I been a sawdust savage ever since. But down here—I dunno—the smell of salt water—edgin'

that order for the Argentine—takin' that trip to the beach yesterday—and now that big ship—aw, hell—just a blue Monday notion. Come on, what you gapin' at? She's time to blow, and the super's watchin'. Heave over that cant and have her ready to roll!"

The whistle boomed.

AT ONCE the saws lifted their gigantic chorus. The big band of the head rig roared as it ripped through a six foot log. At the lower end of the millhouse the trimsaws zip—zip—zipped, in a high, piercing key. The resaws sounded a heavy, steady drone. The high, powerful, long drawn wail of the circular ripsaws of the edger slicing cants into boards, overwhelmed all other sounds. There was no speaking at the edger, for no speech could be heard. Messages were delivered in the sign language of the sawmill men.

As labor limbered Raff's muscles and brought the sweat out on his chest and arms, exultation in his job returned. After all, there was nothing like it. There were the logs crawling up the bullchain from the millpond; there were the dripping cants booming down the live rolls from the headsaw; and here he was, grading each cant at a glance, remembering orders without a look at the board, setting his saws faster than they'd ever been set in the Oldport mill before—the lineup man said so—hoisting the steam rolls, dropping them on a cant to force it through the saws, grading the next cant as the circulars ripped through the grain. This was the zest of life for him, to be master of a mighty machine, a maker of timbers and boards, of two by four and one by six clears for a railroad in the Argentine. . . .

A vision fogged his eyes for a moment. For the Argentine . . . and down there at the cargo dock was the ship to take 'em away. There were the yellow booms, shining in the sunlight . . . a ship sailing eight thousand miles, to the Argentine . . . and he felt a deck heave under his feet, though he had only seen the sea, and that just once. But he could feel the roll of a ship, out of the stir of his blood. A Barclay, that's what he was. . . .

He was jerked out of his semi-dream by a hair raising shriek from the saws. The steel ribs of the steam roll were biting vainly into the cant face. His hand flashed to the clutch lever and the machine groaned to a stop. As he leaped around the edger, seizing a peavy, he saw the bulky form of John Ericsen charging down from the headsaw. But the big six inch cant was pried free and back on the edger table before the super could reach the scene. He stood and watched, hands on hips, head thrust forward, eyes a dull steel color under a threatening frown, as Raff threw in the clutch, rolled the cant on, and dropped the feed rolls. Nothing could be said, when a jam was ended that quickly. But Raff knew that he had dropped the rolls a flash of a second too late. Dreaming about a lousy ship! Thinking of being a sailor! And him a sawdust savage, heart, soul and hide! Well . . .

"Come on, bully, come on," he growled to himself. "Saw lumber. What the hell you care about the Argentine? Mind the job, old-timer!"

There were no more jams in the edger this blue Monday; but at five o'clock the super hailed him at his locker.

"You stick around the hotel after supper. We're comin' to an understandin' tonight."

"What's on your mind?" said Raff, thinking only of supper.

"You'll learn," said John Ericsen, and tramped off.

II

THE SUPER came around two hours after supper. Raff was sitting on the hotel porch, yawning over a cigaret. The super pulled up a chair and sat heavily down. He was a hunched, squat figure in the twilight. His voice was wooden and slow, the words coming solidly, however, like the strokes of a mallet.

"If I was to ask you how many times you'd ever been fired, you'd say none. I've been tryin' to figger how true it would be."

Just then knots of muscle stood out under the smooth skin of Raff Barclay's jaws. The youthful line of his mouth turned hard. Even his shock of curly black hair seemed to stiffen.

"I don't know what the hell's the idea," he said, fighting to keep control of his voice. "I shipped out here as an edgerman, and I've done the work so far. I jammed the old gal up this mornin', I admit, but in a minute she was rollin' free. Maybe I've been fired, and maybe I ain't, but I never been rode—not by any sawmill super that ever spit snoose! I've slung down my apron often enough and walked off the job, I'll tell you that!"

"I figgered so," said John Ericsen calmly. "That's why I wanted to talk. You ever think of bein' a sailor, of goin' to sea?"

"*Now* what th' hell!" The young edgerman's eyes blazed and his voice also flared. "What's the idy of this cross questionin' stuff anyhow? It's—it's—" He thumped the arm of his chair, unable to find a word to express his feelings.

"Oh, nothin'," said the super in a weary voice. "I guess it's nothin' to you. It's only that I used to know your grandfather."

"You did!" Raff was genuinely startled now.

"Yea, lad. A long time ago. I was a kid, didn't even have fuzz on my face, fresh from Norway. I sailed on your grandfather's lumber schooner out of Bangor. Knew your father. Saw him go off for Saginaw. Broke the old man up. You're more like the old man. In looks, I mean. Your father didn't amount to much. I'm wonderin' if you're like him inside. Been watchin'. Dunno. Prob'ly you are."

Raff started to crack out, "Well, what of it?" but choked back the words. His imagination had caught fire from the bluntly striking speech of the super. Here was a man who had gone to sea under his grandfather. The feeling he had experienced when first seeing the ocean, when he had looked on the Argentine bound freighter this morning, stirred in him again. His eyes glowed in the dimming light. The old super was still a motionless bulk in his chair. But there was more force in his voice when he spoke again.

"I saw you watchin' that ship this mornin'. I knew what was on your mind. That far seein' look of yours. It took generations of seamen to give you that. It's what makes you so quick at gradin' the cants. But I was speakin'—*heil*. I left the woods of Norway a long time ago." He paused and slouched lower in his chair; when he spoke again a certain softness was in his voice. "A long time ago. Generations of woodsmen behind me. But I wouldn't have that life. I had to go to sea. And I did, for two voyages. One to Boston, and one from Bangor to the Argentine. With lumber, same as that freighter at the cargo dock is goin' now. It was fine. Seein' foreign life, like it was at Buenos Aires. I thought I'd always be a sailor. But I got back to Bangor—and the woods. Yeah, I went out to a loggin' camp, and I never got away. You know . . ."

RAFF was too amazed for speech. Old Ericsen, this man built like a chunk of timber, with a hard, wooden voice and dull, steely eyes, going sentimental! Raff wished he wouldn't. It made him uncomfortable. But the super was hard boiled again soon enough.

"Never mind what I just said," he growled, clenching a hand the size of a chair bottom over his knee. "I'd just got to thinkin' of your grandfather. A real man among men. Once on the voyage a sailor was blown off a yard and into the belly of a foresail. He'd cracked his head and was knocked out. He'd 'a' been thrown into the sea any minute, and it was a sea gone wild. Your grandfather didn't wait to order somebody else after him, but went hand over hand up a line, and brought the sailor down. A sea tore

them loose and washed them across deck. The cap'n got three smashed ribs out of it, but he never let on. Always on the bridge. A real American deepwater man. One of the kind that's lost to our ships when they're needed most. I was thinkin'—you might be one. You've got your grandfather's look, but prob'ly you're only a boomer sawdust savage, and you'll be that till you die."

"Well, what of it?" said Raff resentfully. "What do you care, even if you did know my grandfather?"

"Just this, young feller," said John Ericsen, becoming the sawmill super again. "You've been boomin' your way for a dozen years through sawmills from Saginaw to the West Coast. Well, the boomer days are gone. With a big company like this one the sawyers have to stick. And it's the same with all the big outfits from British Columbia to the California line. You boom out of here and you'll likely land in a jerkwater mill, and it'll be jerkwater mills for you from then on. Now, looky here. You know edgin' like a badger knows diggin', but I guess that's all. The rest of you is conk—knotty common, anyhow. And you're just about through!"

"Through?" Raff was too amazed to say more.

"Yeah. You're gettin' on, on in years."

"What th'—say, I'm only thirty!"

"That's it. You said you'd been sawmillin' a dozen years, edgin' for six. You've been through the mill; you're ready to grade. You're goin' to learn now whether you're waste or clear. You might as well take John J. Fact and look him in the eye. Your hell raisin' is done. You're goin' to start fightin' now for the best you can get out of life, or you're goin' to slide down with the other old boomers in the jerkwater mills. That's her, and you know it. All I got to say. I put in—thinkin' of your grandfather."

Raff faced John J. Fact and looked him in the eye. He couldn't help it. The super had it right. He'd always known the time would come; he couldn't go on being cocky and proud forever, in all the pride and strength of youth. But rebellion flamed in him. To settle down, to stick on one job year after year, and maybe never to get anywhere after all—that, when there were so many new places to be seen, so much adventure and romance still in his blood—no, he couldn't give in, not yet!

"You want me to promise to stick here, to settle down?" he asked, quietly enough.

"I'm askin' nothin'," said the super. "I've just been tellin' you on account—on account of the old days. I'm nobody's nurse. Fight it out yourself, and in another ten days I'll know."

"Fair enough," said Raff grimly.

"Yeah." Old Ericsen lumbered to his feet. "That's all for now, I guess." He stubbed away to the steps. There he turned. "Well—" he paused, then he shrugged his big shoulders and was gone with a grumbled, "Good night."

III

RAFF BARCLAY slumped in his chair as old Ericsen disappeared. A tumultuous stir of feeling seemed to make him physically helpless. The old impulse was there, the impulse to rise up on his hind legs and yell, "Take your old edger and go to hell!" but he could not respond. The super's words held him down. "Gettin' on in years—gettin' on in years . . ." The fact faced him still; he saw it plain. All the boomers he had ever known had begun to slide at thirty. At thirty the woods bosses and mill supers, the masters of life he knew, had buckled down to the hard climb.

There was no getting away from it. And he felt the strength, the power to go as far as the rest. But the thought of it was a torment, for he could see the effort ahead, the grind, the worry, the slavery to a task, and he knew that by no other means could power be reached. And all that must be given up! The old life!

The old life! God, how good it was! Drinking, fighting, loving, laboring for these, and for no more! The glory of

doing a tough job magnificently, making a rep in some milltown, then, wearying of life there, rambling on. On to a new job, to fresh scenes, other pleasures. Going over the hump, taking to the open road, all flushed up with joy in a free life, wanting no more, shunning any more. To have had all that, to have it now, and to be asked to settle down and to work only to "get ahead".

What did it mean? Why did men do it? There was old Ericsen, a rambler himself in his young days. So tied up now in his sawmill he had hardly a human feeling left. Well, he did; he remembered his own young days; he knew how it was, all right.

Raff's mind settled and rested for a moment on the image old Ericsen had given him of his grandfather. His own father had never mentioned the old man, had never spoken of his family and its sea going men, except when he was far gone in liquor. Raff stared out into the dark and saw ships on the sea, ships with Barclays in command.

Then, far out over the yards the mast lights of the freighter bound for the Argentine caught his eye. And suddenly that stir of feeling that had come to him so often in the past ten days, that had quickened yesterday when he first saw the sea, surged up in him. A deck heaved under his feet. A trade wind flung spray in his face. He was a Barclay. "Have you ever thought of bein' a sailor?" old Ericsen had said.

He never had. Not until now. A new vision blazed over his future. There was the way out from everything, from booming, from settling down. Out to be a sailor! Out to make the Barclay name shine again on the sea! To go out on this very same ship, to ride with a deckload of lumber down to the Argentine . . .

The battle was on. He was in the grip of life, fighting to escape. He felt the need of acting now, of settling all at once, not realizing that the struggle had just begun.

"I'll go out and talk to somebody on that ship," he said to himself. "Then I'll know where I'm at."

RAFF BARCLAY left his chair and the hotel porch for the road that led to the cargo dock. He tramped slowly, his head down, his hands clenched by his sides. On his right were the rows of workers' cottages; he passed, on his left, the company office. Beyond it the homes of the manager and of John Ericsen stood in broad, tree covered grounds. But the super was in the office. Looking through a lighted window, Raff saw him standing at a tall desk, poring over tally sheets. The sight made him groan. To settle down just to reach a place where he'd have to grind like that! Not much, not if he could find a way out, and live. He tramped on between piles of lumber, the trams before them lighted dimly by arc lamps.

Out beyond the piles of lumber the great millhouse was alive. The night shift was turning the big logs into timbers and boards. The millhouse windows were squares of light. The roaring, screaming chorus of saws sounded over the yard. He might rule that some day, as old Ericsen ruled it now. Some man who was thirty now would fight his way up to that place. But not Raff Barclay, not this son of a sea going race, going out now to a ship that was bound for the Argentine.

Raff stopped short as the gleams of an arc lamp flickered over the faces of a man and girl who were walking slowly down from the cargo dock. He glimpsed the strong features of one of the ship's mates; and then an electric thrill shot through him as he recognized Thelma Johnson!

Thelma out on a ship, out with gold braid and brass buttons! So soon after yesterday and last night! Hell, he'd forgotten all about her and all other women in this battle started by John Ericsen—but here was *that* element again. Women couldn't be left out of anything, not by a young bully like Raff Barclay, anyway. For he was the young bully again now; youth was running the machine. The sight of Thelma with the mate had about knocked him over. Not that he was so smitten on her; to him she was just an-

other kid to pick up, love and leave; just like a hundred others he had known while roving through the sawmill towns.

But this was a wallop anyway. Why, last night he'd have sworn she'd jump at the snap of his finger. She'd said over and over she was crazy about him—the first man, the only man—she'd never before . . . and so on, and so on. And she'd only been playing him. The first time for him. Well, the first time had to be. "Gettin' on, on in years—" No, by God! She was his all right! He could still bring 'em to taw! It was just the buttons and braid. She'd cry all over herself when he stepped out now.

"SAY, KID, what's the idea? What'd you tell me last night? Who's this guy, anyhow?"

She stopped suddenly, startled, but she clung tighter than ever to the mate's arm. She spoke, angrily and contemptuously.

"I don't know what you're talkin' about. You haven't any right to speak to me like that, and you know it!"

"You've said enough, kid," growled the mate, shoving her aside; then he swayed up to Raff. "If she says it's no put in of yours, it ain't, see! So cast off, and give us no more of your lip!"

"All right!" Raff shouted the words.

Youth surged up in him, heating his eyes, flushing his face, leaping in his arms. Here was what he wanted, here was something to fight that he could feel and see. Here was the roaring flame of living for the moment, the glory he had known all these years.

"You want none of my lip, sailor!" he roared. "All right—then how'll this do?"

His right fist shot straight from the shoulder. The big sailor ducked. The blow caught him just above his forehead. Raff felt his knuckles crack, the hand turning numb. But the sailor was staggered. Raff plunged in, driving with his left. It smashed the sailor over the heart. He went down, rolled over, scrambled from his knees, wobbly on his feet, but crouched, his guard up. Raff could not clench his right hand. But his heart beat up a higher tide of blood than ever. The old life! Living for the moment! Youth in battle! To hell with the rest!

The arc lamp flickered over the two brawny figures, one swaying in a crouch, rushing and swinging, the other erect, moving catlike in spite of calked boots, a swelling right hand held up for guard, the left fist hitting straight from the shoulder. The tram boards sagged under their pounding feet. The girl watched, staring helplessly for a moment, then she screamed, but no heed being taken of that, she ran down the tram, toward the company office. Both men had already forgotten her. They were caught up in the fire of battle. They could not feel pain, nor anything else but the fiery desire to beat down, to master by physical might.

With his right hand crippled by the first blow, Raff could have little actual hope for victory. But he had a sense of fighting life, of being in rebellion against its power; instinct gave him the feeling that he was fighting now for his youth; that he must battle on until he was utterly victorious or utterly licked. For him life was action, now labor, now love, now a fight. And here he was, surging up on a high tide, meeting life in the shape of a bare fisted sailor who was trying to battle him down.

His right hand was soon entirely numb, and the numbness spread to his elbow, so that he could hardly hold up his arm for guard. So his head rocked and his body sagged from the terrific swings that landed time after time; he rocked and staggered, but for many minutes, minutes that passed as hours, or years, he kept straightly erect, like a pine whipped by a gale.

His left arm never slacked in pumping straight blows; it was as tireless as the piston of a steam engine in the early part of the fight; and in that time the big sailor floundered again and again, staggered back on his heels, backed away, until he rallied his strength for another battering rush.

JOHN ERICSEN, coming at a lumbering run from the office, saw the two men fighting under the arc lamp. He heard heavy boots thudding and grinding on the tram floor. He saw a body surge ahead with the swing or the drive of an arm, another body bending as it was struck by a fist. He saw shoulders jerking, dipping, heaving, as they drove all their strength into arm muscles.

The whirl of arms was like that of wheel spokes. Pounding closer to the fight, he saw the flash of fists flying between the two men, saw them smash against faces and bodies, saw the swoop of them circling back when they missed.

And then John Ericsen saw the faces of the men under the lamp, streaks of white between dark smears. He saw that one of the men was Raff, and swore. He swore again, when the edgerman's arm swung helplessly down—and again, when one of the mate's furious swings rocked Raff's head back so that it seemed his neck must snap from his shoulders—and Raff was down, but crawling to his knees even as the mate panted:

"There, damn you! That'll learn—you to—monkey 'ith—a deepwater man—you—"

Raff was back on his feet, his legs spread wide, his head and shoulders sagging, yet trying to lift his left fist for another drive. The mate started a last swing. His wrist was caught in a tremendous hand. A heavy voice growled in his ear.

"I'm the superintendent here. Get back to your ship."

"Why didn't you let us finish it?" Raff, his head clear again, stared furiously into old Ericsen's cold eyes.

"This is a sawmill, not a roughhouse saloon," said the super. "Anyhow, you've got enough to take you to the comp'ny hospital. Here, throw your good arm over my shoulder, or you'll break your neck. Come on."

An hour later Raff lay in a hospital cot, trying to get the sense of all that had happened into his aching head. Old Ericsen had given him the last blow.

"I'd no more than left you when you went out fightin' over a girl. Well, that settles it. When the doc lets you out of here, you get your time. You're fired. Good night."

So he was finished, that quick. Two or three days, and then he could go, the doctor had said. Where, he didn't know, or care. He was licked. Too much. All of the old life had been knocked out of him. All that he had been a week ago, even yesterday, was gone, leaving him a husk of muscle and bone. What—well, it was too hard to figure out. He was tired, half dead. At last he slept.

IV

THE NEXT evening the mate came to see him. Raff was sitting on the side of his cot, wryly twisting his jaws to work the soreness from them, gloomily gazing through a window at the burner and stacks of the sawmill, all black now against the red light of the setting sun. His right forearm rested over his knee, the bandaged hand sticking out like a white club. The skin about his eyes was swollen and black. But the worst was the feeling that all had gone dead inside of him, that nothing mattered. The years had caught up with him, a girl had made a fool of him, he'd been beaten down in a fair fight, fired off a job. And here he was, not giving a damn.

He saw himself going from here to a jerkwater mill, booming on from there, sliding down like so many he had known, and he felt resigned to that. His fancy of taking a ship to the Argentine—that, too, was gone. It was no use. All was dead. He loathed the feeling, but it seemed that nothing could change it. Then the mate hove in, his swollen lips fixed in a wide grin to hide his embarrassment. He hadn't wanted to come, but that moose of a superintendent had talked him into it, and then exacted a promise not to mention his name.

"Hello, kid," said the mate, still grinning. "How you makin' it?"

"All right," said Raff dispiritedly.

The mate took off his cap and sat down uninvited on the opposite cot. He spread his legs, rested his forearms on them, and dangled his cap between his knees. His grin became more natural, and some of the hardness went out of the lines of his lean face.

"Come on, kid," he said. "You don't look so bad. Hell, I got bruises a foot across over my ribs. And a lump the size of an onion on my head where you busted your fist It was just another battle, and a damn' good one. You're not goin' to be sore, are you, huh?"

"No, I ain't sore." Raff felt a glow in spite of himself, from the sailor's gruff friendliness. "I admit I was licked, though the fight wasn't finished. It's—well, there's something else."

"I hope it ain't the skirt?"

"Naw. She's nothin' to me. I'd fussed her some, that was all. You can have her."

The mate decided that this was a ticklish subject; he'd better get down to the real business of his visit.

"Well, anyway," he said, "I just come to tell you it was a good battle and I'm sorry it was the cause of you gettin' fired."

"You already heard that, then," said Raff bitterly.

"Well, yeah. Talk out on the cargo dock. H-r-r-r-mm!" The mate cleared his throat, frowned, and then went on as if he were saying a rehearsed speech. "I figger it's my fault, in a way. Then I'm short handed. I need a couple of ordinary seamen. She's a good ship, best on the McCormick Line; good conditions, grub O. K. and two men to a cabin. None of the old focsle stuff you read about. Them things is gone on American ships. She's a grand cruise down to the Argentine. You might take to the sea. H-r-r-r-mm. There was a famous clipper captain of your name."

"How'd you know about him?" said Raff, his eyes lighting up.

"Oh, we all know about the famous old time clipper captains."

The mate paused and swore under his breath. He wished he could have stood up and told that square headed superintendent to go jump in the harbor. But then he did need a husky O. S.

"Yeah, you'd likely find out you was made for the sea," he went on. "It's a hard enough life yet, even on American ships, but so's any life that's worth living. Me, I swear at the sea, vow I'll never take another voyage, but I go back, though I'll prob'ly never rate a master's ticket. Something about it grips you and uses you, no matter what you think or care." He realized he was speaking real thoughts aloud and he hauled up. "She's really great, kid. Rollin' down with the Trades through the tropics, nosin' through the Straits of Magellan, up to the River Plate. The señoritas of Buenos Aires'll make you forget every trouble you ever had. You'll have to work, mind. But you won't be sorry you signed on. Just think 'er over. You'll have a week."

FOR RAFF the future glowed again. The emotion he had experienced when first seeing the sea and one of its deepwater ships blazed up once more. The dream returned, driving back the threat of the years. The mate talked on, but he hardly heard. After awhile he was alone, without knowing that the mate was gone. Twilight fell, darkness came on, and he could see the lights of the millhouse and the blazing dome of the burner through the window. But he did not see them. He was on a deepwater ship, rolling away to the Argentine with a cargo of lumber, as his famous grandfather had done so long ago. He was back in the family trail.

He thought all was settled now, but the struggle in his soul had only been started afresh. Raff was three long days and nights fighting it out. The mate had settled only one thing for him; he could not go on as a boomer in the small mills. Either a new youth in the shape of new adventures must open before him by the way of a life at sea, or he must start again here, even if it were only as a clean-up man on the millhouse floor.

He could not rid himself of the need to justify himself in John Ericsen's eyes; he

could never forget how contemptuously the old super compared him with his grandfather. It would be hell to stick here and fight it out, with only the long grind ahead, year after year in this one place, and failure perhaps at the end. If he went on booming through the small mills, he'd never forget, never shake the old super out of his mind. No; it was either settle down here and make his place in life here, or else answer the call of the sea. The sea did call him; he knew that for the truth; the salt of it was in his blood.

But it would be beginning all over, starting at thirty where he should have started at eighteen. There he would have another youth. Adventure and romance would be his companions once more. He'd have years with them, while his eyes were still bright, his blood still hot, his heart ever hungry for the glory of living just in the moment. Why not? What the hell! He had years of the old life in him yet, and there was nothing like it. How could he doubt what path was ahead for him?

There it shone! Steam up and the hawsers cast off, the freighter drifting into the tide, then the thump of the engine, with a clear channel ahead. Green water and white foam shining in the sunlight. Green trees looming on the far hills. So soon to be left behind! The stacks of sawmills smoking along the harbor front. The roar of the saws and planers fading away. The swells of the harbor bar ahead, and beyond them the sea horses splashing off the waves.

Steer south for the Magellan Straits and the Argentine! The deck heaving underfoot! The old sawmill forever left behind! Going out to answer a life that called in his blood! A Barclay on a deep-water ship once more!

V

RAFF made up his mind the day before the freighter was to sail. He got his time card from the office and took it out to the mill for the super to sign. From there he'd go to the ship and sign on. The decision made him feel ten years younger. He forgot his bandaged hand as he tramped through the yard from the office. He whistled like a school kid. He wanted to let out a yell as he saw the yellow booms of the freighter swinging against the blue sky. He thought exultantly to himself:

"Yea, lad, she's takin' you away from all this grief! Another Barclay is goin' to sea!"

John Ericsen nodded grimly as he signed the time card. He motioned with his huge hands to show that it was all right with him, that he approved. Even his thumping voice could not be heard above the saws, so he made no attempt to speak. Raff stuck out his left to shake hands. When the grip left it his heart bounded. Now he was entirely free.

He hurried for the side door, keeping his look from the tumultuous scene of labor. He felt that he never wanted to see it again. Yet, even as he hurried, a nameless dread came over him, like a cloud shadow over a tree, a premonition that he was not yet free, that he might not escape. He swore at the notion. There was the door, the stairs leading down, and the ship on out at the dock. He had only to go five steps—three—one—and then it happened.

He looked back, his gaze darting to the edger. He had noted its silence while Ericsen was signing his card. The silence had continued too long, had caught up with him as he hurried for the door; that was the dread, the shadow; and now it mastered him.

Raff had known it before he looked. The cants were piled high on the edger table. The new edgerman, his face drawn and sweat streaked, his body limp, was staring miserably at the slabbed side of one of the big sticks, while the super blocked out the grades for him. Nearly all common. Raff understood, as he saw the piles of untrimmed boards back of the resaw. The Argentine order was for clears; it must be finished by tomorrow noon, or there would be demurrage to

pay on the ship; and the new edgerman couldn't turn the trick.

Old Ericsen grabbed the saw levers and set the circulars. He ran a cant through, stooped over again, but he had been just a head sawyer in his working days, and his hands were heavy and slow. Besides, he had fifty other duties throughout the mill.

All that went through Raff's mind while the second cant was passing through the edger. He took one step toward the roaring machine.

And so life tightened its grip around him.

Old Ericsen raised up as a bandaged hand touched his shoulder. His eyes of dull steel expressed no surprise. He didn't need a word said to him. He stepped out, and Raff took a place before the edger table. He blocked out the grades while the new edgerman set the saws. Ericsen stood on the table beyond the machine and for three minutes watched the boards stream from the edger. Then he swung down and lumbered away to the headsaw. The Argentine order was going to be filled.

VI

THAT was how life tied Raff Barclay down to one of its big jobs. It conquered him when he saw his job being disastrously performed. All of a sudden nothing else mattered but making the old machine do her work and get the order out. And when it was accomplished there was the urge to do the same again, to do more, to do all that only a man with his training and skill and strength could do, to take hold here and make himself count for all that was in him.

"Take me back when my hand gets well, and I'll stick," he said to the super.

"All right," said John Ericsen, woodenly as ever.

Raff stayed with the edger until the order was finished the next morning. He watched from a millhouse window while the deckload was being lashed down, he watched while the ship steamed down the harbor.

Out there was the sea, and the trail to the Argentine—the trail of youth, closing to him now forever. The stir in his blood still told him that he was born for the sea, but here was his job, his place, with all the hard years ahead. He did not know why it had to be. He only knew it was rather sad, this saying farewell to one's youth; but he was realizing that there is a vast satisfaction in saying the farewell when the time comes, in surrendering all those treasures to life, in submitting to the will by which its work is done.

John Ericsen was watching him from a dark corner of the mill. He was in a dark corner, because it would never do for his men to see a mist over his steely eyes or a softness about his mouth. He was remembering how his own youth passed on a voyage out of Bangor; he was remembering especially how he had fallen from a yard, and how a captain risked his life.

"Somebody must look after the young ones," he said to himself. Then he felt shame. "Now, now—don't you go and get soft about it though, John Ericsen!"

Well, he reflected, he'd been hard enough, making the lad fight it out for himself. Hard enough—except for the time yesterday when he saw Raff coming with his time card, and ordered the edger shut down. A soft hearted trick. But by it a Barclay was lost to the sea. And by it a sawmill man was made.

WATCH FIRES

A Story of the Revolutionary War

By ERNEST HAYCOX

THE TWO officers were lying flat on the ground with the brush parted in front of them, commanding a clear view of the stone house below. They had been in this position—Captain Tench Colvin and his lieutenant, Jennifer Grand—for better than twenty minutes. And still there was no sign of activity from the house and no sign of life in the woods directly behind the house. The captain, hardly more than a youth, stared from beneath the peak of his hat, as immobile as the deadfall beside him. But Grand shifted his legs constantly and complained in bitter tones of the cold.

"Dammee, it comes through my cloak like a knife. I'm paralyzed from the hips down. If you ask my opinion I say there's nobody but the farmer and his wife there. Let's move on with the company."

He was, when compared with the young captain, a man of substantial proportions, big boned rather than fleshy and very deep of chest. His face was of a dark cast with the whiskers giving his lower cheeks a metallic, saturnine expression in no way relieved by eyes which were rather far back in his head. It was a mature and almost crafty countenance, as opposite Captain Colvin's frank and ruddy features as it was possible to be. The latter's gaze never left the house.

"It looks all right," he mused. "But Cornwallis has an advance guard on the Princeton road and it's hardly wise to

think they haven't moved beyond Eight Mile Run. A pretty spot for ambush—below us."

"Well, then," cut in Grand, "let's send a few men roundabout to flush the birds, if any. I'm in a devil of a state."

From the deeper thicket to their rear a heavy, groaning voice rose in a sing-song version of a camp tune. The young captain struck the cold, sodden earth with his fist and retreated from his vantage point, rising.

"If I've told that idiot once, I've told him a dozen times about making noise!"

He picked his way carefully back. The lieutenant smiled covertly. A dozen yards brought Colvin to a break in the brush and here, scattered at ease were something like twenty men in the odds and ends of the Continental uniform. All were silent, excepting a short, fat lump of a man with reddish whiskers and a bulbous nose. He sang on until the young captain's words cut him off.

"Stop that noise, Jeffry! You've had your orders."

Jeffry's face turned from saffron to mottled red.

"Man's got to do suthin' t' keep fr'm freezin'."

"Then work your arms or bend your legs," adjured the young captain. "This is no time to conduct a singing school."

He left the fat one staring vengefully at a grinning circle of companions and rejoined the lieutenant.

"No," said he, taking up Grand's last statement, "I'll not sent out flankers. There's a swamp to the right in those woods. It'd waste another half hour. We've got to get on and make contact. I'm going down myself. If there's trouble I'll signal for support. Meanwhile, you'd better bring the men along the edge of the brush so they can command it with their fire."

The lieutenant emitted something that passed for assent and rose to his knees. Colvin turned to the right, and still under cover went some distance through the thicket before he broke from it and walked boldly down the hill toward the house.

"I thought I saw a dog there," he mused. "If there were British about the place surely the animal would sound off."

He strode along in seeming carelessness, hat cocked well over one eye and cloak whipped about his lean body by the wind. His blue eyes flashed from the house to the small barn and thence to the dark line of woods. It was a dark, miserable day, even for tempestuous January, and there had been no sun. The undergrowth swayed and the pine trees bent. He approached the house with a hand on the sword and prepared to knock.

IN THE brush, Grand still rested on his knees, watching the young captain. He had made no move to bring the company up. There was a cheerless, momentary smile on his face as he muttered:

"Makes a gay figure, the young whippersnapper. Walks across the ground as if it were a ball room. Now when I am captain . . ."

His smile faded as the ambition nearest his heart arose in his mind. Indeed, there were very few hours during the day Jennifer Grand did not think about that prospective captaincy. When the company had been formed and officers elected he had cherished the hope of becoming its commander until Colvin came upon the scene and with no effort had captured the place. The hurt of that event, though a year old, rankled with all its original bitterness in Grand's mind.

"Oh, I'll admit he makes a fair enough leader," continued the lieutenant, peering between the leaves. "And I'll not deny he's a swordsman of parts. But 'twas my place by rights. I'm an older man. I know tactics as well as he. There'll come a day . . .

He pursed his lips shrewdly and a light stirred back in the slaty colored wells. There would come a day when Colvin was promoted, or killed—or captured. Then he would be captain.

His attention was abruptly diverted

from Colvin's progress to a point in the woods behind the stone house. A scarlet jacket came suddenly through the brush, preceded by a sword point. Within the space of ten seconds a file of six British scouts followed and deployed behind the house. Colvin, standing at the door could not see them as they circled the place and advanced with outstretched guns.

The officer, foremost, strode swiftly toward the front. Grand took hold of a twig and squeezed it between his fingers, suppressing the excitement that rose in him. There was yet time for him to sing out a warning to the young captain; time enough to collect the company behind him and charge down the slope. Yet he did neither of these things.

"Now," he muttered, very softly. "Now Captain Colvin, what'll you do?"

Succeeding events moved swiftly. The British officer popped around the corner of the house at the same instant the door opened and the farmer thrust his head out. Colvin, with one foot on the threshold, turned in time to find the Englishman closing in, sword raised. Across the clearing rang a shout. Instantly the farmer flung the door shut in Colvin's face, leaving him with his back to the wall, blade out.

"Ah!" muttered Grand, looking behind.

As yet the members of the company had neither seen nor heard the enemy below them and he turned back to watch the conflict with tight lipped interest.

Colvin had wasted no moment. Surrounded, he plunged directly at the officer and put his sword to work. Grand heard the metal clash, saw the soldiers halt and suspend fire as the duel went on, saw the English officer give ground under the hard attack. Colvin's body weaved swiftly and the sword point went home. The English officer staggered and fell back into the arms of one of his men.

"Dammee!" muttered Grand, wiping his mouth.

Colvin had turned toward the hill. His shout echoed from one side of the clearing to the other.

"Come on, Pennsylvania!"

There was a sudden confusion of bayonet points and men. Colvin disappeared in the midst of the struggle and Grand, crushing the oak twig in his fingers, swore again. The young captain had leaped clear of the mêlée and was running across the meadow toward the nearest shelter of trees. Once more his call echoed up the slope.

"Come on, Pennsylvania!"

Grand rose to his feet as the brush crashed behind him. The company swarmed through the underbrush, scattering as they traveled.

"Hold on!" cried Grand, harshly. "Don't leave cover! There's a hundred men concealed behind the house! It's an ambush. Take aim and fire!"

There was a shot below. Colvin seemed to stumble and Grand let out a sharp breath. The next instant the captain had gained the shelter of trees with the British hard in pursuit. The underbrush around Grand shivered with a volley and the smoke curled upward in the gray air. Looking about, he saw himself the focus of inquiring eyes and, drawing his sword, he pushed the brush aside and started down the slope on the run.

"Come on, then! We'll risk it!"

But under his breath he was volubly cursing. Another chance had gone. A treble cry challenged the British detail who, recoiling suddenly from their pursuit of the captain, turned toward the oncoming company.

They tarried for but one round of shots, gave ground and raced for the woods behind the farm house. Colvin came out of the brush on the dead run, brandishing his sword. The Pennsylvanians spread fanwise, swept around the house and charged for the woods, firing as they traveled. Colvin, foremost, threw himself across the path of a retreating Englishman and engaged in a sharp duel. Bayonet and sword rang and clashed. The Englishman lunged forward, missed his mark and struck up with the butt of his weapon. Colvin drove his blade into the man's body and stepped back, a trickle of blood on his face.

"Into the woods!" he shouted. "Spread out and cut them off!"

The Pennsylvanians vanished from the clearing with a great threshing of brush and a scattering of shots. Colvin, breathing hard, swung upon Grand with angry light in his eyes.

"What are you doing here? Go on with your company!"

"Stood by to give you aid," said Grand.

"I need no aid," retorted Colvin. "What made you tarry when I called? We had them neatly caged."

"I thought I saw a large body of troops beyond the trees. I considered it best to wait a moment."

"You had my order, sir!"

Grand's face turned dark.

"Even so, I had to collect the men. We could not come instantly."

"I told you to bring the company up to the clearing's edge. Did you do that?"

"I was on the point of doing it when the scouting party came into view."

The rivulet of blood, coursing down the young captain's cheek made his face seem startlingly white. The blue eyes blazed.

"You had my orders! Do you choose to disobey them?"

"I thought it prudent—" began the lieutenant, more somber than ever.

Colvin spoke coldly. "Let me exercise the prudence for this company. If you are afraid . . ."

Grand stepped back as if stung; fire gleamed in the slate colored pits.

"Afraid, sir? I shall ask satisfaction for that!"

"You shall have satisfaction," replied the young captain with a singular grimness, "as soon as we reach a peaceful camp. Meanwhile I want my orders obeyed."

He swung on his heel to catch sight of Jeffry limping across the clearing in pursuit of his comrades, almost the only one of the company in sight. Colvin emitted a grunt of displeasure.

"Up to your usual tricks again. Where have you been?"

Jeffry put a wry expression on his ugly face.

"Hurted my foot, Cap'n. Near to broke a toe comin' down the slope."

"You have skulked every engagement this company has been in! If I catch you doing it again I'll lay my sword across your back and send you before a court martial!"

Jeffry spat tobacco and mumbled beneath his breath, straggling off. Lieutenant Grand spoke stiffly.

"He speaks the truth. I saw him stumble and fall."

Jeffry cast an amazed glance over his shoulder and Captain Colvin, sweeping the pair of them at a single glance only nodded and turned away. Grand winked at Jeffry, sheathing his sword.

THE MEMBERS of the company came out of the woods, singly and in groups, with here and there a scarlet coated prisoner walking despondently to the fore. Colvin raised his arm and sang out.

"Gentlemen, form ranks."

Over to the left of the hill, coming from the region of the Trenton-Princeton road a burst of musketry, strong and sustained marked the beginning of a larger engagement of troops. Young Captain Colvin took a stand in front of the forming line with a sudden animation springing to his face. His eyes jumped from man to man.

"A piece of business well done," he commended. "Put those prisoners between the last two files. By the left flank, march!"

They went by the farm house and struck a narrow, overgrown wagon road which wound along the base of the hill they had so recently traveled. It took them across a creek up a steep grade, heavily wooded. The crackle of gun fire became more pronounced and at Colvin's command the column broke into a dog trot. Thus they reached the summit of the slope, threaded their way between stumps and oak clumps and emerged to open country.

Their eminence gave them a good view of the fight as it rolled slowly along the Trenton-Princeton road. Down that road, from the direction of Princeton came a column of British infantry stretching out so formidably that the eye lost the tail of it in a distant copse. Scattered on both sides of the road, taking advantage of every hedge and fence and bush, a body of Americans made a valiant show of stemming the tide. The two sides were not more than three hundred yards apart and the smoke drifted heavily over the ground.

Colvin took his company down the incline, veering somewhat in his course as he saw a mounted officer spurring along a side path to meet him, dodging in and out of protecting groves.

"Must be all of Cornwallis' eight thousand troops behind that advance guard," said the youthful captain, wiping the moisture from his face. He was greatly surprised to find it tinged with red, already having forgotten the musket ball that had grazed his temple. "Coming in an infernal sweat to take Washington. Ah, well! Come on, Pennsylvania!"

The courier wheeled his horse in front of the company.

"Colonel Hand sent me to fetch you from your reconnaissance. He requests you throw your men directly across the Trenton pike and reinforce the rest of your regiment there."

"Done!" cried the captain. "What's the game now?"

"I think," said the courier, ruefully staring at a bullet hole in his coat, "General Washington wants more time to throw up breastworks at Trenton. At any rate, we're to hold Mister Cornwallis back as long as we can. And *we've* got work cut out for us."

The youthfulness which hitherto had so strongly characterized Captain Colvin vanished in midair. He took the company across the foot of the slope on the dead run, hurdled a fence and skirted the right wing of the American skirmishers. From the corner of his eye he sought to identify the battalions scattered over the ground. Part of Housegger's German battalion was there, hugging every rock and every tree trunk, firing deliberately. Farther on he met the insignia of Scott's Virginians. Then, coming upon the main pike, he found himself supporting his own regiment—Hand's Pennsylvanians. The singing of the musket balls became more pronounced and as he raced over the ground he saw the British column halt and deploy.

So long had he led this small body of men and so well did they know the business of fighting that a single wave of his arm was enough to send them seemingly helter skelter into the ranks already lying on the ground, behind such cover as they could find. The British were likewise extending their front to make a pitched fight of it. Horses charged down the highway, checked and wheeled. A brass piece swung its mouth on the road; gunners served it. Colvin shouted to the nearest men.

"Take aim at that rammer! Bidwell, drop back with the prisoners!"

The musketry swelled in volume as a prelude to the sudden erupting of the cannon. The ball creamed overhead and buried itself in the earth behind. It was a signal for a concerted advance along the whole of the British front, with bright jackets rising and running onward to the next bit of cover. The very weight of the columns in the rear pressed them irresistibly on and just as irresistibly forced the Americans back. Colvin, looking toward his left, saw a horseman gallop up from the rear, brandishing a sword. Presently a new wave of men sprang out of the earth and came toward the Trenton-Princeton pike to reinforce that weak spot where Colvin had spread his company. They came Indian fashion, dodging, dropping, rising; gaining the line and concentrating their fire on the red jackets across the way.

"Hold 'em, boys!" shouted Colvin. 'Tis the job for us! If they want Trenton, let 'em pay for it!"

The British wave, redoubled, pressed its advantage. Other brass pieces rum-

bled along the road, swung and belched their warning. Colvin and his men, mingling with the German battalions and the Virginians retreated step by step, contesting the issue with veteran stubbornness. On left and right he saw the line give.

"Eight hundred of us—eight thousand of them," he muttered. "Oh, well. Come on, Pennsylvania!"

The shout was cut short, however, when from the corner of his vision he saw the ungainly Jeffry fire his piece and fall back precipitately, elbowing others aside. The man vanished down the slope of a creek and when Colvin reached the stream he saw Jeffry midway in the ice cold water, fleeing from the field in haste. Colvin drew his pistol and stopped the fugitive midway in the water.

"Turn back," he commanded.

Jeffry's face went saffron beneath the reddish stubble. There was a quaver of fear in his voice.

"Swear to Gawd, Cap'n, I wa'n't runnin'! My foot, it hurts somethin' turrible an' I wanted to git back a piece an' rest it."

"Come up here," insisted Colvin. "Your foot appears to hurt by spells. You were not limping when you broke from the line." He took the man by the coat and pushed him ahead ungently. "You'll stay by me the rest of this day."

When they surmounted the bank the British tide was sweeping onward with sudden fury. Heavy fire raked the ground and the guns boomed incessantly. Colvin found the whole of Hand's regiment giving way and his own command creeping backward with the rest. So, with an eye always to the craven Jeffry, he marshaled his men. They came again to the creek, forded it and found a temporary halting place. A fresh British regiment marched over the horizon to strengthen the advance guard as it took to the water.

Horses' hoofs pounded on the road behind Colvin's company and the rattling of wheels and the clanking of chains told him of help coming up. Two guns of Forrest's battery swayed drunkenly, careened through ruts and turned their brass muzzles upon the creek. Warning rent the air and a roar smote Colvin's ears. A geyser sprang upward in the creek and in a moment the water ran red. The gunners worked with concentrated fury and all along the line the infantry redoubled their labor. But it could not stem the tide. There were too many British pieces hurrying to the fore. Forrest's guns lost their voice in the sullen mutter that rolled across the valley. As quickly as they came they vanished.

FOR THE rest of that gray, cold afternoon and throughout the five miles that intervened the American skirmishers, less than eight hundred strong, held the British to a slow crawl. Colvin, watching his men anxiously, saw one fall here and another there, each time with sorrow. And always until the very gates of Trenton were reached he had Jeffry beneath his eye while the latter puffed and muttered and the sweat trickled down his ugly face.

"I'll kill the whippersnapper!" he panted, beneath his breath. "No man's a-goin' to stand over me like that! I'll put a bullet in his back, shore as I'm borned!"

The chance, that harsh afternoon, never presented itself. Exhausted and hungry the brigade under Colonel Hand fell into the streets of Trenton town. The early dusk of January descended and the persistent enemy, making a sudden thrust, came to grips. Around Colvin's scanty ranks American guns rattled and groaned; the blue shadows were rent with a momentary cannonade. The red coats came on, making a lane with bayonet points. Curling smoke and night shadows cloaked the scene and men's voices turned savage. Colvin found himself shoulder to shoulder with Jeffry and Grand. Jeffry's throat rattled in fear. There was an explosion in the captain's ear and when he turned he could no longer see the ugly one.

Above the turmoil Colvin heard Hand's command.

"You are being supported, men. Cross the bridge!"

They were at the southern end of the town where Assunpink Creek, spanned by one bridge, intervened between the main body of the American Army and the oncoming British. There was a shot and a clattering of hoofs and a banging of metal. The guns went thundering over first. Colvin, marshalling his men, was caught in the eddy. On the southern bank behind newly made parapets a fresh battery opened against the driving British and fresh muskets took up the challenge. The brigade, utterly spent, stumbled to safety, leaving the battle behind them in other hands. Colvin drew aside to let horsemen by and caught a vague view of his colonel confronting a commanding figure on a sorrel. A serene voice spoke.

"Well done, Colonel Hand. You held them up a day. That was all I asked."

The cannon stormed and a veritable hail of small shot passed the stream. Colvin marching off with his men, heard the attack fail. Repulsed, the British withdrew into the town and calm settled down. Night fell.

JEFFRY, aching in every bone, sat crosslegged before the camp-fire and dourly listened to his companions idly discuss their situation.

"I heard a staff officer tell it," asseverated one. "There's five thousand beef eaters acrost that crick, waitin' to tackle us. An' three more regiments at Princeton ready to move."

"Ain't no chance o' them crossin' the creek right in front of our guns," said another. "We got the fords all covered fer three miles up an' down."

"Shore, shore. But who's to stop Cornwallis from turning around our right an' shovin' us plumb into the Delaware? Ain't bright prospects. Wish I knew what old Gineral Washington was aimin' to do. One shore thing, we ain't no match fer the hull British army, considerin' the no-count milisher we got. They never been under fire—an' I reckon it don't take a fortune teller to guess what they'll do when they furst hear a bullet screech."

Jeffry shivered, although close to the fire. His body seemed disjointed at the hips, connected only by a steady throbbing in his legs. Added to this misery was a distressing hunger. Less provident than his companions, he had long ago eaten his small rations and now had to watch the more careful bake their potatoes in the embers. He turned on his side, softly cursing. "Hadn't been fer that whippersnapper I'd 'a' got outen this mess. Now I'll be took prisoner, er stuck with one o' them bayonets, like a sucklin' pig. Damn his hide. I'd like t' make him squirm!"

He looked craftily about, hoping that perhaps he might spy a bit of food momentarily unguarded. Failing, he rose to his feet and, groaning aloud, walked away from the fire. He had foraged his supper more than once and felt in the humor to do it again. Down the camp a small distance there was a house and barn. Doubtless their cellar . . .

His reflections were broken off by a hand reaching out and taking him by the arm. He drew back with a startled grunt. Lieutenant Jennifer Grand's face was within a hand's breadth of his own.

"Out lookin' fer plunder, eh? Better stay close to your own company before our noble captain scorches you again."

Jeffry's temper, never very deeply seated, rose like a rocket.

"Him?" he snarled. "Mebbe he thinks he can lord it over me an' make me mis'able! But I ain't no dog, L'tenant! There's limits an' I fear I'm apt to put a bullet in his back some of these fine days when we git in a fight!"

His thoughts, when spoken, were far too bold and he relapsed to a whine.

"Now, Lieutenant, don't you go carryin' tales to him. Anyhow, I'm obleeged fer you tellin' him the truth about me stumblin'."

"Truth? Why, you scoundrel, you were skulking."

"Then what'd you side in with me fer?" grumbled Jeffry.

"If you're no friend of his," said Grand softly, "you can be a friend of mine. It's my policy to take care of friends."

Jeffry shifted on one foot, then the other.

"My feet're killin' me," he mumbled.

The lieutenant's statement revolved in his none too nimble mind.

Encouraged, he repeated his threat.

"I'd like to put a bullet in his back some o' these days."

"Tush, man, you're speaking of harsh things. Your courage isn't of that kind."

"No?" grumbled Jeffry, fiercely. "You wait an' see! I ain't a dog!"

Grand's face approached until Jeffry could see the thin line of mouth and the black, unfathomable wells of the eyes. The lieutenant seemed to be seeking something in his pocket and presently Jeffry felt the cold pressure of a coin in his fist.

"There's a half-johanne," said Grand, quietly. "Go back to your fire. If I were captain of the company I'd send you off on a leave of absence and you could stay home as long as you pleased."

He vanished in the dark, leaving Jeffry toiling over the statement. He rubbed the coin with his thumb until at last his body trembled with a mirthless laugh.

"Oh, ain't he clever 'un! If he was cap'n, I c'd go home on leave, huh? Well, there's more'n one way o' makin' him cap'n. Guess I understand him, all right."

Turning he walked back to his fire, shot a crafty glance around the circle and nursed his hunger . . .

His guilty conscience startled him again when young Captain Colvin strode into the light with a pair of shoes. But he passed Jeffry without a glance, walking to the one man of the company whose feet were encased in sacking.

"Try these," said he briefly.

"Why, Cap'n," said the man, gratefully, "where'n tarnation d'you find 'em?"

Colvin did not reveal his source of supply. It would have embarrassed him to have said that he had sought them from a farmer's house behind the army and had paid for them out of his own pocket. But, as he walked slowly away, too tired and too disturbed to sleep, he experienced a gust of pride in the duty his company had accomplished that afternoon. Not in any sense a vain man, and often ashamed of his youth, he did not for a moment ascribe any measure of their conduct to his own presence. In fact, the longer he led these men the humbler he felt in being their leader, and the more solicitous was he of their welfare.

A wood detail, dragging fence rails up to the watch fires along the bank of the creek, roused him to a moment's speculation. Across that stream the very finest regiments of the British army commanded by the ablest of English generals slept on their muskets.

It seemed to Colvin that in all the course of desperate circumstances Washington's army had come to the most desperate. It had been maneuvered into a position from which there was, seemingly, no escape save by battle. And though Colvin loved his men and boasted their ability, he knew, with a sinking heart, that there were too few veterans amongst the hodge podge of militia brigades to withstand the redoubtable force in the town.

Wrapping his cloak around him, he swung back to where he had pitched his blankets on the slushy earth. It had turned cold in the last hour and threatened snow.

"Pray God," said he fervently, "the general finds a way out."

He rolled himself in the blankets and fell into a condition that was not sleep—a kind of weary stupefaction in which he could hear all sounds and feel the increasing coldness as it crept through the blanket.

WHEN he was roused from this misery the blaze beside him had gone out and, save for the watch fires along the creek, all was dark. A hand was shaking him and a voice, which he recognized as that of a staff officer, spoke urgently, quietly.

"Roll out your men and get them in the column at once. We are moving. Not an unnecessary sound."

Colvin collected his equipment, stumbled over to his company and woke the men. There was a groping, uneasy movement all around them as the various outfits assembled. Everything was confusion. In the road the guns began to move by, wheels wrapped in sacking, horses hoofs muffled. Thus, with a dull thumping and bated epithets they passed through the infantry. The sentries at the creek challenged loudly and the wood details steadily piled fence rails on the watch fires—all as if to mask what took place behind them in the dark. Colvin formed his ranks and ran off the names of his men, one by one.

"Jeffry."

He called twice before a growling response came back. The man, from the sound of his voice, had strayed from the company.

"Stick to the ranks, Jeffry. If you straggle you will be summarily shot by the rear guard. Lieutenant Grand, you will keep the files closed up. No stretching out and absolute silence."

A company trudged past and stopped, not far off. The staff officer came up.

"Ready, Captain Colvin? Follow me."

They marched a hundred yards under the staff officer's guidance and halted in the rear of the column. Presently other troops closed up behind them. A mounted officer rode along the line, speaking anxiously.

"You will conduct yourselves with the utmost silence. It is the command of General Washington. Forward!"

The company moved forward eagerly, brought up against opposition and dropped to a crawl. Gradually the watch fires disappeared and they were engulfed in the woods. Feet slipped on the frozen ground; it had turned ten degrees colder within the hour. Colvin's men grumbled beneath their breath at the slow pace.

"Who's ahead of us?"

"Mercer's brigade."

"Wal, fer Gawd's sake tell 'im to get outen the way an' let summun march!"

Now and then as the column crept around bends of the rutty, forest road they caught sight of a solitary lantern beckoning. Jeffry, limping honestly, barked his shin bones against a stump and let out a stream of vituperation which echoed down the column and brought upon his head sharp reproof. Captain Colvin dropped back.

"Stop that loud talking!"

Jeffry bided his time until Colvin had returned up the column.

"Must think I'm a cussed dog!" he muttered, "Oh, I'll—"

A pressure fell on his arm. Lieutenant Grand's whispered words silenced him.

"Keep your sentiments to yourself, Jeffry."

The column slogged over the road, now striding to close up lost distance, now creeping inch by inch. They halted and suffered the cold in silence; they marched endlessly, seeming lost in the immense pit of darkness. For the most part it was a severely silent column as the night wore on, although here and there was whispered bewilderment which the older men took a delight in mocking.

"Where in God's name are we going? What road is this?"

"What you want to know fer, sonny? Twon't make any diff'rence."

"We're crossing a bridge. See, we're swinging again, 'cause I c'n see the lantern."

"Anyhow, we're shore foolin' Mister Cornwallis."

The Army had needed no warning about being quiet the first few miles, so heavy hung the suspense over their heads. Would the British discover their ruse? The longer they traveled the more exultant was the triumph in their weary bodies. Once again they were out-maneuvering England's best.

Jeffry, marching always beside Lieutenant Grand nursed his temper to an incredible state of savagery.

"Oh, Gawd, ain't we goin' to ever stop an' rest? I'm half daid! I'll fix—"

Again there was a pressure on his arm and he retreated to his thoughts. The farther he advanced the more fixed did the determination become to put a

bullet in that young whippersnapper if ever the chance presented itself.

Young Captain Colvin, marching beside the front files of the company, fell into a doze. He was conscious always of the steady slip of his feet on the road and of rubbing elbows with the man beside him. But at times his mind was an utter blank and he would be brought back by a sudden collision with the rank in front.

For a time he would remain awake, watching for the lantern ahead, peering at the shadows of the forest as they grew perceptibly grayer. Then the stupor of weariness would again overtake him. In one spell of wakefulness he calculated the time since he last had known six hours of full sleep. It had been better than ten days before.

He was aware that the column began to emerge from its nightlong obscurity. The morning light, filtering through the trees, first revealed the men as indistinct, toiling shapes, humped over, stumbling along the uneven earth. Then, as full light came he saw their faces pinched by cold, drugged by fatigue.

And yet, when the column's pace suddenly increased they found the power to stretch their legs and keep up. Colvin, glancing back, met the sullen, burning eyes of Jeffry. Grand, beside the shirker, had no desire to meet the young captain's face. The man was buried in his own hard thoughts.

THE COLUMN left the forest for a breathing spell, crossed a piece of meadow land and took up its march in another, less heavy stand of trees. Colvin saw the brigades stretched out endlessly to the rear. A splendid figure in buff and blue, astride a sorrel galloped up the column and stopped at the head. Presently Mercer's brigade marched on down the road and vanished in the trees while the rest of the column, now headed by Hand's brigade, turned to the right and skirted the trees.

A staff officer rode beside Colvin, commenting on the division. "We're only two miles from Princeton. Cornwallis left a brigade there under Colonel Mawhood which, if we're fortunate, we'll take. Mercer's going on over to the Princeton-Trenton road and knock down a stone bridge."

"Fair—" began Colvin.

He never finished that sentence. The column came to a halt as a sudden burst of firing echoed through the trees, coming from Mercer's brigade which but a moment before had set out for the Princeton-Trenton road. The rattle of musketry swelled to greater dimensions and a sustained shouting marked the beginning of a good sized fight. The figure in buff and blue whirled on his horse and sent a signal to Colonel Hand, then went speeding through the trees toward the scene of action, cloak flying. Hand galloped back to the column and brandished his sword. Colvin swung his company and led the brigade at a rapid pace into the woods. It was a good hundred yards out into open ground again and upon reaching it the troops paused to view a scene of disaster. Two regiments of British—Mawhood's brigade which had left Princeton that morning to join Cornwallis—were deploying from the road and swarming through an apple orchard, pushing Mercer's brigade in front. The first few volleys had been sanguinary enough, for the ground was littered with the dead and wounded; and as the British bayonets came closer the American troops, most of them green, gave ground and fled. The tide of battle bore them, pell mell back towards the woods.

Hand launched his troops at the left flank of the British, without a moment's delay. Colvin, deploying his men, saw the spendid figure of Washington riding through Mercer's demoralized ranks, brandishing his sword and calling for them to turn and hold their ground. Midway between his own troops and those of the British he was in the zone of hottest fire with the smoke clouds curling around him. Colvin had a sudden constriction of his throat. Parched voices shouted warning.

There was no prelude to this fight. It

came suddenly and waxed to an immediate crescendo. The Pennsylvanians flung themselves on Mawhood's left wing with all the fury at their command. The shock of that encounter rose to the skies and the smoke of musketry swirled like a thick fog, low on the ground. Colvin, racing ahead of his men, met a grenadier with bayonet outstretched. He thrust and parried and lunged until the sweat started from his head and his arm ached.

He beat the gun down and saw the man fall before him while his own saber point turned scarlet. On all sides of him men were at grips, metal banging metal and belated shots bursting here and there. He heard the swift passage of guns not far away and immediately thereafter their sullen booming. The battle seemed to gain strength, to focus around Hand's brigade.

A cry reached Colvin's ear. Turning, he saw Jeffry prone on the ground one hand fending off the menace of a British bayonet. He dashed back with a shout of warning. The English soldier, hearing that cry to his rear, deserted his fallen foe and swung in defense. The scene became the rallying point for both sides. Colvin beat the bayonet aside and stood astride the prostrate Jeffry.

"Come up, man!" he shouted. "Up and try again!"

He had a glimpse of Jeffry's face, dead white beneath the whiskers. A moment later the man had scrambled to his feet, behind the captain. The whirlpool of conflict widened and the Americans, feeling the victory at hand, charged onward. It was the turn of Mawhood's brigade to break ground and flee. Colvin went forward, rallying his men.

Behind, Jeffry was ramming home a charge, sweating profusely and stung to a desperate, defensive courage. His comrades were racing by on all sides and, bringing up his musket, he trailed along, one eye upon Captain Colvin's slim back. Of a sudden he was aware of some one running beside him and turned to see Grand's face moving with anger.

"Shoot now, you fool!" muttered the lieutenant. "Do it now or I'll see to it you're everlastingly damned!"

With that warning the lieutenant went ahead.

Jeffry was not quick witted and events had moved so swiftly in the last thirty seconds that it left him swimming of mind. But, across all his numb perceptions flashed a streak of gratitude. He looked around him, saw no one free enough to watch him, dropped to his knees, took careful aim and fired. Lieutenant Jennifer Grand, twenty yards in advance, staggered, buckled at the knees and pitched forward, face down. Jeffry managed a dry, panicky gain and stumbled onward to catch up with his comrades. It seemed safer in the van of the battle than alone in the gory background.

AGAIN Washington, "the old fox", had wormed himself out of danger. The battle of Princeton had been his challenge to the laggard Cornwallis and, with that blow struck, he moved swiftly toward the mountainous country of Morris County. Late that afternoon Tench Colvin, on patrol duty with his company, saw Cornwallis marching his army in the valley below—marching back from Trenton toward New York. He dared not attack Washington's new position and so was retreating to a safer base.

Calling the roll of his company in his mind, Colvin made note, sadly, that the ranks were thinner by six. Among them were Jennifer Grand and the laggard Jeffry. He turned to one of the survivors.

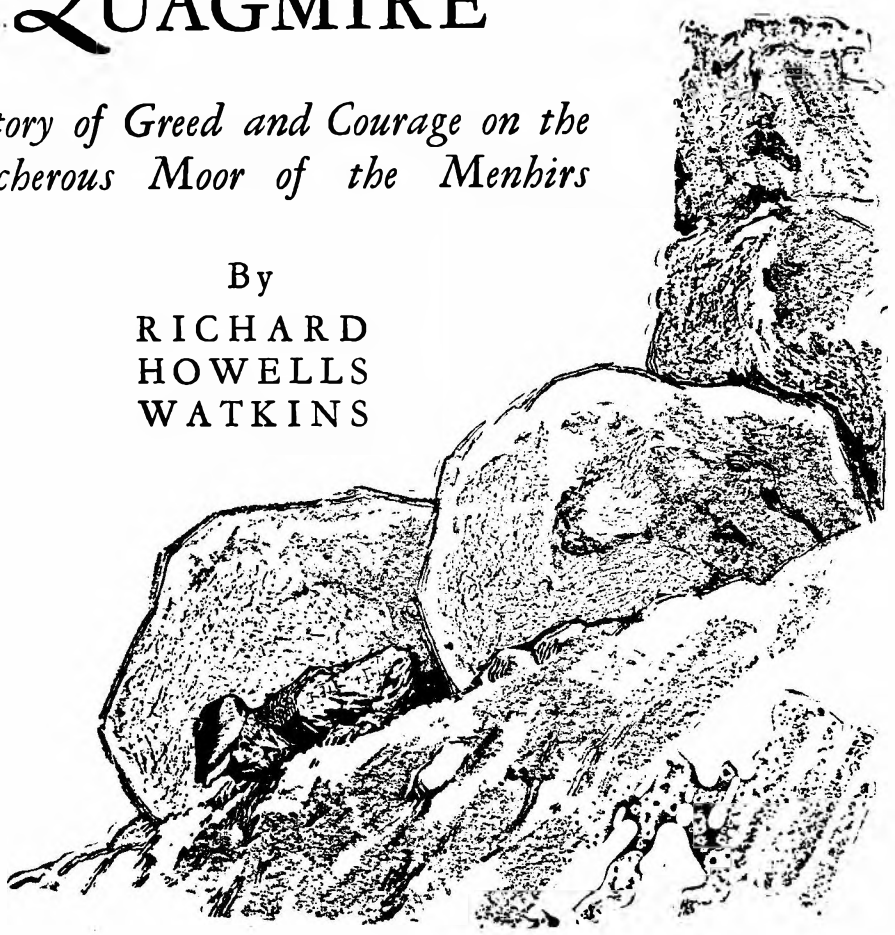
"Bidwell, did you see anything of Jeffry?"

"Daid," said the man. "I seed him fall jest as the Britishers fired their last volley afore retreatin'."

QUAGMIRE

A Story of Greed and Courage on the Treacherous Moor of the Menhirs

By
RICHARD
HOWELLS
WATKINS



A MAN, dwarfed to the size of a frog by an immensity of granite towering over him, squatted low between two boulders. With tight lipped caution he peered down the long steep slope of stone littered turf in front of him.

The reason for his stealth was not apparent. Had he chosen to scale the great mass of stone that crowned this ridge, and stand upright upon the top of the crumbling and frost riven granite, he would still have been no less secure from human eyes.

This tor that was his hiding place reared like a ruined castle over a high, treeless, rolling moorland that is marked by a white, blank area on England's town crowded map. In less forbidding parts of high Dartmoor there are scattered tiny hamlets and farmhouses, but here, in the wildest section of the moor, man has attained no foothold within historic time. Unyielding granite and far too yielding morass have kept it virgin for unreckoned centuries.

Despite his hiding, the man between the rocks did not appear to be a timorous fellow. Whatever his forehead lacked in prominence was compensated for by his prognathous jaw. It was a belligerent jaw; that, and the scarcity of brain above

it, coupled with a scarred and flattened face, hinted that its belligerency had not always been held tightly in check. Nevertheless, his pale gray eyes, deep socketed, modified the pugnacity of the jaw. The eyes had a peculiar intensity about them, a certain wariness, challenging and habitual, like the wariness of one of the great cats. Perhaps the marks of sanguinary affrays had something to do with this developed craftiness.

The suit he wore, always shoddy, and now shabby as well, was strained by the movements of a body too broad for it. The point of greatest tightness as he squatted was at the back, over the right hip pocket, where an automatic was plainly outlined. The man did not appear to be aware of the pressure of the metal. That, too, was habitual.

His shoes were city shoes, thin soled, flimsy, and once to be considered snappy. They had not taken kindly to the moor.

For more than an hour Jim Gruder had been crouching there, motionless save for an occasional shifting of his weight, or a stretching forward to survey the lush greenness of the valley below the tor. The slope was studded almost to the bottom with great boulders and slabs of granite, split from the mass above him by eons of rough weather.

His pale eyes studied the blocks of stone attentively, flicking from one to the next in a zigzag movement down the declivity. They were the only cover on that bare slope, but they were better cover than trees would have been.

Upon one stone that rose above all the others his gaze became fixed. It was a hoary menhir, or Long Stone; silent evidence that once, in some time before history began, a race of man had made some use of this upland waste.

Gruder stared at the gray stone with hostility. He recognized it as the work of human hands, but that was all. Why that rough needle of granite was there, who had raised it near his desolate hiding place, he could not imagine. To him it was a thing of the present, a part of the landscape that intruded, marring the utter solitude on which he had reckoned.

"What the hell's the good of a thing like that?" he muttered in irritable speculation.

The moor gave him no answer. Minutes passed; then suddenly the slope below him was veiled by a whiteness that swirled in front of his eyes. He started up in alarm; then relaxed again with a curse.

"That damn' fog!" he snarled. "Sneaks up like it was going to jump a guy or something."

While he could, he watched the vapor roll noiselessly down the hillside. Then when the slope was completely blotted out by the blankness of the mist, he stood up and turned to the rent mass of stone behind him. The moist veil that had swept upon him so abruptly was eddying in thickening folds around the granite, now concealing, now revealing it. The tor seemed to bend and sway, even to writhe in the midst of the bewildering whiteness.

Gruder turned from it with a suppressed growl.

"Blast this place!" he whispered, as if afraid of being heard.

He set his back to one of the boulders, put a cigaret between his heavy lips and lit it with cupped hands. Keeping his eyes rigidly toward the shoulder of the hill, he waited impatiently. Globules of water formed on his clothes; the chill of the mist struck through and made him move his shoulders vigorously.

Above him he caught sight of a pale white disc, past which fog wraiths wavered. Then, utterly unprepared, he found himself staring into the blinding eye of the sun. The vapor had passed. The tor, the slope below, the upright Long Stone, leaped into view. Hastily Gruder ducked out of sight.

Crouching again between the boulders, he followed with his pale, sunken eyes the fleeting mist as it descended the slope. Near the bottom the cloud of vapor slipped effortlessly from the heath to which it had clung and floated on in the air above the lower reaches of the valley.

It drifted toward another tor that heaved itself up to the northeast. There it repeated its abrupt obliteration of the moor.

But in its going it had revealed to Jim Gruder what he had waited for so long—a sign of life below him. His body became tense: he gave vent to a sound of satisfaction.

Almost at the lowest level of the valley was the diminutive figure of a man.

THE NEWCOMER was moving slowly. As he plodded on, he struggled, incongruously enough, with a plank that he tried to balance at the middle. By his sluggish, dogged progress it seemed likely that he had carried that plank a long way, and that his destination was not yet in sight.

The man was short, and thin almost to emaciation. His handling of the plank indicated a lack of the wiry strength that slender men are supposed to possess.

"You been a long time comin', Harland," Gruder muttered, with a tightening of his lips. "But I'm bettin' it'll be worth the wait in this God-awful place."

His eyes glowed strangely as he watched. His cigaret fell from his lips unheeded. He studied the man below him carefully, noting that he walked with head bowed under his burden, looking only at the turf just ahead of him.

With abrupt decision Gruder darted from his hiding place. Bending double, he slipped down the slope to the next sizable boulder. In this cover he paused warily a moment, and then ran on, obliquely descending the hillside toward a spot well behind the quarry he stalked.

When Harland halted, as he did frequently, Jim Gruder flung himself flat on the drenched turf. He did not move again until the little man ahead staggered on. After his first spurt, Gruder made no effort to close up the distance between them.

In this manner the two passed on around the shoulder of the granite topped hill from which Gruder had come, and on down a further slope of the rounded moor. The going became wetter now at every step; the granite boulders were sunk more deeply in the fen. Occasionally a ledge of stone outcropped abruptly, only to vanish again beneath the spongy heath a few feet farther on.

Another mist, moving on an unfelt wind, rolled softly down from the tor on to them. Gruder, grim lipped, muttering oaths, spurted again through the sudden blankness that separated him from the man with the plank. His feet squelched loudly in the sodden ground. He trod more cautiously then, leaping from clump to clump of the bog grass that grew in hummocks over the surface.

In the growing density of the mist he misjudged a distance and jumped too far. His toes hooked in something hard, beyond the clump, and he went down on his face in the marshy soil.

Half stunned, he lay quiet, listening for a sound ahead. He heard none. He looked about, to see what had tripped him. It was the top of an imbedded stone. Beside it, a few feet away, was a similar upright stone, and another, and another. All were roughly shaped, and somewhat smoothed by weather, like the top of the Long Stone. But these stones were much shorter, or had sunk deeper than the menhir on the slope.

Gruder looked the other way. He discovered instantly that he lay sprawled between two rows of gray stones lifting their tops a foot, or two, or three, above the moor. As far as he could see into the mist the avenues of granite blocks stretched on.

He scrambled to his knees, snarling at the stones that had ranked themselves about him in strange order in this wilderness.

"What in hell—" he muttered. "This is no graveyard! What are them things doin' in a swamp?"

He crept on, out of the granite rows, and found that he had utterly lost his sense of direction. He could not tell where he had last seen Harland, or what course the little man was taking. After edging distrustfully a few feet farther from the stones that marched across the

moor, he stopped and waited. His eyes were baffled by the blankness, but his ears heard vague sounds. The more he listened the less he could make of the faint noises; he could not know finally whether he heard anything or not.

"It's goin' to be worth somethin' to me —all this—or that shrimp will sweat blood for it," he mumbled in sudden rage.

The pale grayness lighted up; the sun slit through the mist. Gruder, after raising himself up for a quick look around, dropped flat again. He had seen Harland. The man was straining to pick up his plank a few hundred yards away.

As Harland struggled on, Gruder crawled toward a boulder affording better cover. For a moment he paused in the open to stare suspiciously at the huge round stone. It was nothing more than a great rock, with no sign that human hands had ever touched it. He moved closer and stretched out behind it.

Harland dragged on a few hundred paces further. He came to the edge of an expanse of brilliant green, like the green of moss in a dark and dripping forest. It was far brighter in hue than the bog grass on which Gruder lay; far greener than any foliage Gruder had ever seen. He eyed the strange flat sweep uncertainly. At that distance he could not make out its nature, but he was repulsed by that vivid hue.

"Poison green," he whispered.

The green expanse spread out in the great hollow among the tors for hundreds of yards. A rise of ground, a sort of hillock, covered with sedge grass and heather, was visible in the midst of the brighter hued vegetation. It was like a dark green islet in the midst of a virescent lake.

At the edge of this verdant flat Harland had stopped. He looked about keenly, and then, moving on a few feet, stepped on a stone. Balancing his plank anew, he planted a foot gingerly on the greenness. His foot sank into the stuff as far as his ankle. He put his other foot in.

For a moment he stood motionless, gazing ahead. Then, with eyes down, he shuffled over the glaucous expanse straight toward the islet. He made his way slowly, like a man ploughing through snow.

"He's got some sort of path through that filthy muck," Gruder muttered.

The thing was like no swamp he had ever seen before, and yet it was a swamp, he knew. His eye marked the stone that the other man had started from.

NEAR the island Harland halted. With a gruelling effort, he raised his plank high in his arms. For an instant he held it straight and rigid, then let the upper end drop toward the solid ground.

The plank fell with a hissing splash. The farther end dropped upon a hummock above the edge of the marsh. Harland tried it with his foot. It was firm.

He did not at once cross this final plank in his bridge to the islet. Stooping, he fumbled in the ooze at his feet and lifted up out of it a pick and shovel that apparently had been resting across the submerged plank.

With these in his hands, he stepped upon the new plank and moved over it to the solid ground. There on the islet he sank down, as if exhausted by his efforts.

"Take your time, fellow," Jim Gruder muttered, not stirring from his place. "I guess you're where you been goin' all these days."

In a few minutes the man on the island rose. He groped in the coarse grass and found the pick he had dropped. Moving with mounting eagerness, he walked a few steps to a sort of mound on the crest of the islet. Several times he circled around this, examining it meticulously. Finally he picked out a spot and sank his pick into the turf.

"I'll wait here, till he's done the work," Gruder decided.

But despite the words, he wormed nearer and finally stood upright. The other man's zeal had raised in him human excitement that would not brook further inactivity. For twenty minutes he restrained his impulse.

"What's the use of hidin' now?" he muttered, at last. "I got him right where I want him."

He turned toward the stone that marked the starting point of the path through the morass. The tread of his feet brought a hissing noise from the wet turf beneath, but he paid no heed to this. Once his right hand swung back, to touch the weapon in his hip pocket, but it was an unconscious gesture.

The man on the island dug on, completely immersed in his efforts.

Poised on the stone, Jim Gruder stared down at the brilliant surface that separated him from Harland. The stuff was sodden moss, but when he stepped upon it his foot encountered no support beneath it. It was like a vivid green tablecloth, with no table beneath it.

He sat down on the rock and with an outstretched foot cautiously probed the yielding surface. At one point, a few inches below the top, he felt something hard. He pressed upon it; it gave slightly, then remained firm. He stood up, put half his weight upon the unseen support, and then all.

Up through the greenness there came a seething, bubbling movement; the surface boiled. Some feet from the rock, a green coated thing rose sluggishly up out of the depths. With a curse Gruder jerked his foot back. The thing sank back again. He realized after a startled second that he had stepped upon one end of a plank and the other end had projected above the slimy surface. He grunted.

"By God, he'd got a regular board walk. The little boob must 'a' been workin' on this a month. Fair enough!"

Mustering his nerve, he stepped out upon the end of the hidden plank and jumped toward the center. The toes of his shoes, then the shoetops, disappeared under the green muck; he felt the bog quaking and hissing beneath him, but the plank sank no lower.

"God!" he muttered. His eyes fell upon the busy little man on the island. "Safer to keep moving," he decided.

With arms outstretched, feeling his way with one foot, he edged out into the quagmire. Following the submerged boards, with the muck trembling beneath him, he made for the island. The last dozen feet he took with a frightened rush. Though the final plank, insecurely balanced on the hummock, turned under him, he made the islet by a frantic leap.

NOT UNTIL the thud of Gruder's feet on the solid ground aroused him, did Harland turn from his digging. He stared in amazement at the broad figure of the grinning intruder.

"Here I am again, Harland," Jim Gruder said. "You and me are partners in this deal!"

Harland's pick slid out of his fingers; his mouth opened and shut in inarticulate astonishment. He pulled off his spectacles which were fogged by the steam from his perspiring countenance. Seen as close as this, he was a frail little man, young enough in age, but somehow old in manner. His blistered palms testified to his inexperience in the handling of a pick.

"If you don't think we're goin' fifty-fifty, I got the proof in my pocket," said Gruder. He jerked out his automatic with vicious suddenness, jabbed it into Harland's stomach and slipped it back into his pocket again. He did this with a swiftness that was uncanny. "Us Americans in a foreign country have got to stick together," he added mockingly.

Harland's blinking blue eyes had at last made out the identity of the other man.

"It is the hobo—the tramp that didn't want to work for me," he murmured, as if explaining this development to himself. "How very remarkable!"

"Lay off that tramp stuff, you!" Gruder commanded. "I'm your partner, that's who I am. Now, what's the dope? What are we digging up? I'll say it's well hid."

"How did you get here?" demanded Harland.

By this time he had completed the polishing of his glasses and now he replaced them on his nose. His astonishment had vanished; he became a precise

little man bent upon solving a problem.

"I been tailin' you for a week—ever since you wanted to hire me out as a pick an' shovel man on the quiet. If it hadn't been for those damn' sudden fogs I'd 'a' followed you to this place the first day."

"But why—why trail me? What earthly interest could a man like you have in—in this?"

He gestured in perplexity at the mound by which he stood.

"I got a lot of interest in some ready cash," Gruder said, with a menacing scowl.

The man's unexpected lack of fear did not please him. Harland seemed to ignore completely both the display of his pistol and his menacing attitude.

"What's the lay?" Gruder demanded, with a scowl. "If it's silver or other stuff from some old castle around here I know a fence in London that will handle it."

"You—you think this is—a treasure hunt?" inquired Harland. "Where did you get that idea, may I ask?"

"Cut the bluff. It won't work," Gruder growled. "Get busy in that hole. You told me it was treasure yourself when you wanted me to work for you on wages."

"Treasure!" the little man stared; then chuckled unexpectedly. "Treasure! I said *archeological* treasures."

"I don't give a damn what kind you said. You're after something, you little weasel, or you wouldn't be sneakin' off alone to a God-awful swamp like this. I'm in on it, that's all. An' I'm tellin' you it had better be good."

Harland laughed; he leaned on his pick handle and laughed straight in the flat face of the larger man.

"I'm a scien—" he began.

In a stride Gruder reached him and grabbed him by the throat. His blunt, powerful fingers closed tight around Harland's windpipe.

The little man did not struggle. His scrawny Adam's apple quivered in Gruder's grasp but he stood still. In a gust of passion, venomous and uncontrolled, Gruder shook him till it seemed as if he would rip the little man's throat apart. Then he flung him on his back with a sudden thrust.

"Now laugh!" he raged.

HARLAND lay as he had fallen, gasping for breath, with his thin hand up to his tortured throat. He stared up at Gruder's pale, glowing eyes with a bewildered expression. Not even when he was able to drag himself up to a sitting position did he move his peculiar gaze away. He studied Gruder with painful concentration, as one would study some unknown species. Gruder, his fists on his hips and his legs spread apart, grinned down at him, enjoying that pained perplexity.

"I wouldn't do that," Harland gasped at last. "I really wouldn't."

Gruder gave vent to a short bark of laughter.

"Who's goin' to stop me?" he demanded.

"Nobody," Harland murmured. "Nobody."

"I'll pull your head off and chuck it in the swamp, if I feel like it," Gruder snarled. "No tricks, you! If this treasure ain't worth my time, by God, you'll never see nothin' but green again!"

He gestured, as one hurling something heavy into the bog.

But Harland was not looking at him now. The little man had made up his mind about Gruder; accepted him with scientific calm for what he was, however impossible that might have seemed before his furious assault. Now he was gazing, not at Gruder, but sadly toward the mound—the mound that must yield riches to please this thug.

Apparently his safety, his life, depended upon that. If it were a tumulus, an ancient grave, he knew it would give up at best a few stone implements, or perhaps a crude bronze celt. Hardly enough to suit Gruder.

"Get busy!" Gruder commanded. "Unless you want me to—"

"Oh, I know there's nobody within miles to stop you if you desire to murder

me," Harland interposed coolly. "And you could dispose of my body in the quagmire. It would sink out of sight in a few minutes."

Gruder stared in his turn. This was an offhand way for a man to speak of being murdered.

"You got that dead straight," he growled at last. "Act right an' you'll live. What are we diggin' up?"

"I'll tell you," said the scientist tractably. "But first let me show you something."

He climbed to his feet.

"Go ahead," Jim Gruder consented, with a menacing scowl. "But don't forget I c'n put four-five holes in your head before you c'n raise that pick."

"Come with me."

Without haste Harland walked toward the plank that lay with one end on a hummock and the other in the swamp. It still rested on the surface.

"Do you see this?" he asked, bending and touching it.

"What of it?"

"Watch!" Suddenly marshaling his slight strength, he flung the plank sidewise. Pivoting on its farther end, it splashed into the green slime a dozen feet from the islet.

Jim Gruder uttered an incoherent sound. He stood there, mouth agape, his eyes rigidly fixed on the seething mire.

Harland straightened up again, touching his blistered palms together gently.

"I am not afraid of death," he said in a dry, level voice. "That was what I wanted to show you."

Fury mounted in Jim Gruder's flat, scarred face. His eyes left the repulsive green slough that cut him off from the rest of the world, and turned slowly toward the man who had marooned him.

"Wait!" Harland did not raise his voice, but there was a convincing note in it, a note of deadly earnestness. He stood on the edge of the island, his frail body poised for a leap outward. "If you try to reach me I jump now," he said. "I'd rather die at once than stand your manhandling and then die. Would you prefer to starve all alone in this place? Speak up."

Jim Gruder checked his rush. The cunning, the wariness that showed in his eyes, overcame in this supreme emergency the impulse that would have sent him on, a ravening, killing beast with a weaker thing at his mercy. Craft told him that the man who had destroyed the path to safety would not hesitate to destroy himself.

He stood still. His mouth gushed forth a torrent of curses and threats of instant death. But he stood still.

HARLAND slightly relaxed his position, but not his vigilance.

"Man has evolved," he murmured. "If you were the unthinking, murderous pithecanthropus you look, you would not have stopped until you had forced me to jump—or torn me apart."

"What's the idea?" Gruder asked hoarsely. "You can't scare me. There's some way o' gettin' out o' here or you wouldn't 'a' chucked that plank out!"

"There might be," Harland conceded, with casual interest. "I haven't considered it, my murderous friend. You are my most pressing danger."

He looked toward the rounded mound, and nodded in that direction.

"There's no treasure there—merely a few calcined bones of a stone age man, at the most."

"How do we get off o' here?" Gruder demanded.

Harland's manner was now not that of a man facing death; he was the abstracted theorist again.

"In that bowl barrow—if I have been so fortunate as to find one in so unusual a position—is a man who had no difficulty in coming to this place or leaving it."

Jim Gruder turned from the mound to the scientist with his hatred masked by hope.

"How'd he do it?" he asked with careful mildness.

Harland smiled at his eagerness.

"When he lived, this huge granite basin in the midst of these tor topped hills contained a lake of clear water, not a quaking

green mire," he said. "That was perhaps five thousand years ago—a mere minute when you think back to the post-carboniferous volcanoes that gushed forth all this granite from the bowels of the earth."

Jim Gruder stirred uneasily, though he took care not to move toward that resolute little figure on the edge of the islet. This talk of five thousand years being a minute made something in his shudder, as the mire had shuddered under him.

"To hell with that stuff!" he said loudly. "How do we get out o' here?"

"We might wait five or ten thousand years," said Harland with a certain austerity. He was studying the ill concealed alarm on Gruder's flat face. "By that time this quagmire will become a mere fen, a peat bog, like that you crossed in pursuing me. Vegetation will live and die in this stone hollow, as it has for ages. There is no outlet, and the dying plants choke the lake and solidify the mire. Will you wait?"

"Be damned to you!" Gruder snarled. "Cut out this thousands o' years stuff. We'll be dead o' hunger or poison water in a couple o' weeks. Don't nobody ever come by here?"

An idea occurred to him, and he felt for his pistol.

"I'm not turning the gat on you, you shrimp," he said, his voice quick as Harland faced the quaking slime again. "I c'n make somebody hear with this beyong the peaks."

Harland smiled.

"It is unfortunate that this is a shooting county," he said dryly. "Do you think men heed the sound of a gun where snipe, woodcock and rabbits are to be had and licenses cost half a guinea?"

Gruder snarled at him, and turned his automatic helplessly in his hands.

"Don't throw it away," Harland counseled. "It's an easier death than others I can think of."

He put his hands in his coat pockets and turned from the edge of the mire. He had come to a decision. Gruder watched, suddenly motionless, like a cat about to pounce. The man was almost within reach of his itching hands.

"Go ahead with your manhandling if you will," said Harland over his shoulder, as he strolled negligently toward the barrow. "I was a fool ever to fear your claws. An instant's agony—and obliteration. Good heavens! I, a scientist, reckoning generations by the thousand, years by the million, men by the billion, to fear a little pain, or to think seriously of one man's death! Ridiculous!"

JIM GRUDER, glaring at him, understood little of this, but in the midst of this ageless place of desolation the talk of thousands of generations, millions of years, chilled him to the heart, as superstitions chilled him. Here was time or some other power beyond his ken, mysterious, even formidable, since somehow it made this puny, unarmed foe scorn him. In an instant he could reach forth an arm, shut off this weak little man's windpipe. But the man did not fear that; indeed, he seemed to invite it.

He was laughing now, laughing at Jim Gruder, laughing at the cold blue, killing steel in his hand. There was something here beyond Jim Gruder; something unknowable and weird. Millions of years! He remembered the solitary menhir and the stone rows. How long had they stood on the moor? His scalp prickled. He felt himself shrinking up in the midst of a terrible, vague immensity. With haste he put his pistol away.

"There's some way out o' this," he said hoarsely. "Get a guy off o' here, won't you? I swear I never meant to do nothing more than make you divvy. I wouldn't 'a' hurt you, fellow. I'll help you dig up this stuff for nothin', once you show me how to get away."

"Escape!" murmured Harland reflectively. "Suppose you do get away from here. How long can you escape death that you dread? Fifty years perhaps? A second of time! Prolonging life so briefly isn't worth harassing the brain about."

Gruder licked his lips.

"Lay off that," he muttered. "Just get me off o' here—away from you and your damn' yip. That's all I want."

Harland did not hear this. He was meditating.

"Escape!" he murmured. Suddenly he turned to Gruder. "There is a chance of escape from instant obliteration," he said.

"Go ahead!" Gruder urged thickly.

The little man thought deeply before he spoke.

"In the depths of peat bogs there have been found crude dugouts—trees half scooped out by fire and hand held bits of flint. Every vestige of the men that made them is gone, the men of Paleolithic times, thousands of years past. But the dugouts are preserved in the mire and found in this age by peasants cutting turf."

"What about escape?" demanded Gruder. His voice was hoarse. It rasped his throat. These words turned his brain, but he clung unremittingly to hope of life, somehow, through this blood chilling man.

Harland pointed to the sea of green slime around them.

"Dive in with me!" he invited. His voice rang out. "At the bottom of that quaking mire there is, perhaps, chance of greater fame than ever came to man before. Think! After our civilization has gone down under another age of ice, another civilization will doubtless arise eons later. In that new age remnants of you may be brought to light again. You, of all the teeming races of man will have survived to tell the story of your kind. Escape! Earthly mortality!"

Escape! Gruder's knees shook under him. Death in a sucking, devouring slime! To be under that for thousands of years! Escape!

Harland's hand reached out suddenly and pointed toward one of the high tors.

"See!" he said compellingly.

Jim Gruder raised his eyes. Over that towering, austere summit a white mist was pouring in a sudden gush of annihilation. The rugged granite vanished as if a white hand had brushed it away. And then the hand of ghostly, swirling vapor was stretching on, down the slopes, toward the islet—toward him.

"That is how we will be blotted out," Harland said. "Our cities will be no more than menhirs and stone rows and circles of this moor. And you, down in a mire slowly turning to solid ground, will remain to—"

Gruder sank down on the turf, with his hands over his head. His brain was reeling under the impact of the words. His chest heaved in convulsive movements that he could not stop, and all the while he trembled, too, at the revealed vista of the ages.

"Cut it out!" he pleaded brokenly. "You're crazy—cuckoo—an' you got me goin', too! If you got any pity, cut it out!"

"If you fear that sort of dying, you have your pistol," Harland suggested, bending toward him. "Or if you would rather shoot me and thrust me in—"

Gruder raised his head. The mist was upon them. Tors, mire, island—all had vanished in that chill whiteness. Even Harland, so close, looked spectral and unreal as the wavering film thickened between them.

DESPERATELY he crawled nearer the man. He, at least, was a fellow creature. He groped in his pocket, drew out the pistol and flung it at Harland's feet. Then he clutched him by the trouser leg.

"Take it—but lay off that talk," he begged. "Lea' me alone—lea' me alone! No! No! Don't lea' me alone in this damn' fog!"

His grip tightened on Harland's leg. The little man's mild eyes glinted. He looked down at the sharp outline of the blue black weapon on the turf. He poked it curiously with his foot.

"An interesting refinement of the rounded stone that first an ape man's clumsy paw could grasp and fling," he murmured. "No, not a refinement; a mere survival."

He did not stoop to pick up the weapon. While the vapor blanketed the moor he

stood motionless, waiting placidly while Gruder, shuddering, maintained his hold on his leg and kept his eyes tight closed.

"Of course," Harland said aloud, "if you have no taste for earthly immortality, there is a way of prolonging your insignificant spark of life a few seconds—I mean years—longer."

Jim Gruder looked up. His pale eyes blazed with unquenchable hope, though he shuddered at the unearthly calm of Harland's countenance. He did not speak. The mist drifting by them became less solid; bits of earth and sky wavered into sight.

"I perceive that you are a powerful man," Harland said.

"Yeah," Gruder agreed instantly. "I'm strong."

There was sanity in these words. He scrambled to his feet. The surrounding hills were visible once more and the sun, though sinking, shone again.

"Look!" said Harland, moving to the edge of the green ooze and pointing out over it. "Just there, under the surface, about ten or twelve feet from this solid ground, is the end of the plank I laid yesterday. It is sunken a few inches, but it is there. If you possess the strength, hurl me, either by a rotary movement of your body or by a swing, out far enough so I may grasp it. Once on that plank I can reach the one I was compelled to remove a few minutes ago."

"You—you want me to chuck you out there—into that—that slimy stuff?" Gruder stammered. "Supposin' I threw you short?"

"In that case, the possibility of undying fame and preservation through eons," Harland replied. "For you—this islet, till you tired of it."

"Come on while my nerve lasts!" Gruder rasped painfully.

Without hesitation, Harland lay down upon the turf. He removed his glasses and placed them carefully in his inside pocket. Then he locked his hands together and crossed his legs. He also closed his jaws tightly. His eyes appraised the other man with keen, unswerving scrutiny.

Gruder seized him, one hand about the locked hands, the other gripping an ankle. He lifted him easily and moved to the soft edge of the mire.

"Ready?" he muttered.

"Proceed!" Harland answered.

Gruder swung him. His powerful arms lifted the light body of the scientist high over the green muck and back over the islet in increasing oscillations. And then, with a grunt that was half cry, half groan, he swayed outward again and let go his holds.

Harland hurtled through the air, then dropped upon the surface of the mire with a resounding crack. Gruder, limp, collapsed on one knee, saw a spout of green slime leap into the air from under the little man's body.

FOR TERRIBLE moments Harland lay motionless on his back, stunned by the force of his fall. Around him the green surface bubbled and gurgled, like some thing, some beast arousing himself to action. Harland's feet slid slowly downward into the boiling muck.

Gruder strove desperately to call out, but his throat was held immovable and his tongue was leaden in his mouth. Harland stirred, and suddenly writhed over on to his stomach. The movement half immersed him in the mire, and one hand, thrusting mechanically at the ooze, went down through it to the shoulder.

Gruder clutched at his throat. Blackness swirled before his eyes.

Harland ceased to move. Then, slowly, he turned his head; stared attentively at the spot where Gruder crouched and reached out his other arm to the right. It did not sink in; it touched something solid. It was the plank.

Gripping it by the farther edge, he pulled. Inch by inch under the steady strain he got his head and then his chest on to the board. With a great effort he drew his left arm out of the sucking, viscous muck. His weakness was increas-

ing, but he was now half on the plank, and he could rest a moment. Borne up thus, he gradually worked one leg on to the board and then the other.

Shakily, breathing heavily, Harland got to his knees. He was a mass of green slime, but he was still in command of himself. He stood up, safe, with a path connecting him with a solid ground—with the earth.

Gruder realized all this in a sudden flash of thought. The power of movement and speech came back in the flood of mingled hope and fear. He leaped for his discarded automatic and covered Harland.

"No tricks!" he snarled.

Harland fumbled for his glasses and adjusted them on his nose. He looked at Gruder and at the leveled pistol.

"Come, come!" he said reprovingly. "I can not have that! No compulsion!"

"Put that other plank across here, you!" Gruder commanded.

Harland shook his head resolutely.

"I will have no compulsion," he said with implacable firmness. "You may shoot."

The pistol in Gruder's hand wavered uncertainly. Harland faced him, as if awaiting the shot.

"I didn't want any rough stuff," Gruder mumbled.

"We shall have none," Harland assured him. "Toss that weapon here—or use it."

"What? D'you think I'm—"

"Toss it or use it. I shall not wait here long for your decision."

Gruder stared helplessly at this man. He could put bullet after bullet into him; at this short range, but what good would that do him here on this accursed place of horrors? Alone here, with Harland's words to writhe in his brain; with hideous, blinding mists to sweep down on him; with Harland's body out there on that plank. In sudden decision he fling the revolver toward the other man.

Harland reached for it awkwardly, but failed to catch it. The pistol struck him in the chest and dropped to the board beneath his feet. He picked it up and silently put it in his pocket. Then, while Gruder watched him with breathless intensity, Harland knelt and reached for the other plank.

He worked hard with all his puny strength; for ten minutes to release the board from the sucking grasp of the moor. Then without a word he pushed it toward the island, into Gruder's stretching hand.

"One moment!" said Harland. Before Gruder, with his shaking, fearful hands, could adjust the plank solidly on the hummock, Harland stepped lightly upon it and crossed to the island.

"You may go now," the scientist said coldly.

"What? Ain't—" Gruder, one foot on the plank, stopped and stared with a new fright at Harland. His eyes strayed down to the bulge in Harland's pocket, where his own pistol lay, and then he glanced despairingly across the mire. He must walk an undeviating course along the planks with this armed man, whom he had threatened to kill, behind him.

"You may go now," Harland repeated. "I have work I can do better alone. Take this with you. I have no use for it."

He put his hand in his pocket, brought out the automatic and thrust it contemptuously into Gruder's fingers.

"Go!" he said.

Bending, he took up his pick in his blistered hands and turned toward the mound that might be a barrow.

Gruder, numbly, slipped the gun into his pocket. He crept out upon the first plank. The green mire shook and gurgled horribly beneath him. He dropped to his hands and knees and crawled, gasping and mumbling, along the sunken planks. At every step the terrible words of Harland rang in his ears.

"Million of years—Dive in with me—at the bottom of this quaking mire—undying fame—remnants of your body—"

He reached the landward end and leaped to the turf that squelched beneath his feet but did not sink.

"God!" he muttered.

Just such a bog as this had once been a mire like that. A terrible fear of it lay

like a band around his heart. He was drenched with chill perspiration. His knees were sagging beneath him. He cringed before the silent, inexorable moor.

He looked across at the islet. Harland was there, working unskillfully with the pick. Gruder shook his fist at the unconscious scientist. A wild, blinding hatred of the man rose up in him.

"I could go back and pull in some of those planks," he muttered. "I could go back and pump hot lead into his head. He—he knows I can!"

He stopped and jerked his head savagely. Millions of years! Fifty years—a second of time! He could not get the thought out of his head. This brooding waste proved Harland's words as no other place could prove them. Fifty years—a second of time!

"He knows I can bump him off—and he doesn't care," he shouted to himself. "He doesn't care! Damn him to hell, he doesn't care!"

He pulled out his automatic. It reminded him of other words. "If you fear that sort of dying, you have your pistol."

Drawing back his arm, he flung the accursed reminder far into the green ooze. Then, turning, he ran like a madman back, toward the stone avenue he must pass to get away—to get away from the mists, the solitude, millions of years, to people, towns—the teeming races of man.

The SCOTS CONDOTTIERI

By F. R. BUCKLEY

THE TROOPS of irregular mercenary horse known to fame as the *condottieri* are generally considered native to Italy, whose history they largely made in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth centuries; but their prototype was produced by circumstances in Scotland a hundred years before such forces were known in continental Europe.

Their lands laid waste by war, the Scottish chiefs were forced to organize their followers into raiding bands and to live on the goods of their neighbors on the English side of the border. The very poverty which dictated this course permitted the raiders to succeed, despite the efforts of the powerful forces sent against them; for the typical raider—"a wild man on a shaggy pony"—carried, in addition to his weapons, "nothing but a small bag of meal and an iron plate whereon to cook the same."

It is little wonder that troops weighted down by armor, encumbered with a baggage train, and unfamiliar with the country—such as the vast army sent against the Scots by Edward III—could march for days without coming up with anything but herds of deer.

The enemy had no idea of fighting; he had simply invaded England because his lord's lady had served up a pair of spurs for dinner, indicating that the loot of the last raid was exhausted; and, having replenished the larder, his idea was to retire to some inaccessible spot and rest until the spurs were dished up again.

But certain leaders of wider views left Scotland to fight the English as allies of the French, using, in the new field of campaign, the same ghostlike methods of attack and retreat as had proved so successful at home. Douglas, the great leader of these pioneer free horse, set the fashion for many *condottieri* who were to follow him, becoming, after years of privation shared equally with his men, a noble of his adopted country, a Count of Touraine.

The WINNER

A Story of a Brainy Crook and the Cleverest Peace Officer of the Far North

By FRANK RICHARDSON PIERCE

THORNTON was in a particularly gloomy frame of mind. He stared solemnly at the red hot sides of the Yukon stove and told stories with unhappy endings—as if there weren't enough trouble in the world without adding to it with sad stories. Outside it was around sixty below zero and the Northern Lights were fairly crackling. The mystery and beauty of the spectacle had long since ceased to hold us. We were thinking about old Bill Shannon, holed in, we hoped, and comparatively safe from the bite of that killing cold.

I shifted my moccasined feet and leaned forward.

"And then what, Dick?"

"He struck it rich; took out around a hundred thousand dollars in coarse gold in six months and—went crazy. He's down in Morningside, Oregon, where most of Alaska's insane are sent. You know there are three sides to Alaska—Inside, Outside and Morningside. Sometimes I think Fate takes a morbid delight in lifting men up in their particular field, then instead of letting them finish in a blaze of glory, just drops them flat.

"I knew of a football player once, known the country over, as a passer, punter and ball carrier—triple threat man, you know. He got columns about his last game, and I'll bet half of the eighty thousand people present to see him rise to the heights, as the sporting editors predicted, were confident he would outdo all former efforts. He was in perfect condition, and while the teams warmed up he got off a couple of seventy yard punts.

"Eighty thousand people stood up and watched him come down the field, running interference for the man packing the ball. One of the opposing team took him out; a second tackled the ball carrier and, when the others got to their feet, there was one of the country's greatest on the ground. They spent several minutes working on his leg, but he couldn't stand, much less move around. He was in his last game just twenty-seven seconds; part of that time on the ground.

"Then there was that great German ace, got eighty planes. Rightly his finish should have been in a great air duel with one of the leading enemy airmen. He was downed when some one got on his tail while he was on another plane's tail. No sort of an ending for an ace. And then—"

"What has all this to do with Bill Shannon?" somebody inquired.

"Nothing, I suppose, except that it got me to thinking. Shannon is one of the greatest peace officers the North has ever known— Cut his eye teeth during the Klondike. He's out there, stalking Breed Antikoff, one of the real brainy crooks the North has had to deal with."

"Sure," Elliott interrupted, "and there you have your duel. Shannon's due for retirement and bringing in Breed Antikoff is a fitting close of a long career. In other words, your duel to the death of the aces."

"Guess you're right," Thornton admitted, "if either wins it's a great climax to their particular idea of life. I'll try to snap out of it. This stillness at times gets me! We should be out there right now helping Shannon get Antikoff but—"

"But we don't know which way to head for," Elliott interrupted again. "It's too cold for dogs or men."

THERE were five of us, temporary deputy marshals, sent out to aid old Bill Shannon. Deep in our own minds was the thought that old Bill might stick out in the cold too long. It was his pet theory the best way to gain on a man was to keep going after he was tired and was beginning to let down. But we said nothing of this. Worry over Shannon was back of Thornton's dark thoughts. Raging as men will when blocked by Nature, we spent the night sleeping, smoking, waiting —mostly waiting.

My mind ran down Antikoff's list of crimes. There was a streak of the Russian in the man's makeup—found often enough in Alaskan natives as a result of the Russian occupation. And from this white strain he undoubtedly derived the shrewdness with which he executed his plans. He preferred the knife, which he could either throw, or use in close quarters, but he was also a dead shot with either rifle or pistol. Brains had kept Antikoff out of trouble long after most people were dead certain he was guilty of at least two murders and several thefts.

And then he had attempted a killing and failed to complete the job. His victim had lived long enough to gasp out the assailant's name—Antikoff. Twenty-four hours later Shannon was on the trail, and now we were behind Shannon. Just how far, no one knew.

DAWN came at last and with it a sun that lingered a few moments above the rim of the world, then vanished without noticeably increasing the temperature in the slightest. All life seemed to have vanished, and in the mind of each was the hope that we could conscienciously return to the trapper's cabin and the Yukon stove that night. We spread out, fanlike, and it was Thornton who first picked up the trail.

Antikoff's tracks were plain enough and we had not gone a half mile before Shannon's cut in. And, there in the snow, the story was written. Elliott, a veteran in tracking, estimated old Bill was now five hours behind Antikoff and the fresher of the two. Somewhere ahead, a duel of wits and guns was in progress, and Nature was the referee. A criminal or a manhunter would climb a notch higher in his calling.

We speeded up as long as daylight lasted. Thoughts of the cabin were gone; the suspense of what might be ahead gripped us. A cold winter moon, shining on the snow, made it light, and the posse moved onward through a crackling world. Once Elliott cursed because his parka hood had frozen to his face.

Frequently he stopped and studied the trail for long intervals.

"Both of 'em sticking to it," he announced about midnight, "and both of 'em tiring! The breed's weakening and Shannon knows it. Here, see, he stopped and studied Antikoff's trail. See, the old man's speeding up. The cold's beginning

to get 'em though. You'll notice Antikoff headed for the clump of woods over there, then changed his mind. He wanted to put more distance between him and his crime. Say, Thornton, your nose is frozen!"

Thornton swore thickly, his face deep in his parka. With others he was afraid of frosted lungs. A nose, such as Thornton's somehow sticks out. We thawed the frozen member, then pushed on. A half mile beyond Antikoff's tracks magically vanished. A sinister air hole in the river's ice might have told the story.

"Shannon don't think he went through!" Thornton exclaimed. "Look, boys, old Bill kept going."

We stuck to Shannon's tracks for nearly a mile, following the meanderings of a very tired man, then we picked up Antikoff's once more.

Hunter and hunted were very close now—a matter of minutes Elliott estimated while we could not be more than an hour behind them. Ahead the trail left the river and climbed up toward some trees. Even Antikoff had finally decided he must have fire. Though he must have known he could not remain long—just enough to brew some tea and enjoy a moment's warmth before a friendly blaze.

"What's that, a shot?"

Thornton's nervousness became evident again. We were all tense; speaking in whispers.

"Those two alone," he muttered, "fighting it out and Nature the referee. A glorious end, a glorious triumph for either of 'em. Different than that ace. Nobody to sneak up quietly on Antikoff's tail and drop him while he's dropping Bill; no one to sneak up on Bill. Just the two and Nature the referee. Say, did you hear that?"

"Yes," Elliott answered, "the ice, down there in the river. Come on! Have your guns ready. We don't want to spoil Thornton's dream of a finish fight between those two, but we're going to be ready for anything. Down! Bill Shannon began crawling here. He must be directly ahead. We'll split in two parties and see if Antikoff left the woods—cut off escape."

WE LOOKED at the woods from the other side a half hour later. No tracks led from them. Somewhere in the silence, beneath the cold light of the moon, two men had either fought a finish fight, or were stalking each other. Silently Elliott sent us forward.

"Maybe we'll referee the finish," Thornton whispered, "and not Nature. Damned still now! Maybe—" He did not finish his query, but moved ahead with the rest.

I saw Elliott raise a warning finger, and crawled over to join him. He pulled back my parka hood and whispered into my ear.

"He's squatted down just over that ridge. Warmin' his hands before a fire I guess. Get your gun ready!"

I pulled my hand from my mitt and gripped the automatic pistol. As one we moved forward, covering the figure, crouching in the parka. "Up with 'em, Antikoff!" Elliott ordered.

Coming silently from the brush, Thornton joined us.

"Up with 'em!" Elliott repeated the order. "We have you covered!"

Silence.

The three of us advanced and approached the silent man. Thornton broke the silence.

"God! What a way to finish! Like the football player; like the ace! Nature didn't referee this fight, she finished it!"

Antikoff had gathered fuel, lighted it, then before he could feel the warmth the cold had struck. His resistance was low; he had waited too long. His frozen, naked palms were turned toward a dead fire; his squatting body, stiff—a block of ice.

I heard Thornton suddenly whisper—

"The referee finished it; neither had a chance!"

He was pointing. As if just crawling from the brush was the outstretched body of Bill Shannon, frozen, lifeless; an extended pistol, gripped in the frozen hand, covered the crouching Antikoff. The mouth was open, as if giving a command. Above, the Northern Lights flashed and crackled; about us, we could feel the presence of the invisible referee—the winner.

A Novelette of a Remarkable Escape from the French Penal Camp in Darkest Guiana

JUNGLE

By ROBERT CARSE

A LOW half cry, a choking gulp. Again silence. Lambson, six feet four of straight ebony strength, leapt across the little cell, pressed his nose against the bars, great fists twining about them. He could see nothing, hear nothing but the minor roar and rush of the breakers along the rocks. But, out there somewhere in the humid darkness, a man had just died—the sound of life giving swift way to death had broken the spell of the Isle of Silence.

The great American negro waited, repressing his breath, eyes glowing with the hope that six years in the Guiana penal colony and a year here on this dreadful Isle of Silence had not yet dulled. A sound like that of a small breeze came down through the complete moonless darkness to him. Other men, other solitary convicts had heard that cry, that sob, were whispering to one another in wonder, question. He had not been wrong then!

He waited, straining there against the bars of his fetid little cell. Then, although he had heard the sound many times before, he shivered uncontrollably; mad mumbling cries, shrieked oaths, frantic demands to the guards, to the wife he had killed, to the judge who had sentenced him to this slow hell, were rushing from the throat of Cognard, he who had been going insane now for weeks.

The big American breathed fitfully, shook his head, as if to cast off the effects of a blow. No one talked in this place,

no one shouted—except the insane. And even he, with all his primitive stoic calm, would go mad if that kept up for long . . .

Swiftly, silently, he drew back into his cell, huge fingers out like talons. He could not see, hear or smell the man outside the cell door, but he was there; he sensed him. Cognard still shrieked on; the entire island was ringing with his burbling, terrible shouts. Metal clicked against metal; the man outside was working at his cell door.

Lambson leaned forward, feet wide. Was it one of the guards? Was it a fellow prisoner—one who had broken loose somehow and killed the guard?

"Big One!"

Lambson did not answer; waited.

"Big One!"

Lambson worked long unused throat muscles.

"Who is it?"

"Brochan. Quick—Legros has done it; it is us two he has chosen!"

In a bound the negro was beside the little Provençal and out of the cell. He asked no more, implicitly and silently followed Brochan. Legros, the man Brochan had just mentioned, was the most famous lifer in the entire colony; had just been resentenced to two years solitary confinement here after a second attempt to escape. Now he had tried again—and so far been successful. Why he had chosen himself, Lambson, and the meek Brochan he did not know, but now was no time for thought.

Side by side, white man and negro,

they rushed along the rocks past the cells, Brochan clutching the dead guard's keys in a sweaty fist. The whispering from the cells was like a hiss of escaping steam now; they could see wildly shining eyes; hear the clack of bars being shaken in their sockets. Men knew a break was being made, wondered if they, too, would have a chance at that glorious draught of life, freedom.

"*Hsst!*"

The two stopped. bodies set, hands out, ready to kill.

"Brochan? Lambson?"

"That's right!"

"Come. Step to your right; *he* is there."

Quickly, the two stepped forward, swerving about the akimboed form of the dead guard, following the barefooted, dimly seen Legros. The way was toward the beach—the sea. Behind them in the cells the men were making simian cries of hope and rage, shaking bars and beds, whipped into a frenzy by thought of escape.

"Curse the swine!" rumbled Legros, the double murderer. "Ah, good! Now they will not hear us!"

Again the madman, Cognard, was making his pitiful, wailing bedlam. Callused toes spread, the three slipped down the rocks to where the blue fire of the surf played. Legros, the leader, the man who had planned this thing, bent suddenly down, stripped off the dead guard's pistol belt and holster, handed them to Lambson, went out into the surf. The other two heard the labored panting of his lungs, the dull grumble of rocks being rolled aside.

The small banana-stem raft floated to the surface lurchingly.

"Quick!" husked Legros. "The dead one will be missed—or those fools will rouse them with their yapping, and then, good night for us!"

The other two needed no urging. They waded waist deep into the roil of the surf, clambered onto the frail structure of the raft, grasped the rude paddles from their lashings, paddled madly away, breasting the comber barriers only after terrific toil.

They did not look back. Ahead was the mainland, freedom. The current, the breeze flung seas caught at their craft, heeled it about despite their attempts with the paddles. At last, with a faint oath, Brochan, the little Provençal, gave up, lay inert on the center of the raft. Lambson, the American, and Legros, whose fate would now be the guillotine were he captured, kept on.

Isle Royale was to their right, to starboard. Off the port bow, the ochre glim of lights from the leper island. They croaked at one another with joy; the wind and the current had at last caught them right, were carrying them inshore. A phosphorescent trail licked across the trembling blackness of the sea. Sharks. Great, eight-foot fellows. The two cursed them with the familiarity of old enemies and kept on.

"Where to?" grunted Lambson, shaking the sweat from his round jaw.

"Maroni—the river."

"The Dutchmen?" growled the American, who had tried this thing once before himself.

"What else? I have money—plenty of it. But, we have no shoes, food, quinine; can't try the jungle—yet."

The great negro did not waste his breath in answer; the other was right. Legros was a smart guy—with daring and guts besides. They paddled on, grimly, ever fearing the patrol boat, the flash of lights from Isle Saint-Joseph telling of their escape.

Brochan, revivified by half an hour's rest, stimulated by the thought of escape, freedom, rose up, once more took his place at the third paddle. They worked heedless of pain, of bruised muscles, aching backs, arms and legs, dry mouths and throats. They moved through a dark immensity of sea, sky and night, bending like automatons to their paddles, mouths wide, eyes staring ahead for sight of Hattes Light or that leaping line of blue fire which would be the surf piling up at the river mouth.

DAWN flung carmine streamers of light across the purpled sky. The wind, which had helped them so throughout the night, died out. The sea was calm, oily. Ahead, from the jungle, came the creak and jibber of monkeys, macaws, parakeets. Those three from the Isle of Silence had not heard such sounds in long, drab months. To them it meant freedom, victory. The pace of their strokes increased; they grunted as they paddled now, making a low *ha!—ha!* with every dip of the paddle.

The world was a great globe of bloody red; the lifting sun limned the palm fronds with gold. Dawn—discovery, capture—or freedom. Through the red flamed water about them the gray files of sharks came closer, as if sentient, aware of their weakness, their nearness to defeat. Brochan, partially crazed, howled, cursed at them, batted at one with his paddle blade. To their left could be quite clearly seen the reddish yellow upthrust of the lighthouse, the black sticks and hulls of the little shipping anchored in the muddy road bed.

"There they come!" husked Brochan through black crusted lips.

They looked at one another, then astern, where, from the jetty, the convict manned long-boat was putting out, bow and stern thwarts lined with guards, sun burnishing the barrels of their carbines.

"We have a mile!" grunted Lambson in his bad French. "We can beat 'em yet! Me for the sharks if we lose. *Ha!—ha!*"

His tremendous, sweeping paddle stroke lurched the frail craft a full fathom ahead. The other two stared at him with dull, unbelieving eyes, then, catching his fire, his terrific defiance of the men astern, they labored with him. All night long their course had been roughly north by west, up the coast from the Islands of Salvation and toward Dutch Guiana and the Maroni River, boundary of the French territory.

Already they were well into the mud flanked mouth of the Maroni. It was, as the American had said, barely a mile to freedom. And a three to one chance. For, up the river on the east bank were Saint Laurent, Saint Jeanne, filled with prison guards. Behind, eating up the scant half mile between them, came the long-boat—propelled by convicts like themselves! Their one real chance was that the guards in Laurent had not been notified from the shore station or from Cayenne and that the following boat was the only one yet out after them.

That thought came and went fleetingly; their brains were incapable of long or coherent thought now. Everything, the sea, the river, the jungle ahead, the fleet long-boat astern, had become a dimmed blur. This was now a piece from some fantastic and terrible nightmare in which they were phantoms possessed of human suffering and entirely denied relief. They only half saw the gray-brown crocodiles that stirred and slithered in the mud; the parakeets that flicked overhead from the jungle in flame colored flight. Oblivion was swiftly wrapping a thick gray shroud about them.

Suddenly, from astern came a frantic burst of firing, a peal of wild, barking shouts. The three faltered in their stroke, stared astern. The convict boat steerer had purposely beached the craft on a mud bank; the men at the oars, too, were trying for escape! Guards clubbed with rifles and pistols. Two of the rowers leapt into the shallow water, started to swim, heedless of sharks, poisonous water snakes, crocodiles. A big guard in the bow of the beached boat calmly raised his carbine, fired. Once, twice. One shaggy head slipped at once below the viscous surface. The second man, evidently struck in the shoulder, rose frantically up from the water, bare arms above his head, cried out to the blue sky, fell back, a crocodile tugging at him.

The water about the little banana-stem raft swirled with the movement of some great body. Sharply, the three realized where they were. Crocodiles were all about them, too; could rend this raft in half! They paddled on, heads

down, looking back toward the long-boat, where now the guards had clubbed and beaten the rowers into submission.

Black mud stretched ahead. Then the jungle. They had won!

THE raft slurred in over the evil smelling stuff as they pushed desperately with their paddle hafts. It would go no further. Inhaling deeply, they rose, plunged off into the stuff shoulder deep. Yard by yard they dragged themselves through. Bullets whipped up little black geysers about them; the guards had at last decided that they could spare lead on them, the runaways!

Legros, feline, dynamic in his nervous energy, made the bank first, yanked himself up to firm ground by a long liana. Little Brochan gasped sighingly, all but went forward on his face in the slime, a guard's bullet through his shoulder. Lambson leaned out, caught at him with strong fingers, dragged the man to him, bundled him over his shoulder, walked slowly out and up the bank, utterly careless of the bullets that leapt and crooned about him. Legros reached down, grasped the comatose man; between them they hauled Brochan into the security of the undergrowth. From the river came a howling cheer, then:

"*Mort aux vaches!* Death to the cops!"

Curses, blows from the guards came in answer, but the yipping cheers and taunts of the convict boat crew kept on, until, finally, the craft disappeared upstream toward Saint Laurent. Lying in the tangled jungle growth, already beset by mosquitoes and gnats, the three looked at one another. They had attained the impossible, the thing they all three had striven for singly once, or more than once—freedom!

But at what a price! Brochan, the little Provençal cabinet maker, lay panting moaningly, a neat Lebel bullet wound through his left shoulder, his skinny, unhealthy chest and back stained with the flow of thick blood. Legros, he who had murdered the guard, had freed these two to join him, and engineered the thing, sprawled semi-comatose, gash of a mouth open, nostrils of his high arched nose fluttering widely as he breathed. Lambson, the American, was prone on his side, face and great naked body thick with gnats and mosquitoes, his huge barrel chest trembling with the exhalations of his breathing. Before his eyes queer lights and shadows flickered in wierd dance; his lungs and mouth burned; immense, dull weight pressed upon him.

It was he, though, who possessed greater natural strength and vitality than the others; more closely approached the animal in his physical reflexes and ability to recover. In an hour he was on his feet, stripping the ragged denim trousers from Legros—the only piece of clothing in the trio. He ripped the worn, thin cloth into strips, roughly cleaned and bound Brochan's wound. Then, battering head down, he plunged through the dense wall of creepers, leaves and lianas to the river bank and searched its ochre, sunstruck width.

As yet no boat had appeared there. Obviously, despite the terrific beating it had been subjected to, the convict boat crew had done its best to make slow going of the trip up to Saint Laurent with news of the trio's escape. The convicts' speed in overtaking them in the desperate race from the coast had only been a ruse to throw the guards off watch and so insure their own efforts at escape.

He stumbled back to Brochan and Legros. The catlike Legros was on his feet, fully conscious, examining the firing mechanism of the pistol he had taken from the guard on the Isle of Silence.

"No boat?"

"None. Where now?"

Legros gestured with his shoulder.

"Up country. Can you carry him?"

"Sure."

"Let's go, then. Those pigs in that first boat will be wild enough when they are sent back from Laurent to hunt for us even here."

Lambson nodded, leaned down, swung up the pitifully skinny frame of the Pro-

vençal to his broad, gleaming shoulders. Parting the vines and leaves with his hands as best he might, Legros went ahead, making a path for the panting negro. Legros looked back only once, then smiled sardonically to himself; he had chosen well when he had picked this strapping black from Brest! The fellow was worth two of himself and the other wounded lad.

They were too tired, too numbed with pain and exhaustion to want for food, but their desire for water approached madness. They had been nearly fourteen hours without it. Tongues and lips were swollen, cracked, black. No longer did sweat roll down the slick black skin of the strapping American; his bodily moisture was almost exhausted. He and the Parisian, Legros, could no longer converse by word of mouth, they made dumb gestures with hands and bodies, grimaced with pain racked faces.

It was afternoon when they stumbled out across an old charcoal clearing, weaved erratic course through a wide savannah and came to the charred remains of a former Dutch plantation-house. Here, beyond doubt, must be water! Legros, whipping up the ultimate dregs of his energy, surged ahead in a crazy lope. Lambson, bowed almost to his knees by the weight of the unconscious Provençal, swayed through the charred timbers and let Brochan slump down against a rusted strip of corrugated tin roofing.

A croaking cry penetrated the haze about his brain; he sat up, mechanically licking his lips with a tongue which all but refused to function. Legros, dripping from head to foot, was running towards him across the clearing. Lambson made a bestial grunt, leapt up. The Parisian carried in his hands a wooden bucket slopping over with water!

Tropic-wise, more by force of instinct than conscious restraint, the big negro drank very little of the water, but bathed himself from head to foot, soaking the stuff into his pores, his close kinkless hair. Then he poured a palmful down Brochan's throat, bathed and cleaned the wounded man while Legros held him upright.

"You got more water?" asked the negro, when it was over.

"Sure. Plenty. Well, over there."

Lambson's cracked lips came back from beautiful teeth, from rows of still bluish, raw gums; he shook the little clearing with his booming shout of laughter. From the immensely tall trees the wild monkeys awoke and staccatoed back at him. Legros stared; was the big fellow going off his head now?

"Why laugh?" he growled.

Lambson's boom of laughter again beset the silence of the clearing. He smote his matted, massive chest with his palm.

"You—me—him—we're free!"

Legros grimaced wryly.

"Still too early for that—yet, Big One."

"Maybe," admitted the big American, still smiling, then looked down at Brochan.

The Provençal was slowly recovering consciousness.

ACROSS the rugged turquoise of the sky above the clearing the sun was burning brilliantly toward the horizon. Brochan lay motionless under the patch of shadow flung by a mangrove. Legros and the American, sweat again rolling from their bodies, worked on hands and knees through the ruins of the Dutch bungalow, searching for something with which they could make fire.

Once, with a hoarse cry, the huge negro came erect, a rusty, haftless machete in his hands. Legros cursed badnaturedly; the machete was a good find, but it would not help toward heat, toward that fire which would drive back the night prowlers of the jungle.

Again Lambson roared out in simple joy.

"What now?" barked the Parisian, nervously irritable.

Lambson poised his find on his broad fingertips—a battered tin watch, the crystal still intact. Legros grasped the thing from him, jerked savagely at the crystal,

popped it loose, cleaned it in his hair.

"What are we going to eat, Legros?"

Both men stared around. It was little Brochan who had spoken, from his resting place in the mangrove shadow. A quick frown passed across the lined face of the Parisian; he was the leader of this mad expedition; had brought these men to join him . . .

"I got money, that's all," he snapped. "One of the bush guys from Saint Anne was to meet us in the river with food, a canoe, clothes. He didn't show up, the wise mug! Worth his hide if he did."

Lambson had been staring thoughtfully at the descending sun.

"You get fire, Legros," he said suddenly, "and I'll get food."

Before the lanky Parisian could answer the other was gone, disappearing into the undergrowth at the clearing edge. Legros was enough of an optimist not to hesitate. He hurriedly gathered up twigs, dry leaves, shreds of bark. Brochan, who watched futilely, offered a piece of the denim cloth from his bandage. Legros hacked it off with the rusty old machete Lambson had found, quickly shredded it up.

He went down on one knee beside the tiny heap of tinder, the thick, cheap crystal held between his fingers. From the crystal to the soft rags a reddish purple ray of light leapt. Long, terrible minutes passed while nothing seemed to happen. Slowly, very slowly, the color of the cloth turned from its original faded gray to a soft brown, to a darker brown. The small brown spot widened, deepened in color again. Fibre began to crumble. An infinitesimal wisp of almost colorless smoke fingered up.

The two convicts remained motionless, afraid even to move. In another minute, if— There it was! Small, pale gold flame leapt up. They—they had fire and heat, light! Legros crouched down almost devoutly beside it, put his breath gently upon it, fed it with torn mangrove leaves, little slivers of wood. In five minutes a steady, nearly smokeless fire was burning.

Night palled the sunlight, swiftly, inexorably. From the jungle roared the nightly chorus of the wild monkey packs, the shrilling of macaws, parakeets. A high, terrific peal of sound pierced the rest. Silence. The two men by the fire looked at one another. Legros fumbled for the service revolver in its holster. That had been a jaguar.

"Lambson—he is out there, alone!" exclaimed the little cabinet maker, his pale eyes wide with fright and wonder.

Legros smiled grimly, muttered:

"Don't worry about that brute. He's all right!"

"Listen! What is that?"

Legros whipped out the side arm, cocked it expertly. The trembling scream of the jaguar had silenced all the other jungle life; every small sound now fell distinct, tremendous. Legros was totally motionless, right elbow propped on right knee, revolver muzzle up waist high. A sighing laugh of relief came from Brochan. Into the play of light from the fire walked the American, a wide grin on his shining face, two dead *pecas*—wild, rodent-like hares—dangling from his fist.

"Name of a name!" ejaculated Legros, and slapped the revolver back into its holster. "You are a great mug—shadow among shadow. Next time, call out, Big One!"

Grinning worldlessly, the American squatted down beside the fire and tossed the two *pecas* at the Parisian's feet. Legros stared.

"How did you nab those?"

Lambson held out his massive, prehensile fists, grinned more widely. Legros and Brochan, city men by birth and breeding, shook their heads at one another in wonder. But the knowledge of their hunger was all important. Legros was no woodsman or hunter; had been raised on the boulevards of the Right Bank; but he knew the elements of cleaning game. He took the haftless machete, moved off to one side of the fire with the *pecas*. In a couple of minutes the job was done: hunger, necessity and years in the penal colony

had effectually destroyed what gastronomic qualms any of the trio had ever possessed.

They could not wait until the little rodent-like animals were fully roasted; the smell of the burning flesh nearly drove them mad. Saliva running from their bearded jaws, they tore up portions of the hot, half raw meat, gulped it down, following it with vast swigs from the cracked wooden bucket Legros had found.

Wiping their lips on hairy forearms and the backs of their hands, they pushed away from the fire a bit after tossing several of the bigger timbers from the ruins onto it. Beyond the firelight was the black, sentient jungle night. Overhead, the splashed silver of the stars across the moonless sky. They were fed. They were alone. They were free. From one to the other the psychic communication passed. Legros, the most perceptive, put the feeling in words. His voice was cracked and shrill with a tremendous emotion when he spoke:

"We are free! The three of us."

He stopped; a vast shudder ran over his tall, nervous frame. His eyes were reddish, gleaming in the firelight. He licked his thin lips, opened and shut his hands spasmodically.

"France!" he shouted suddenly at the night. "France!"

It had the wild clarion note of a bugle call. Brochan, too, was caught up in the great nostalgic hunger that the sound, the thought of that word brought. He wept feverishly, unashamedly. Lambson, the American negro, who had deserted from his labor battalion of the Expeditionary Force and married a French negress in Brest, stared from one to the other, half believing that they were madmen.

Then there came to him the memory of how fever-wracked dying men in the penal colony had whispered that same word. How men being taken to the "widow"—the guillotine—had cried out that word as they were placed face down across the sloping neck-board. France—their country—these men loved it. The country that had sentenced them here, subjected them to the unnameable, uncountable brutalities of long years! France. It was the soil itself—the villages and cities—the rows of poplars, the white, straight, dusty roads, the great gray cathedrals, the soft brown spring fields, the city streets at night, that these two yearned for.

Him? He called himself an American; basically, he was not. He was a negro. His people had come out of Africa, from the Slave Coast. From the jungle. From a place like this. He stared off into the somehow sentient darkness with keen, unafraid eyes. This—mangrove, swamp, muddy river, savannah, this was as much home to him as the Birmingham in which he had been raised, or the Brest in which he had toiled and married. He swung around, attracted by the fiercely powerful will of Legros.

The lanky, bald headed Parisian had attained and passed his emotional peak; he was quiet, soft-spoken now.

"I have money—much money," he said.

Miraculously, in his hands was a thin sheaf of folded thousand franc notes. Brochan and Lambson blinked. They had heard that some of the older, more astute convicts could thus conceal money about their naked bodies, but never before, had they seen it done. This Legros was a mighty wise mug!

"Money—to take us, all three, back to France. Once we have made Brazil—Belem."

He halted, lean jaws clamped hard together, to stare at the two for long, intense minutes. Fascinatedly, they gazed back.

"I chose you two out of all of them because I thought you were good fellows, could be trusted. You are murderers—like me; we have that in common from the rest of those mugs behind, there."

Brochan, who had, in a sudden, since inexplicable, quarrel, killed his Marseilles employer with an adze, flinched at the mention of the type of crime that had brought him here. Lambson, deeply

calm, kept his big eyes steadily on those of Legros; he had killed a drunken Russian sailor in self-defense—a man who had been wrecking the little café run by himself and his wife; he had no qualms about it.

Aware of the thoughts of the other two, building up his case step by step, Legros went swiftly on:

"Brochan, you cracked in your boss's head with an adze. You, Big One, broke a drunkard's back and neck with your two hands. I—I knifed my wife's lover in the back! We, the three of us, we are more than *bagnards*—average convicts—we are men who have slain in hot blood, who have loved our freedom so much that we have all before tried to escape. What?"

"That is right!" grunted the pair, again whipped into mental excitement by the fiery flow of his words.

Legros hunched forward a foot or so nearer them, tapped the holstered revolver at his hip, made a passionate and melodramatic gesture off into the jungle.

"If I thought that the two of you were to butcher me in my sleep for this money that I have shown you I would shoot you both now! You see?"

The two simple men nodded like schoolboys being catechized by the master. Legros went on, letting his voice fall back into a gentle minor:

"But, it takes more than one to go from here to Belem—to full freedom. It is us three mugs together—waiting for the guy who is slow, is sick, helping one another. I freed the pair of you from Saint Joseph, from the Silence; it is my money that will get you back to France. We will forget that now. We are partners, buddies. I'm right? You agree?"

"You're the guy!"

LEGROS smiled, but it was not a smile of pleasure, of amusement. Twice before he had tried to escape alone—and failed. Because he had been alone; because he had been incapable of coping with the jungle single handed, had been driven back to capture by his fear of the jungle nights and days which rose in immense barrier between himself and that France which he loved insanely, now that he had been banished forever from it.

Money—he had plenty of that, hidden in secret bank vaults in Paris. He had been a rich man; was still. Money meant nothing to him—in exchange for freedom. Meant everything to these two simple men if they could gain that freedom also.

He was a tremendous egotist, a brave man—in the city, within the demarcated bounds of civilization. But, not here. He could not make good his escape without these two, and must impress upon this simple pair the fact that they were unable to gain France, freedom, without him. In that he knew now that he had succeeded.

He stood up, a commanding figure, despite his nakedness, his cadaverous face, matted hair and beard. He outstretched his right hand. Unconsciously obeying the implicit command of his action the other two also came upright.

"We shall shake on that?" he demanded. "And the one who fails first to keep the promise—the other two shall kill him?"

Tears were about the corners of Brochan's weak eyes as he advanced, hand out. Shortly, he and the Parisian shook. Brochan stepped back, as if from some royal presence. The big negro advanced, grinning broadly, white teeth agleam in the firelight. He pressed Legro's hand in his own huge grip, freed it. The tension broken, the three dropped down to their heels again, sat staring vaguely at one another.

"Legros," broke out Brochan suddenly.

"Yes?" The Parisian looked sharply at the Provençal, wondering what fumbling question the little man was going to ask him now.

"How did you kill the guard—get the keys to free yourself—me—Big One?"

Legros gave a short laugh of relief.

"I made a noise in the cell. He came near, cursing me, just before one of

Cognard's raving fits. I was silent. He became suspicious, curious, came closer. I stabbed him through the chest—impaled him—with a long, sharp rod broken from my bunk frame."

"*Sacré!*" He who had killed his employer with an adze shuddered from head to foot. "How, then," he demanded with irrelevant curiosity, "did you reach him through the bars—get to his keys?"

Legros laughed again. This time with the satisfied enjoyment of the master craftsman explaining a job well done.

"He did not do more than make a half cry. You heard? I thought so. But, he died standing up—the thing clean through him. When he fell, he fell forward, noiselessly, against the cell door. The rest—easy!"

He flexed his long wrists and hands to show how he had reached through the bars, drawn out the keys, squirmed about so he could reach the lock, insert the key, turn it—without sound.

"Good!" boomed the big negro. "It was coming to that louse; he used to beat the poor Cognard when he was already insane."

"Yes—yes," husked the cabinet maker, as if trying to satisfy his own conscience. "He deserved it—dog!"

He spat—a typical prison gesture.

For a long time the three were silent, gazing into the fire. All were immensely weary, nodding where they crouched, but unwilling to give up any part of this first night of freedom, eager to savor it to the full. Only Legros moved—to get up and put another blackened wall timber on the fire. He still feared that darkness, despite the presence of the other two, despite the loaded revolver at his hip.

"We got to sleep," muttered Lambson at last. "It ain't many hours to dawn now."

"You're right," grudged Legros, "we must sleep."

"Where tomorrow?" asked Brochan nervously.

"Up-country," replied the Parisian. "Until we hit one of those Dutch plantations. About two days' march, hey, Big One?"

"Yes." Lambson, because of his size and strength, had long been attached to one of the convict wood chopping gangs in the brush; knew the French bank of the Maroni very well and the approximate locations of the Dutch plantations across the stream. "What do we do there, *chef?*"

Legros suppressed a contented grin at the sound of the word "chief"; answered:

"That bush fellow was paid in advance to bring down clothes, food, water, a canoe. But the river patrols will get him now—even if he does get crack headed enough to set out. Bah! He's probably already in Cayenne, getting a skinful on the money. We got to buy from these Dutchmen; its the only thing."

Brochan stirred uneasily, good hand gripped about his wounded shoulder, now feeling the effects of the night chill.

"They say they're bad guys, those Dutchmen. That's why I didn't jump this way when I made my break. You're sure they won't jump us, take your—our—dough, sell us back to the dogs across the river?"

"No!" barked Legros, angry now that his plans were being questioned instead of complimented. "I got a revolver; there's three of us—we could take care of a couple of them before they could get us. No, all those mugs want is money. For a thousand-franc note most of them would sell their souls."

"He's right; let's sleep," grunted the big American at no one in particular.

He rose up, dumped two more long timbers on the fire, curled up, doglike, long, corded limbs reflecting the firelight. Brochan was the next to doze off, sitting half upright because of his wound. For a long time Legros remained awake alone, staring into the flames, evoking images of his former-wife, who had managed to get a divorce and remarry since he had been in prison. Then he, too, could no longer keep awake. His head fell forward on his hairy chest; he slept—a thin Buddha.

THE BITING fire of the sun on the barren clearing brought them awake about an hour after dawn. Brochan was raving with fever, lips and face puffed and bluish. Legros and the big American drew a little away from the sick man after putting fresh kindling on the all but extinct embers of the fire.

"His wound's got infected," snapped Legros bad naturedly. "He's got the fever from it now; in a hurry he'll have blood poisoning and die on our hands. You know what to do?"

"I seen what the mugs did in the brush camps when the guards' medicine run out."

"What?"

Lambson nodded towards the haftless machete.

"Sear the wound, then slap on a dressing of chewed leaves and *cinchona* bark. You clean up the thing while I go get the dressing stuff, huh?"

"Sacred Thunder!" protested the Parisian. "The shock won't kill him?"

Lambson shrugged a broad shoulder calmly.

"Other guys has stood it. Between his fever and what pain he's got now he's almost crazy already. He'll die, sure, the other way. And he's a good guy."

He squinted again toward the babbling, shivering Provençal, moved off silently toward the jungle. Legros had somewhat cleaned and sharpened the blade with wet sand and a smooth stone and was carving out a rough handle when the negro came back, carrying in one palm the wet poultice of leaves and bark. The two men drew together and stared at Brochan. The Provençal sat, knees crossed, head swaying from side to side, mumbling over and over the details of his conviction and trial. He lived now in a fever inspired world, wholly unconscious of what happened about him. With some pride Legros exhibited his handiwork.

"Good! Heat the point in the fire, *chef*."

Reluctantly, Legros did so while the American stripped away the rude bandage from the redly inflamed wound.

For many long minutes after it was over the still rather sensitive Legros imagined that he could smell burning flesh, hear the weak shouts and screams of the wounded man. But, the operation, the cauterizing, had been brief and efficient—if brutal. Brochan was in a coma now, the soothing, healing poultice held in place over his wound with what had been the bandage. Lambson, startlingly tender, picked him up and carried him into the shade of a mangrove, covered his face and body as well as he could with leaves. Then he came back to where Legros crouched by the dying fire.

"What now?"

"We got to pull out; we've been here too long already. There's a *picada* right there—" Legros pointed toward the tangled opening of an old trail—"which will at least take us up-country, somewhere. To some joint. The story about this dump is that the man who owned it died of the fever during the rainy season. His wife, a young kid just out from Holland, went mad, burned up the shack and herself. The plantation hands passed the story along and no one has had the guts to take on the place since. Like a lot of dumps in this cesspool country!"

Lambson grunted.

"That *picada* looks pretty bum. You'll do the machete work—clear trail—if I carry the sick one?"

"Sure! Anything to get going."

"Good. We got nothing to carry water in but that old bucket?"

"That's right. But, how about some food first?"

"Couple of old banana trees over there. Too cockeyed myself last night to see 'em. Stay here."

He picked up the machete, came back with a small bunch of the half green fruit. They gulped it down while Legros filled the bucket from the old well. He jerked the revolver belt and holster into position, took up the filled bucket in his left hand, the machete in his right. Lambson swung up the wounded man, whose loose head swung back and forth over the negro's shoulder.

Abruptly, the incandescence of the clearing gave way to the spectral gray light of the jungle as they entered the mouth of the old trail. Foot by foot they went ahead, their pace regulated by Legros's awkward manipulation of the machete. To other men their progress would have been pitiful, ludicrous. To them, after what they had been through, and eternally buoyed up by thought of the real freedom ahead, it was magnificent. For a while.

Then even their tremendous nervous energy ebbed. Suddenly, standing in the hot, moist dimness of the jungle trail, they were poignantly aware that they were attempting the next to impossible. Their captivity in Cayenne and on the Isle of Silence had stolen greatly from their strength, their stamina. Bad water, fetid quarters, insufficient food, bout after bout of the prison fever, had wracked and spent them almost hopelessly.

Both suffered from the protruding "prison belly"—sign of malnutrition and rotten water. Both had swollen, raw feet, aching legs, bodies and brains. The swinging bucket had chafed skin and flesh from Legro's shins, the work with the machete had blistered his soft hands. Lambson, despite his marvelous physique and inherent power, was a shaking, gasping wreck. It was all he could do to stand upright himself now. Carrying the dead weight of Brochan any further was out of the question.

LEGROS was the first to give fully in; he slumped sidewise in the grass and creepers, spilling all the remaining water from the bucket. The machete fell from his hand, he sobbed terribly. Lambson, still shouldering the weight of Brochan, attempted to go forward to the other. His foot caught on a trailing liana; he too teetered forward on his face, Brochan on top of him. Inch by inch he pushed the unconscious man from him, began to sit up. Then, galvanically, he sprang ahead, towards the Parisian.

Legros had whirled around in the trail, eyes bright with abrupt madness, hands like claws. He screamed a woman's name—that of his wife, who had brought him to this. Then, suddenly, he whipped up the wide bladed machete and started to drive it toward his shaking chest. Lambson's open handed blow knocked him sprawling, sent the big knife off into the creepers.

He swung about, lips livid, darted at Lambson. Wearily, the American subdued him; many times had he seen fine men go like this.

A vast ague settled on Legros; the American released him, crawled to Brochan's side. Slowly, the Parisian came out of it. He stared at Lambson incredulously.

"What are we doing here, Big One?"

"You let it get to you," muttered the American.

He drew his finger across his gullet graphically, indicated the machete among the creepers.

"Name of a dog! I did?"

Legros beat at the insects about his face with his hands. With brooding, blood shot eyes he gazed about him. At the stinking beauty of the great orchids; the screaming pairs of macaws; the bright blue arabesques of the huge jungle butterflies; the matted, dim tangle of creeper, limb, fern and vine; the drifting, ever falling curtain of leaves. He shuddered, gripped his hands tightly together.

"I—I am afraid of this place, Big One. Even in Cayenne, at night, before I tried the first one, I feared it. You know?"

"From other men; yes. But, don't let it get to you." Lambson halted, to let forth his booming laugh in challenge of what lay so powerfully about them. "I don't mind the dump. I got used to it up in the wood camps, and when I made my bust out. You was a clerk in the office in Cayenne, hey?"

"Yes." It was a whisper. Lambson stared fully into the other's eyes. Open, unashamed fear was there. This man must be made to move on or he would truly go mad.

"Come on!" barked the big American. "Get up! Leave the damn' bucket there.

We tried to buck too much. You take the machete again; we'll make it all right."

"You're sure, Big One?" Legros' arrogant courage, his command of himself, so manifest the night before, were now completely gone. To him, now, the Saint-Laurent guillotine, or death by his own hand, were better than this.

"Sure! Step off!"

Reassured, placing instinctive faith in the other man, Legros lurched up, reached for the machete and again feebly attacked the clogged trail ahead. Lambson, grunting, swung Brochan's small frame to his shoulders. They went on, the fumbling machete blows echoing vaguely, to be dulled, destroyed by the jungle.

Night came. The grayness of the jungle day gave way to abysmal shadow. They had no fire, no food, no water. They crouched where they were, naked body close against naked body for protection. Brochan lay beside them—only his fitfully slow breathing to tell them that he was still alive.

Vast choruses of frogs boomed through the night. Twice jaguars screamed like women in horrible agony. Monkeys coughed and barked from high above, near the matted roof that blotted out the sky. Once they caught the stench of a lumbering, thick snouted *peccary*—more dangerous than the jaguar. Vampire bats beat about their heads with webbed, unseen wings. They could not sleep, but their misery of brains and bodies was so great that their fear was a dull thing.

At last, dawn. The gray light of day once more. They came erect, went on, as they had the day before—mechanically, not quite knowing why. After a vague eternity of hours they sloped out into a clearing—excited by its brighter light when seen far ahead.

The open space was an old wood cutting, long disused. To them it was a magic place after the jungle. Here was sunlight, space, air—a concrete evidence of man's ability to conquer that which they had just left.

"See?" growled Lambson suddenly. "See? Quick!"

He pointed with his free hand. A small *peca* was scuttling across the clearing. Food! Legros whipped out the revolver from its holster, fired three times before the little animal tumbled over and lay twitching. Legros smiled—for the first time in two days—and turned, with sudden gayety, to the negro—

"Pretty good shooting, hey, Big One?"

"Good enough! Better than I thought you could."

Legros hobbled over and brought the kill back. The Parisian, once *bon vivant* of the Rue de Rivoli, asked no gastronomic questions now. When the two were done only the bloody pelt and a couple of the bigger bones were left. They were new men; stood erect, smiling at one another. It was Legros who, suddenly remembering, gestured down towards Brochan.

"You think he'll live, Big One?"

"Not if he ain't given food, water and decent care in a hurry. He's slowly going out now. But that trail ahead is open—the slash is pretty new."

"You mean we're near some plantation?"

"That's right."

Legros licked his lips eagerly.

"Let's go, then! You got your wind?"

"You're the guy! Head and feet, now, hey?"

"Sure."

They bundled up the emaciated form of Bronchan between them, went ahead through the stump spotted cutting. Lambson had been right; the trail on the far side was open, had been recently cleared. They trudged along it for two hours, peering ahead through sweat filmed eyes, constantly hoping that the next turn in the trail would expose another clearing.

BUT THEY heard the dull blows of machetes, the barked curses of the Dutch overseer before they saw it. Sugar cane. Bush negroes in breech clouts. White men who still wore the wide straw hats and colorless cotton pants

that marked them as escaped convicts. Men who had escaped from one form of enforced servitude into another almost as bad. For in the shade at one side of the clearing, blackened clay pipe outthrust from a corner of his bearded mouth, slouched the burly Dutch overseer.

In the crook of his arm was a high powered American hunting rifle. At his hip a six-shooter. These men were badly quartered, badly fed and rarely paid—for work. The bearded gentleman was present to see that they did that work, fully earned their doubtful pay.

Legros and the big negro stopped at the end of the jungle trail, uncertain as to their next move. They gently lowered Brochan to the ground, shuffled their festered feet, looked at one another. The effects of that jungle journey still fogged their brains. Between them and the watchful overseer rose the cane; he had not sighted them as yet.

"Go talk to him," croaked Lambson; this was civilization; the leadership was once more in Legros's hands. "Just have your persuader handy; these guys are tough," he added.

The lanky Parisian thumbed his matted, greasy beard thoughtfully for a moment, then moved away, hand near the butt of his revolver. The negro grinned wryly as he watched him. Legros's shambling pace had abruptly changed to a broad swagger.

One of the brown faced workers looked up suddenly, vapid eyes bright with amazement.

"Hello, Big One! Out again, huh! You picked a bum place. Who's the sick one? Brochan? I'll be damned! Who swung it for you?"

The worker's stream of questions and ejaculations quickly stopped. The overseer, Legros a cautious half pace behind him, was advancing towards the silent negro. Wordlessly the big Hollander looked over the motionless negro's beautiful build, his massive shoulders, arms and torso. He nodded reluctantly, as if in answer to some silent question of his own. Then his hard gray eyes flicked down to Brochan's pitifully emaciated body.

"You two. Not him," he grunted, around the pipe.

"Him too." Legros' hand lifted an inch or so nearer the revolver butt.

The big Hollander had spoken first in the familiar Cayenne creole *patois;* now he launched into violent, vituperative Dutch. Legros and the negro listened without interest; they had heard all kinds and qualities of cursing—putting it in Dutch did not improve it. The only outstanding fact of his denunciation was that he needed men, would hire the trio, but would pay them no wages, because this sick dog would take care and medicine and would not be able to work for a while.

"Thank you, sir," said Legros, making the "sir" a subtle insult.

"Don't thank me!" roared the big man. "When the gang knocks off, have some of your rats of former companions show you the way in. I'll see you two later!"

He obliqued away, never fully turning his back, always keeping one eye on Legros. When he had gone back to his former position in the shade, Legros laughed hysterically, muttered out of the side of his mouth to the American:

"The dirty roach! He knows me—fears me. Still, he wants money so badly he's willing to play with us but unwilling to let these poor dogs know that he is. That was the reason for all the wild cursing about wages and the rest. Swine! Probably got an idea in the back of his thick skull that he can turn us over to them for ransom. Funny, hey?"

Just as the fulvous sun fell aslant the jungle rim the big overseer jerked a tin whistle from his shirt pocket, shrilled a short blast: the day's labor was over. Former convicts whom the two had known personally or by sight during their years in the Cayenne colony came over to them, croaking eager questions, offering them the tepid contents of the water jugs. To Lambson's surprise, Legros was close mouthed, disclosed little of what had really happened. But one hairy little fellow, a former Rouen gangster, pointed

to the revolver belt and holster with a knowing smirk.

"You brought away a nice souvenir, huh, Legros?"

"Shut your head, you rat," barked Legros savagely, "or I'll put my foot down your throat!"

The workers roared with laughter: this Legros, he was a great mug! Two of the former convicts picked up Brochan, and the group, over a dozen all told, started slowly toward the plantation house, walking through broad fields of maize, manioc and cane. Silenced somewhat by Legros's snarling attack on the Rouen gangster, their new companions took them across the bare compound in front of the plantation bungalow and to the row of rough huts where they were quartered.

An octoroon boy, a house servant, was waiting there for Legros and the American. He handed them two pairs of ragged cotton trousers and told them that Van der Schleemans, the overseer, wanted to see them immediately. Legros frowned, answered that they would come almost at once. They installed Brochan on a crude bunk in one of the empty huts, left him with one of the older Cayenne men, who said that he had worked in the convict hospital as an orderly and would take care of the little fellow, then Legros drew the American away into the darkness behind the huts.

"What's the racket?" asked the big man simply, puzzled by this swift undercurrent of thoughts and emotions which he could not fully grasp.

"A whole lot!"

"Huh? Then what we hanging around here for? That big Dutch pig looks like bad news to me. And these cursed *bagnards* can't be trusted. That old guy, him who's with Brochan, I know him; he's all right. But the rest!"

"You're smarter than I thought, Big One. But, listen: we got to deal with this Dutchman—get food, boots, a rifle, a canteen and ammunition from him, or we're licked. We can't pack the little guy around any more the way we have—he'll croak. And Brochan's our pal. We can't throw him over. We promised to hang together and I'm not a low enough slob to break that promise now. Are you?"

"No. You're square about that. Brochan's a good guy; a guy you can trust. But—"

"You listen to me, Big One. That Dutchman's waiting to see us now. He knows I got money; knew who I was as soon as he saw me. He's probably just got a mail in from Galibi giving him the low down about our bust out. He wants money—all he can knock out of me—and all he can get as a head-reward and bonus for turning the three of us back. We aren't going to work in the fields for this guy; don't worry about that! I'm through with that sort of stuff. That was just a stall on his part. But, we got to watch him, or he'll have us in irons and on our way back to the place. We've got to take a chance on that and hang around here until Brochan's better and we're rested ourselves. Then, we blow up-country!"

"That's the talk I like to hear!"

"Sure. But, keep your head shut now. I'll make all the chin music. Just keep that machete handy and your eyes open."

"You're the guy, *chef!*"

SILENTLY, they padded across the compound to the broad, one story bungalow. Great crossbreed mastiffs, chained to a wild fig tree at one corner of the house, roared and jumped at them, making their stout chains quiver with the strain. Legros snapped a curse at them as he and the American mounted the board steps, pushed back the screen door and entered the enclosed verandah. The inner door was open, protected only by a curtain of mosquito netting. This the two lifted and went in, side by side, warily.

Van der Schleemans, the overseer, sat at a big table at the far side of the room, a large swinging kerosene lantern, suspended from a rafter, above and behind him, a six shooter beside his hairy fist on the table. Briefly, the two newcomers

glanced about them. Through an open door into a bedroom they could catch sight of a staring quadroon wench dressed in bright calico. From what was obviously the kitchen, in the rear, came the sounds and smells of supper, being prepared by the house boy. Van der Schleemans's hard gaze fixed on the machete in the American's hand.

"Put down that machete, you! Where do you think you are?"

"The hell he will!" answered Legros. He tapped the service revolver at his hip. "We like you too well to trust you, m'sieur! Now, what 'll you have?"

Purple veins stood out suddenly on Van der Schleemans's broadly square forehead; his teeth clicked noisily together. But his hand did not move. Legros smiled cynically, openly; this Hollander had guts, anyhow. The Parisian spoke, in a low, level voice:

"Van der Schleemans, my two pals and I got dough; are willing to pay for what we get—"

"Where is it?"

Once more a smile deepened the lines about Legros's eyes and mouth.

"Not here, big guy. Don't worry."

"Ducked out in the brush somewheres, huh?"

"You guess very well!"

Unconsciously, the Hollander's hand jerked towards the revolver; never in fifteen Guiana years had he been taunted like this! Then he grinned sheepishly; Legros's revolver muzzle was trained full on him.

"Listen," snarled the Parisian, "if you value your good looks, don't do that again. Not healthy."

The Hollander nodded with an attempt at good nature, withdrew his hands from the table, placed them, in full sight, on the high arms of his chair.

"Here's the way it stands, big guy," went on Legros, revolver still in the palm of his hand, "my partners and I don't like your health resort much; we're bound out as soon as our pal's right and we can come to terms with you. Wait a minute!" Van der Schleemans, who had started to speak, sank back in his chair again. "You won't get any more than a thousand francs for the return of the three of us. I'm willing to pay you two thousand for good boots, a rifle, fifty rounds of ammunition, a little meat, salt and a canteen. That lets you out. If you try to tangle with us—and play the hog, you'll get a bullet through your belly. Right, Big One?"

Lambson's affirmation was a quick, fierce grunt. Legros went on, nervous eyes shifting back and forth around the room.

"You have one of your lads take care of the sick one. As soon as he's on his feet—and it'll be about four days or a week, if he's going to live at all—the three of us will blow. We won't try to steal any of your other devils from you; I don't trust them any more than I trust you. Its just a little piece of straight business between the three of us and you. The day we leave—you get your money, two thousand francs, when you hand over the stuff—right here. Right?"

Van der Schleemans licked his thick lips with a dry tongue; did not answer for quite a while. Legros, watching him hawk-like, realized intuitively the thought evolution in the Hollander's brain. The big overseer was aware that he was temporarily beaten now—but, in a week, with the superior forces at his command, he would have these three, their wad, and the French penal ransom for them too. But, right now, he must make a show of playing fair.

"Right, Legros!" he rumbled at last. "You guys come back here in an hour and I'll see that you get fed. Ain't no sense in your eating the slum those other birds get."

"Thanks," said Legros softly, smiling with his eyes, "but, we'd like to eat with the boys just for old time's sake. You save all that good food for the sick lad. See you in the morning, hey?"

Van der Schleemans was incapable of answer. Lambson, at a slight finger tap from Legros, turned and walked toward the door and the verandah. Behind him,

back towards the door, came the bright eyed Parisian, revolver still in his right hand, cynical glance still on the ruddy face of the Hollander. Across the verandah; down the steps past the leaping mastiffs; across the compound . . .

In the mangrove shadows before the row of huts they stopped, to turn and stare into each other's eyes.

"You're a great guy!" ejaculated Lambson in open admiration.

Legros's teeth showed in a short smile.

"Enough to handle that windjammer, anyhow! He'd have put enough poison in that chow to drug us both with the first mouthful. And when we came to, he'd have us and the money."

"You got it on you still?"

"Sssh! Sure. Why not? You and I just got to split the night into two watches, turn and turn about. If we don't—*pouf!* We certainly picked a winner when we picked this one! Well, let's go see how the lad is coming along."

They walked along the row of dark huts, already in complete silence, the weary inmates now deeply asleep, to a shack at the end of the row, from which pale light splotched out into the darkness. Inside, wound quite expertly bandaged, dressed in an old but clean pair of cotton pants and a torn shirt, was Brochan. Beside the rude bunk was a clean glass, a spoon, a bottle of nameless medicine.

Legros grunted in admiration.

"Your old friend did pretty well, huh?"

"It looks that way. What's the chance of finding some food around this dump?"

"I don't know. The shack at the other end of the row looked like a mess hall. I guess that's where this mob eats. Let's go see. Bring the lantern, huh?"

THE AMERICAN took down the kerosene lantern from its nail, followed the lanky Parisian down the row to the end shack, an open affair, with a tin roof supported by four corner timbers. Under the roof was a plank table, grimy, fly filled. At one end, head propped on his hands, a man slept. The two looked at one another, then approached him silently. They made little or no noise, but, when they were within a foot of him the man was on his feet, a knife in his hand. It was the old fellow who had volunteered to fix up Brochan.

"Hell!" he croaked, shaking his shaggy gray head, "I've been waiting for you mugs to come for so long that I went to sleep. Here's some chow I saved out for you."

Legros stared levelly at the man, who, although manifestly an escaped convict like themselves, was unknown to him. He turned to the negro for confirmation of the man's identity and trustworthiness, still fearing some plot of Van der Schleemans's.

"You know this mug well, Big One?"

"Sure. He's a good guy. Him and me was in the same wood gang four years ago."

The gray headed man nodded knowingly.

"Yeah, and the Big One helped me out more than once; that's why I done this for you two." He suddenly produced, with the quick stealth common to most old prisoners, a battered tin platter bearing half a dozen greasy cassava cakes, some boiled rice and a couple of bananas. Without waiting to thank him, the two fell upon the food, wolfed it down. The old man watched them with brooding eyes, asked when they were done—

"You guys aren't going to hang around here, are you?"

"No, Old One," answered Legros guardedly, "why?"

"You got jack, then — plenty of money?"

Legros's face was a hard mask. A strange, taut silence fell over the three. The old man laughed in high, jeering falsetto.

"Legros," he barked, "I don't know you, and you ain't quite sure of me. Ain't that it? Big One does, though, don't you?"

"That's right. You're a good guy, Magrel. "He stopped, swung his gaze to

Legros, went on unhesitantly. "We got money—yes. But, the three of us—Brochan, this bird, and me, are partners. We can't take no more with us."

"You couldn't even spare an old mug that's got a wife, children, granchildren, in France, a few francs?"

"Turn it off!" rasped Legros. "You'll have every man in the place, from Van der Schleemans up, listening in a minute. Cut it out, Magrel! What the Big One said is so; the three of us are partners. We took you in, we'd have the whole gang around our necks in a minute. Wait a second, though. Here. You've done us a favor!"

Old Magrel stared wide eyed at the stained thousand franc note thrust suddenly into his shaking fist. Slow, weak tears worked down his face. Legros thought for a moment that the fellow was going to kiss him on the cheek in gratitude. But, instead, Magrel leaned across the table, lips drawn back from toothless gums as he hissed:

"That puts you way up in the world with me, Legros! You're a white guy. If this can't get me away, nothing can. I'm pulling out right now. I had hopes I could fix things up when I seen you guys come out of the brush this afternoon."

"You mean you're going to make a bust tonight?" demanded the Parisian incredulously.

"Why not?" whispered back Magrel. "I got a little dried meat I saved up, a machete I stole from the tool shack, a crock of water—and this. Sure. It'll give me a headstart over the Dutchman's dogs."

Legros shuddered even now at thought of the jungle at night. He shrugged, held out his hand. Magrel shook it; shook Lambson's big fist; got up.

"One more thing: don't trust anybody in this hell hole; they're all out for the same thing—freedom. And what squareness they had left after they got through with them, this Dutch swine has knocked out. Well, *à bientôt—à Paris!*"

Swiftly, he was gone. Legros cursed aloud, peering about him nervously.

"Is the old guy cracked, Big One?"

"No. I fixed him up when he got snake bite one time, in the brush. That's why he took care of Brochan and us—not for money. If you had the money to spare him, all right. If you didn't, all right. I hope he makes it!"

"Huh! Well, let's go get some sleep. I'll take the watch from now until midnight. Its going to be tough—but its got to be done."

They went swiftly back to the shack where Brochan lay. The big American negro coiled up on the floor, head on his hands; slept. Legros crouched on his hunkers in the doorway after blowing out the lantern. For a long while the silence of the compound was broken only by the rustle of palm fronds and mangrove leaves asway in the slow night breeze, by the snores of the sleeping men in the huts, the faint, irritant clack of a loose jalousie in the bungalow, the dim sounds of the jungle night, the buzz and creak of mosquitoes and gnats . . .

The Parisian's bearded jaw sank lower towards his raised knees, his grip on the revolver loosened. He blinked his eyes, bit his cracked lips to keep himself awake. Then what he had feared, what he had been waiting for, happened. There came the soft scruff of careful naked feet across the packed dirt of the compound. It was not the movement of a stranger, for the mastiffs by the bungalow did not bark out.

Legros moved back a foot or so into the small shack; cocked the revolver with his thumb. Stillness again. The almost impalpable hiss of retarded breathing. The prowler was right outside now. Legros came erect, snoring loudly through his nose in pretense of sleep. The other man was not two feet away from him—was on his hands and knees in the doorway.

Calmly and without hesitation Legros fired one shot point blank. In the quick flare of flame he made out the features of the man he had just killed: it was the Rouen gangster. He cursed violently under his breath; he had been hoping that it would be Van der Schleemans himself.

Lambson had lurched up in a tremendous bound, was beside him, machete in his fist. Excited shouts and curses came from the huts. The mastiffs bayed and snarled wildly. Light sent orange barbs through the jalousie cracks of the bungalow windows.

Shoving the revolver into the waistband of his new trousers, Legros lit the lantern and told the negro to sit down, like himself. In the doorway, the top of his head blown off, was the apelike little fellow from Rouen. Bearded ex-convicts, wide eyed bush negroes, the octoroon house boy, finally Van der Schleemans himself, came to gape at the tableaux in that hut.

Men cursed and questioned. Van der Schleemans raved for fifteen minutes in Dutch, Spanish, French and Cayenne *patois*. Legros and the American sat motionless, weapons in their hands, faces without expression. The wave of voices broke at last, retreated. Van der Schleemans howled an order and two of the bushmen dragged away the hairy, grotesque body. Legros and the American were alone again.

"A good object lesson," whispered Legros after a while. He snapped open the revolver, ejected the empty shell, blew through the barrel. "But I only got one more shell, Big One. We got to watch ourselves from now on. Maybe, though, from now on, they'll ask for an invitation before calling."

He glanced over at the huddled form of the torpid Brochan, and, for the first time, Lambson was cognizant of what a great nerve strain Legros was under.

"You and me, Big One, promised that lad we'd see each other through, but, if he don't hurry up, this last one will do for me!"

"Ah, shake it, *chef!*" grunted the big negro, who greatly admired this man. "There ain't no reason why it should get to you. We're all right!"

"Sure," grudged Legros, forced into uncertain cheerfulness, "we're all right. Grab some sleep again, Big One."

Lambson, who did not have a nerve in his body, obeyed. But this time Legros did not blow out the lantern; he let it burn. Time and again his eyes strayed to the dark black bloodstain on the dirt of the doorway. One—in Paris. Two—on the Isle of Silence. Three—here. . . . He was a triple murderer; had killed three men. He, Edouard Legros, who at one time had shuddered at the thought of death . . . Sin to wipe out sin . . . Death to insure life . . . An inexorable chain, the next link never known until it had passed you—beyond recall. . . .

An honest man? He laughed shrilly aloud at thought of the word. Yes, he admitted at last, Lambson, the American negro here, was one. And little Brochan. But, both, in the eyes of the world, were murderers—who had been sentenced for the rest of their lives to this slow, humid hell of Guiana. He, himself, somewhere, retained within him a spark of manhood, of self-respect. He could still play fair with these two men he had chosen as partners, would gamble his whole future recklessly on the chance that he and the other two would escape from here without being captured by this greedy brute of a Dutchman or murdered in their sleep by these hardly sensate husks of men—their brother convicts from Cayenne—men who did not possess the mental stamina of themselves, who had had that last fine quality stolen from them by the long, terrible years of brutality, bestial suffering and hopelessness.

The little mug from Rouen had yearned for that France the same as he, Legros, yearned for it—and had been willing to commit murder to achieve his desire. And died, attempting it. The thought was too grim, the conclusion too terrific for even his morbid brain. With an immense effort of his will he quieted his brain, projected himself into a sort of vague, dreamy hypnosis.

SOMEHOW, the hours went on. He awoke Lambson, mutely handed him the revolver, crawled himself to the spot warmed by the big negro's body, slept at once. He awoke at dawn, called

by the American, who had just given Brochan some of the medicine proscribed by old Magrel—he who had fled into the jungle during the night. Outside, the plantation hands were stirring, drawing water from the well, carrying firewood to the bungalow.

The two went out, walked, grimly silent, to the mess shack. Men there moved away from them, did not speak, look their way more than once. The two were ostracized, hated for the killing of the hairy man—for their ability to cope with and confront Van der Schleemans, the blond god of this place.

Before the sun was even above the jungle rim Van der Schleemans came from the bungalow, pipe in the side of his face, rifle under his arm. He growled an order. The workers piled out of the shack, fell into a column of twos. At another order they slouched off, to get machetes, axes, hoes for the day's labor. Legros and the negro watched them go, sitting at the grimy table. Lambson, usually silent and self contained, cursed now.

"And that's freedom! The Dutch dog ain't no better than a prison guard. If I was them I'd make a break—"

"Yes?" snarled Legros, breaking in. "Just think what happened to us in those couple of days after we left the river! These mugs can't even swipe a machete. Death's the only thing they can look forward to. A great life!"

They got up, left the fly infested place, went to their own shack, sat there throughout the morning hours, staring glumly out into the jungle. A little after noon Brochan came to consciousness for the first time in four days. Lambson had saved him out a little food from his slovenly breakfast. He now fed it slowly to him. Brochan stared about him, croaked:

"What's up? What dump is this?"

Briefly, Legros told him. Brochan's pale eyes warmed with feeling.

"You two are great guys!"

"That's all right, old timer; go to sleep. We got to jump this place in a hurry!"

Brochan nodded weakly, swerved his unshaven face about on the straw pallet, was again asleep. While he slept the two examined and redressed his wound. It was healing slowly but cleanly. That meant that in a couple of days they could travel. Sitting there that afternoon in the door of the shack Lambson sang the marching and working songs of his old wartime outfit, beating time happily with hands and feet. Soon they would be on their way again—out in the open—on their way to real freedom! Beside him Legros crouched broodingly, hawk's eyes staring back and forth with ceaseless energy.

Before sundown, Van der Schleemans bringing up the rear, the workers came stumbling back. Piling their tools in the supply shed on the edge of the compound, they swarmed at once toward the mess shack.

"Come on, *chef!*" urged the American. "We won't get no chow unless we're quick."

Hurriedly they joined the others. As they came in under the tin roof a dozen pairs of sullen, bloodshot eyes swung on them. They started to sit down, reach out for the tins of boiled rice. A huge, splay nosed bushman sitting next to Lambson knocked his hand away from the rice tin.

"What's the matter, guy?" asked Lambson good naturedly in the Cayenne *patois.*

"This workers' food. *Souteneurs* like you no eat here—"

The fellow never finished his clumsy insult. The American's hand whipped out, caught the burly bushman's wrist. Lambson did not even get up. But, with a jerk of his shoulder and back muscles, he broke the bushman's wrist bone and hurled him flat on his back out of the shack.

"Kill him!" screeched a voice from the end of the table.

A heavy trade knife drummed over Lambson's shoulder, whacked into the corner timber behind Legros. The Parisian, at the far end of the table from the knife thrower, was on his feet, revolver out.

"Who's the mug that heaved that?"

"Me, you scum! Me—Rouen's mate!"

The dead gangster's partner, a thin, livid faced man, was standing up, hands tense by his sides. His close set, beady eyes glowed redly as he stared down the table at Legros. No one spoke. The score of men sat breathing deeply, waiting for the next move. The gangster made it; reached for another knife in his waistband. Legros shot him through the lungs.

Straining bodies kicked back and overturned the rough mess bench. Men leapt towards the hated pair. Lambson hurled one man up by the arms, flung him into the pack. Legros slammed right and left with the empty revolver barrel, kicking, gouging. A rifle bullet crashed through the place, slapped into the tin stove at the rear, ricocheted. Van der Schleemans had joined the party. Lambson rudely shoved Legros flat on his face. Crab-fashion, the two crawled out into the darkness.

"Quick—the bungalow!"

They ran, heads down. A racket of rifle fire came from behind. Howls of pain, the sounds of blows. Van der Schleemans's voice, strident, confident, commanding. The upflare of the mutiny had been summarily quenched. Now the Dutchman would come after them, the two who had caused this thing—caused the escape of one man, the death of two more, set the whole plantation in dangerous turmoil.

They pounded up the front steps of the veranda. A bullet rapped through the mosquito netting, whipped over their heads. Heedless, the two rammed through the door. Down on one knee behind the overseer's desk, the octoroon house boy was frantically fumbling with the firing lever of a rifle. Lambson swept up a heavy deck chair, flung it crashingly. The octoroon screamed out in fright, fled through a rear doorway. In the bedroom the quadroon wench screeched frightful curses from her hiding place in a big clothes chest.

Legros scooped up the discarded Mannlicher, freed the jammed firing lever, turned just in time. Van der Schleemans stood panting in the doorway, rifle at his hip. Legros shot instantly—twice. His hip shattered, the big Hollander tumbled forward on his face.

Behind the desk was an arms rack. From it Lambson whipped up a pair of German automatics. Wrenching open the butt plates, he found the magazines full. Before Legros could cry out to him the big man had sprung out the front door and across the compound toward the defenseless Brochan.

Legros yanked over the wounded Hollander; Van der Schleemans was still conscious. The Parisian picked him up without undue roughness and carried him to a deckchair in the center of the room.

"You'll live, Dutchy, if you do what I say. Where's your ammunition?"

The Hollander gestured weakly toward the desk. Legros spilled the contents of half a dozen drawers to the rattan carpet. He grasped up four or five boxes of rifle and revolver shells, dumped them into the wide pockets of a drill hunting jacket he whipped from a peg on the wall.

He ran to the door, staring out. In the square of light from their shack he could make out the watchful figure of the American. Dark, silent shapes prowled the compound and one sprang up at him just as he turned his back. He wheeled, fired from the hip—low, so as not to kill the man. Then, knowing that it would not be long before the frantic hands would rush the place in a body, he raced through into the kitchen.

Here on shelves were a tin water bottle, canned food, salt, quinine, matches. In an alcove dangled a canvas army pack. He grasped the thing, dumped his load into it after filling the water bottle from the pail in the sink. Back into the main room again, struggling into the sleeves of the hunting jacket, the pack over one arm.

Bright eyeballs stared at him through the jalousie cracks. He made as if to sweep up the Mannlicher and fire; they

were gone swiftly, curses welling into him in a ragged wave. He looked rapidly around him, to be sure he had not forgotten anything. Yes—boots.

He swerved into the bedroom. The wench screamed. He jerked her unceremoniously from the wardrobe chest, pushed her out into the main room. Three pairs of tall lace boots stood in the chest. He caught them up, knotted their laces together, slung them around his neck. Back into the main room. The quadroon was crouched down beside Van der Schleemans, weepingly dabbing at his wound with a bandanna cloth. Legros scowled, staring at the white faced Hollander. He waved toward the big arms rack on the wall behind the desk, the litter of cartridges on the floor.

"You'll have time after I'm gone to get a gun loaded and take care of those swine if they try to jump you. She'll tend your wound. And that house boy'll see that some of your friends from the next plantations will show up in time to straighten out the boys that are left. So long now; sorry our visit wasn't more pleasant!"

Legros smiled sardonically, swung swiftly toward the door, stopping only to jerk a big electric hand torch from its resting place on a wall shelf. Finger on the trigger of the Mannlicher, he stepped out on to the porch. Bare frightened feet scuttled away from him. He grunted a curse at men who let their fear of death overcome their love of freedom, and stalked recklessly across the compound.

Brochan, aroused by the shots and noise, was conscious, but very weak, While Lambson stood guard at the door, Legros slipped the sick man into a pair of denim trousers, pulled a pair of Van der Schleemans's boots on his scabrous feet.

"Where to, *chef*?" croaked the sick man, sweating already with excitement.

"To the river, I guess. No more jungle for mine. There must be a trail leading east from here to the Maroni. This Dutchman don't go overland to Galibi and the sea. We get on that trail, Big One and I will carry you. I'm a huskier guy than I was four-five days ago. How about it, Big One? Ready?"

"Sure. These mugs is fighting among themselves. Either that or trying to break into the bungalow." He laughed boomingly. "They're afraid of us, the lice!"

"Come on, then, and pick up the lad. I'm bowlegged now from the gear I got to carry. I'll go ahead with the flashlight. Right?"

"Sure."

In one lithe bound the negro was inside the hut, had lifted the wanly grinning Brochan to his broad shoulders. Legros blew out the lantern, waited for a moment in the darkness of the doorway. Then, cocked rifle in his right, flashlight in his left, he went ahead, the American padding gruntingly behind in his stiff boots, Brochan bumping on his shoulders. Their course took them in among banana trees—away to the eastward from the bungalow.

Behind, the compound, the huts and bungalows seemed strangely silent. Suddenly, the American whispered—

"You'd think they'd let them mastiffs loose, huh?"

"No! They're even afraid to do that—afraid to go near them. We're all right, as long as we keep traveling."

They went on through the deep, soundless blackness. On the far side of the banana plantation was a small savannah. Legros whipped the flashlight shaft across it, eyes squinted for sight of the trail which he knew must be there. At the north end he found it—wide, well-worn.

He grunted with joy; increased his pace. He alone of the three acutely realized the danger they were now in. Not only were the French guards and patrols looking for them, but the attack on Van der Schleemans, a respected Dutch subject, would surely bring the Dutch territorial troopers hard after them. From either gang they could expect small mercy, for, after a terrific beating, the Dutchmen would undoubtedly turn them over to the French—and

so to the Maritime Tribunal at Cayenne—and the guillotine, on half a dozen charges apiece.

ONCE more they were in the jungle. Once more the wild monkey packs screamed and gibbered, the mysterious night prowlers crashed through the brush, huge vampire bats lurched into the rays of the electric torch. Legros was beset again by a cold sweat. He was no longer the contained, level headed schemer of the plantation; he was a frightened, hunted man, driven forward only by desperate necessity and his great nostalgic longing for freedom and France.

Three or four times the negro had to shout out at him to go more slowly, for the Parisian was advancing at a pace that often broke into a ragged lope. They had gone perhaps four miles when Lambson again uttered a low shout of warning. Legros halted, listening, staring.

"What is it?" he demanded huskily.

"Some guys are coming up-trail from the river. Quick, jump it into the brush and put out that damn' light!"

Marvelling once more at the negro's keen jungle sense, the Parisian obeyed, Lambson, the wounded man still on his shoulders, at his heels. They crouched down among the lianas and great tree ferns, trying to check their breathing, every small sound. For over five minutes they waited so. Then they heard the pound of rushing footsteps, the creak of leather, muttered curses.

The three rested motionlessly, Legros and the American with fingers hard on their trigger guards. Light slashed the darkness with a blade of gold. Half a dozen men, rifles in their hands, hats pushed back from sweaty foreheads, broke into view. Leading them, a rifle muzzle against his back to keep him moving, was Van der Schleemans's house boy. The other men were Dutch plantation workers and overseers from down-river. They rushed past, were gone into the infinity of darkness around the turn in the trail.

"Name of a name!" husked Legros. "We would have tangled with them in great shape if we had kept on down the trail!"

"Sure. Let's go. Them guys will be coming back after a while—and faster than they went!"

They scrambled back onto the trail, rushed on. After three hours more of grueling labor Lambson whispered that he could smell the river mud ahead. He was right; in fifteen minutes they could make it out quite distinctly. They halted wordlessly.

"What now, *chef?*" asked the American.

Legros shrugged a weary shoulder in the darkness; answered finally:

"Our only bet is to go upstream—for Brazil. If we go down, the river patrols are sure to get us. There's only a couple of river towns to slip by if we go up—Armina and Cotica on the French side, and they're the only ones for us to fear. Then we hit the border, Brazil and the mountains. The swine won't be looking for us to go upstream, anyhow. They'll think it'll be too hard for us."

"Why not stick to the jungle; it's safer, ain't it?"

"Maybe. But you don't make half the time. And how long do you want to go on carrying Brochan?"

"Huh! He ain't no pack of cigarets. How about a canoe—paddles?"

"Those Dutchmen we saw on the trail came upstream. Their canoe must be down here at the end of the trail. Or those that Van der Schleemans uses when he goes down-country."

"That sounds right."

They moved ahead cautiously, going foot by foot, afraid to employ the flashlight any more. The jungle gave way to a small clearing on the sloping, muddy river bank. They stopped, listened, watched. No sound except the jungle noises and the slow susurrus of the sluggish river came to them.

"Stay here with the lad. I'll go look around."

"All right." Legros knew the negro's almost uncanny ability to move skill-

fully and silently in the total darkness. Lambson slipped the slow breathing wounded man down to the clayey soil beside the Parisian, dropped flat to his naked stomach and wriggled ahead down the slope of the bank.

Those were perhaps the most terrible ten minutes of Legros's life. For he saw, heard or felt no sign of life except that of the wounded man at his side and the dim jungle diapason. What had become of the American, what had happened to the guard that the Dutch planters had undoubtedly left with their canoes he did not know.

Lambson might have been silently knifed by one of the Dutchmen's bushmen. A sleepy crocodile on the muddy bank might have . . . A dozen things. With freedom—or the guillotine in the balance. He, himself, he knew, was almost powerless here in the jungle alone. If Lambson did not come back in five minutes more he was going to blow out his brains—shoot poor Brochan first, then himself. He could not stand this.

"Legros!"

The Parisian trembled from head to foot.

"Sacred name! What?"

"Come on. Bring Brochan!"

"Where are you? I can not see!"

"Come straight ahead—quietly; them guys are asleep."

Dragging up Brochan and his rifle as best he might, Legros stumbled with painful caution down the slippery bank. Wet hands reached out and held him back just as he was going to walk blindly into the water. Staring wide eyed, he recognized the wetly glistening form of Lambson. The American was kneeling 'midships in a long dugout canoe which he kept inshore with one bare foot.

Brochan was dumped down aft, Lambson lifting him bodily over his head. Legros passed inboard the Mannlicher, the pack and flashlight, started to climb aboard himself.

"Go back up the bank—to your left—and bring my guns, pants and boots."

Not yet understanding why the other was dripping wet and had stripped off his valuable clothing, Legros obeyed. He climbed over the fire charred gunwale, slipped down into an inch or so of slimy water on the bottom. The American mutely thrust a paddle into his hand; he took it. Lambson worked aft to the stern. At a low hiss from aft the kneeling Parisian dug his paddle into the mud and pushed off in unison with the American.

The lazy swing of the current caught the stern of the crazy off-center craft, lurching it downstream. Legros paddled hard right instinctively; the bow came about and headed upstream. Once more they were on their way.

During that night they butted into unseen snags and sand bars half a dozen times, twice almost tipping over. Chancing discovery, they used the electric torch to work their way clear again, then paddled on blindly in the darkness, Lambson steering as best he could from the stern. At the first quick coral flush of dawn Lambson drove the long snouted craft in towards the creepers of the bank, securing it in the mud, a stout liana lashed about the bow thwart. Then Legros, who had been pondering the thing all night, turned to him—

"What was the racket there at the end of the trail?"

"Huh!" The big negro smiled grimly for a moment. "Those Dutchmen was wise guys; they had their boys anchor offshore. I swum out to one of them. It was empty. I got aboard, untied the rope in the bow, let it go, with the rock, and paddled in. Them bush guys was in the other ones—all asleep. Easy, huh?"

The Parisian gave a nervous quiver as he thought of that swim through the crocodile infested waters.

"You're a great mug!"

He reached for the water bottle, drank sparingly, passed it to the American. He drank. They hunched down in the slimy water of the canoe bottom, unable to keep their eyes open any longer, and slept. Brochan's feeble murmur brought them out of it an hour or so after darkness.

"How do you feel?"

"Better—a whole lot. Where did you pick up this crate?"

"At the end of Van der Schleemans's trail. Last night. How long you been awake?"

"A couple of hours. Some of the guys of the river patrol passed by, going downstream, a little after noon. They seemed in a big hurry!"

"Hell! Looking for us. If they find us, they're good." Legros started up. "Where you going, Big One?"

"Ashore. I'm hungry. I'll be back."

"Go ahead. I'll stay here with the little one. Be damn' careful, will you? Here, take a couple of matches. The Dutchman's cooked food spoiled my appetite for raw meat. . . ."

The American grinned, took the matches handed him, slipped them into the waistband of his trousers with his automatic pistol, scrambled up the bank through the dense growth and was gone. The other two had lain nervously, slapping at the insects, for over two hours before the negro crept silently back into the canoe.

"How'd you make out?"

"Great. Here; eat that."

"What is it?"

"*Peccary.* Found him on a back trail, a mile or so in there. Got him through the head; two shots. He don't smell nice, but he tasted all right. I tried it out when I cooked it. Brought enough to last us a couple of days. Ain't no sense to stop and do this again for a while.

They ate ravenously of the stringy, sour meat, stowed the rest away in the canvas pack. Brochan wiped his lips contentedly with the back of his hand.

"Where we bound for, Legros?"

"Brazil."

"You know where you're going now?"

"Yes. There was a big map in the office in Cayenne. I learned the whole thing by heart before I made my first bust out. This crick runs right up to the Monts Pucuvennes. That's the border; that's Brazil. Then the Tunucs-Hunucs, and down the other side."

"How far to Belem then?" It was Brochan who had spoken.

Legros made a little sighing noise.

"God alone knows. At least a thousand miles. Bad country, too. But, we can't go back. Me—I'd just as soon die up there in the Pucuvennes or the Tunucs-Hunucs than in the arms of the widow in Cayenne. How about you?"

"That's right."

"Good. Here's a couple of other reasons why. This way we keep right between the two territories. We meet a Dutch patrol—we can jump over into French country—and the same for our 'friends', see? Then, when we do hit the Brazil line, up in the mountains, we got a much better chance of sneaking over the border than down in the lowlands. I don't see any argument, do you?"

"Ain't none!" boomed the big American. "Let's push off."

IT TOOK them three months to clear the lower river, paddling only at night, secreting the canoe in some backwater bayou or creek and sleeping during the days. Innumerable times they just escaped detection and capture by the shrewd eyed river patrols that swung past, manifestly detailed solely to find them. Once the searchers came so close that they were forced to desert their treasured canoe and rush away into the jungle. But, an hour later, when Lambson ventured back to the swampy bayou in which they had left the canoe, the patrol had gone, unsuspecting.

The river towns they successfully passed at night. Beyond the largest, Cotica, they decided to stop. Legros and Brochan, now quite fit, went back into the place at night, armed with the pistols and Mannlicher. They sought salt, matches, an ax. In a side street they bumped full into a territorial gendarme, sleeping in a doorway. Alley curs snapped and yowled at them. The gendarme awoke, cursed the dogs into silence, went to sleep again.

The pair swore devoutly under their breaths and went on, to find a small

shop kept by a Chinese. They carefully woke up the stertorous Cantonese and Legros talked swiftly to him through the green wooden bars in the window. The desired articles cost them a thousand of Legros's francs, but they considered the transaction worth it. Passing hurriedly back the way they had come, they reached the gendarme.

Legros's hand clamped down on the flat automatic butt in his waistband; the fellow was awake now, lighting a cigaret, round face bathed in the ruddy light from his match. The pair had discarded their boots for this venture; were barefooted. Inch by inch they crawled along the opposite wall, Brochan with his new ax poised. The match was blown out. The gendarme inhaled, exhaled, yawned sleepily, stuck his matches back into his tunic, stumped off down the street towards the main square. They were safe. They laughed aloud, ran on.

The next week they came to the first series of precipitous rapids. For days there had been no sign of pursuit. Freedom really seemed ahead now. Once they surmounted this difficulty, capture would be next to impossible. Brochan and Lambson laughed, sang and cavorted like boys let out of school. Only Legros was glum, silently preoccupied. He alone of the trio was cognizant of the terrible hazards of the mountainous, barren country that lay ahead of them, beyond the headwaters of the river. Freedom was yet a distant, dim thing. Death still laid a gray shadow across his thoughts—between him and his Paris. He did not transmit his fear and worries to the others. Why spoil their happiness, their efficiency, by worry?

Brochan here for the first time exhibited his real ability and worth as a member of the party. He rove together a strong rope out of long lianas, by which they would tow the canoe. Risking everything, aware that they could not make the portage at night, they scaled the low rocky bluffs alongside the rapids in broad daylight, their gear lashed to their backs, the battered canoe pulled forward and upward foot by painful foot through the screaming froth of the violent water.

It took them all of fourteen hours of tremendous, unremitting labor. But, when they achieved the head of the rapids, calm water was ahead. Once more they had won!

They found it impossible to paddle in the increasingly swift water above the first series of rapids. Brochan cut long, pointed poles with his ax. They poled their leaky craft forward, paddles discarded.

No longer did they take the caution to travel at night and sleep by day. Pursuit must now come from behind, and they had a long headstart which would be hard to overcome. From time to time, as they laboriously worked upward, a blunt prowed canoe came sliding swiftly downstream, the Indian occupants staring at them with wondering eyes. They stared back sullenly, and went on, without exchanging word or gesture.

The canoe was severely battered making the second rapids and the three decided that it must be repaired before they went on. Brochan, the cabinet maker, claimed himself competent for the job. Legros and the American left him, the canoe beached on the river bank, and went inland for game.

The character of the country along the river had changed. No longer was it the thick, tropical tangle of the lower country. Lianas, orchids, ferns, palms and mangroves had disappeared. Extremely tall and gaunt trees, whose names they did not know, reached gray arms to the sky.

Gone, too, was the jungle life—the parakeets, macaws, chromatic butterflies, the mosquitoes. Only the wild monkey packs, the thick snouted *peccary* and the jaguar were still with them. Ahead, dimly purple, austere, rose up the Pucuvennes. Long ago, to their left, they had made out a magenta bulk which Legros said was Mont Le Blond.

In the strangely grim forest Lambson found dim, winding trails, followed one of them down, Legros walking unhesitantly

behind him. After several hours of silent travel the big negro grunted softly and stopped where he was, gesturing to the Frenchman to step to one side of the trail. Legros obeyed, instinctively throwing off the safety catch of his automatic.

A faint, chill wind blew through that ghostly gray wood. Borne on it was a thick, nauseous smell. Legros repressed a shudder; somewhere close was long dead meat. The American had knelt motionless in the center of the little trail through the tall yellow forest grass. There was very little sound. The coughing jabber of the dun monkey packs in the tree tops had stopped abruptly. The stench increased. With an easy, quiet motion Lambson levered a shell into the breech of the Mannlicher.

From the trail ahead came low grunting noises, the thud of a heavy body in motion. Legros licked his lips, stared, his shaky nerves on taut edge. The tall yellow grass quivered back; the huge gray-black *peccary*, blunt snout and evil-glittering eyes upraised, was in the trail right in front of the American. With startling swiftness its pace increased to a lumbering gallop, the heavy head went down.

Lambson remained totally still. To the staring Frenchman it seemed that the big man was entranced, had become a magnificent statue of black marble. Then, twice, the Mannlicher roared. The American leapt up, sidewise, firing as he moved. The huge, hoglike beast swerved past, unable to stop its lumbering charge. Still at full run, it swung down the trail from sight.

"You missed!"

Lambson grinned briefly.

"Not that time. Listen!"

From the trail behind came a blood chilling scream, a series of resounding thuds. Lambson, with a gesture to the Frenchman to follow, ran down the trail, reloading. Legros, reluctant to be alone for a moment in this eerie place, followed hard after. The *peccary* lay athwart the trail, thick blood slowly oozing from black nostril vents.

Lambson laid a thumb on each eye socket, then on two small, dark holes in the heavy hide. All four shots had taken immediate and terrific effect. Perfect shooting.

"Why take such chances?" demanded the Parisian. "The thing almost plowed you under, there in the trail!"

Lambson nodded good naturedly, tapped the Mannlicher butt plate against the thick skull of the animal.

"You ain't sure unless you get it squarely through the eye, into the brain. They got skulls harder than mine!"

His booming laugh awoke the forest echoes, the monkey packs above. Legros cursed in shrill admiration, was silent, watching the American skin and quarter the beast, using the old machete Legros had found that first day of their escape from the Isle of Silence. Lashing the dripping meat to a long pole with cords plaited out of the forest grass by Lambson, they started back through the darkling forest to the canoe.

Brochan had long before finished his caulking job; sat now by the fire he had built, thin knees under his chin, singing a dockside song of Marseilles Old Port.

"You're a swell pair of butchers!" he greeted gayly. "That's enough to last us for a couple of weeks."

"We'll need it!" snapped Legros nervously, brooding eyes lifted to the black, hard outlines of the mountains above and beyond.

"What do you mean?"

Legros shrugged, gestured characteristically with his bony hands.

"Mountains ahead. Cold. Maybe snow. Maybe no game."

Brochan cursed, losing his mood of gayety.

"You brought us here!" he challenged.

"Sure; it was the only place to bring you."

"Legros is right," rumbled the American," we can't go back."

He was roasting a chunk of the sour *peccary* meat in the fire; handed them each a dripping piece. They ate, drank from the tin water bottle, wiped their

mouths with their hands, stared musingly into the blue-red of the coals.

"You think we'll ever get back to France, *chef?*" asked Brochan finally, as if trying to dispel his own doubts.

Legros made a soft whistling sound through his long teeth.

"Sure! I would have bumped myself off long ago if I had thought that I couldn't."

"Truly?" Brochan hunched a bit nearer the fire, thin arms twined close about his knees. "What you going to do when you get there?"

"Name of a name of a sacred name! Eat—like a gentleman. Wear fine clothes, silks, soisettes, linens. Bathe four times a day. Sleep in a soft bed. Smoke ten franc cigars. Go to the Opera, the theatre. Read fine books, drug myself with fine music. Be a man—a swell!"

"That's all right—that's all right!" grudged Brochan, squinting into the flames.

"Well, how about you?" demanded the Parisian, caught on the quick by the other's offhand acceptance of his desires.

"Me?" Brochan stared off into the darkness, at the mountains, the roaring spate of the river, the tall forest. "Me? I'm going to Alsace, just across the border, where I have a cousin." He halted, eyes bright with thought; went on. "And make such cabinets as will knock your eye out—with no one to tell me how!"

"What's that? With no one to tell you how, hey?" picked up the quick witted Legros. "Was that why you bumped that mug—your boss?"

Brochan lurched back from the fire as if struck a bodily blow.

"Who told you that? Who told you that?" he demanded shrilly, shaking from head to foot.

Legros and the American exchanged a quick, understanding glance. Legros cursed apologetically in the prison jargon.

"No one, old timer. No one! Just a foolish question. As for the Big One, here, he's going back and kick hell out of the wife who would not testify in his defense, who let him get the works. Hey, Big One?"

Now the other two glanced eagerly at the big American negro.

"Oh, I don't know," rumbled Lambson. He grinned gently into the close darkness beyond the quiver of the firelight. "Maybe. I ain't made no promises to myself!"

The three were silent, all oddly shaken by the turn the conversation had taken, all engrossed by the thoughts of that future which had lain so heavily upon them from the day of their conviction. Lambson, the negro, was the first to move away from the fire, curl up in his doglike manner and go to sleep. For hours the other two sat before the fire, febrile visions in their eyes. At last, worn out both mentally and physically, little Brochan rolled over and slept.

Only Legros, lean, dour, was alone by the dying fire, eyes roving back and forth, hands jerking and moving in his lap. He dreamed of Paris—the city of light. Paris, in the spring, with the buds softly green in the Bois. Paris, the little island in the Seine. The Punch and Judy shows. White capped nurses with thin legged children in the gardens of the Tuileries. The crowds on the boulevards at night. The face of some *café* charmer, dimly appealing above her coffee cup in a private room. His head nodded, fell forward on his bony knees. He slept.

THE DART nicked the bow gunwale of the canoe, spun on, to kick whitely into the water. Only Lambson kept on at his pole; the others had flung themselves down in the canoe, grasping for the rifle, the automatics. Mysteriously, another one sugged into the side of the canoe, quivered there. Lambson stood straight up, still gripping his canoe pole, keeping the craft from swinging about downstream in the roiling water.

He raised one hand, then the other, to show that he was unarmed. Legros, watching him, understood, hissed an order to Brochan. They too came cau-

tiously upright, empty hands high. For an interminable time they stood so, almost afraid to search the river banks with their eyes.

Then tall, naked men ran down the banks from the trees, blow guns and dart cases in their hands. One, a heavy-set man with thick hair and beard, called out in strange Indian gutturals.

"What do you think he means, Big One?"

"I don't know. Better get inshore, anyways."

Legros regained his pole and, slowly, he and the American brought the craft in against the bank. The tall, brown men still watched them with speculative eyes. The bearded fellow spoke again, pointing to the automatics, the Mannlicher, the ax and the machete. One by one, never knowing when he was going to have a poisoned dart driven through his neck, Brochan stooped down and handed them over.

The bearded man took the Mannlicher, caressed it curiously. Then, as though not quite certain of it, he placed it under his arm, butt in front of him, muzzle pointing full into the faces of his fellows behind him. He made a commanding gesture with his hands. Silently, the three stepped from the canoe. One of the Indians gave it a push with his foot. The current caught at the thing, swung it swiftly downstream. The bearded man pointed off into the forest. Unhesitantly, Lambson obeyed the order, started ahead, the two Frenchmen at his heels, two of the Indians ahead of him.

The course lay close to the steep river bank, along a narrow, little used trail. For hours they walked without word. It was almost night when they passed two rough stone monuments imbedded in the bank. One bore an inscription in French, the other in Portuguese. They were crossing the border into Brazil!

Shortly afterwards the leaders swung away from the river and cut on a sharp oblique into the forest. The three convicts, blood thinned by years of confinement in the tropic seacoast country, were numbed by the dismal night wind, too weary and hopeless even to think. They stumbled along, heads down, eyes half closed with exhaustion.

Then ahead they heard the snarling yap of dogs, smelled fire, cooking food, saw a huddle of rough huts outlined by the light of a central fire. They were led directly to the fire, pushed down on their hunkers silently. Women and children, youths and old men came to stare at them incuriously, only evidencing excitement over the big American. The bearded leader had disappeared, carrying the Mannlicher and automatics.

Finally he came back, accompanied by a little man who hobbled only by aid of a heavy crutch. The three stared up at the newcomer; by the cast of his features, his general presence, he did not seem to be the same as the men about the fire. Suddenly, he spoke, croakingly, in rapid Holland Dutch.

Legros, once more the leader of the trio, answered in French, spitting out sharply:

"We're no Dutchmen. French—from the Islands."

"Name of a dog!" The little crippled man started forward, crutch end banging on the rocky ground. "Stand up!" he barked in French. "Let me see you!"

They obeyed. He stared at them with rheumy eyes.

"What is the big fellow?" he demanded suspiciously, glancing at Lambson.

"He is an American, a black, but one of us. From the Isle of Silence, too."

"Huh! What in the sacred name are you doing with Dutch guns? Boots?"

Legros' laugh barked through the silent clearing.

"We swiped them from a Hollander down below."

For a long time the old cripple was mute, resting heavily on his crutch. At last, he spoke.

"You can not be liars. Only crazy men, or lads from the place would come into the Tunucs-Hunucs half bare and without a guide."

"You have been there?" demanded Legros, eager to end this tense uncertainty.

A slow grin made a grimacing mask out of the cripple's mahogany colored face.

"Fifteen years! How did you make your bust out?"

Rapidly, dramatically, Legros told him. A great, croaking laugh came from the cripple when he was done. He brushed back the Indians behind him, snarling quick gutturals. He said no word to the three but stumped off toward one of the larger *malocas*. They followed, recognizing that here, somehow, was a man who understood.

A SMALL fire smoked fitfully inside the hut; the only heat and illumination. They crouched down around it while the cripple scratched about with his free hand in a dark corner. He hobbled back into the firelight, a large earthenware crock in his hands.

"*Tafia*—booze," he told them. "Drink up! I'm Jules Labec, him who bumped the boss of the Twelfth Arondissement in '98!"

The three grunted in recognition of the name, of the crime, drank deeply of the fiery, odoriferous stuff, passing the crock from hand to hand. One drink and the blood jumped hotly in their veins; eyes shone, lips came back from bluish gums.

"You escaped in '15, during the war, hey, old timer?" barked little Brochan, already drunk on the powerful *tafia*.

"Here's a good lad who knows his history!" cackled the old convict. "Yeah, Georges Flammereaux, Hyperion Guignet and me pulled a bust out in '15. Beat it over into Dutch country. We was in a wood gang up Saint Anne way; stole a canoe. We stayed across the river a long time; I become foreman of a gang. That's where I learned that lingo. Then them two wanted to jump on again—was eager for France, a crack at the Army and that war. I wanted to leave well enough alone; the guy we was working for was a white Dutchman. But, two against one. We come just like you did, I guess. Pass the jug, *bagnard!* Hey? Yes. A fight just below the first rapids. They got good old Guignet on the first crack out of the box. Georges and me kept on—Georges carrying me; they broke my leg, the swine!"

The old man stopped, darting his hot eyes from one to the other of the trio. He reached again for the well handled jug, drank copiously, spat at the fire.

"Believe it or not, rats, but that mug, Flammereaux, carried me for a week—until he could swipe a bush guy's canoe. We got this far, me in a raving fever. Then these boys killed Georges—he always was a lad for fighting. They brought me here, with him, for—"

He stared up, interrupted by an involuntary question wrenched from Legros.

"These lads? *Nike epidias*. Flesh eaters. Sure. Or so they were when I come in. No, I lived, see, and they was square enough to let me. How long ago? I don't know, *bagnard*. Maybe ten years. You can tell better than me. It's a long time, anyhow. And now I'm the ace in this pack, see? Pass the jug, Shorty!"

The *tafia* had the effect of a heavy blow at the base of the brain. Brochan was already in a stupor, swaying back and forth, mouth open. Now he fell flat on his back, snoring through nose and mouth. Legros, who, in his day, had been a hard drinker, tried to keep swig and swig with the old convict, but failed, stomach and heart unaccustomed to the stuff. Only the giant American could could keep at it, but did it sparingly, realizing intuitively the worth of this half mad little fellow to the success of their plans.

Labec, himself now very drunk, kept at it, telling and retelling the details of the ancient gang war in Paris in which he had committed his crime, the story of his escape from the penal colony, the death of two comrades in their flight up the river, and his peaceful domination of this tribe of forest hunters. Lambson sat crosslegged before the fire, nodding good-naturedly to the old man's drunken

rhetorical questions, and then bringing forth a grunt of laughter or commendation. In the end old Labec fell forward supinely on his face, out.

Lambson lifted him up, wrapped him and his two companions with rough pelts taken from a pile in the corner. The knapsack, their tools and guns still lay just inside the doorway. He opened the pack, found some scraps of salted meat, gulped them down gratefully. He rose to his feet, went to the door of the *maloca.*

The clearing was in complete silence. The big central fire had died down to a bed of ruddy embers. Wind made dim diapason through the forest trees and around the corners of the huts. Nowhere was there a living thing in sight. Obviously, Labec's boast was so; he did control this small, dangerous tribe.

Before he lay down by the fire Lambson stared grinningly into the *tafia* crock. It was empty.

The three awoke about noon, all possessed of throbbing headaches. Old Labec was already up and gone from the hut. The trio were wolfing down some of the smoked meat found beside the fire when the cripple came back into the hut, a young, good looking Indian lad behind him.

"Hello!" grunted Labec in greeting. "You mugs are a bunch of old women when it comes to drinking." He made his grimacing grin, sat down beside them, pawed at a chunk of the meat. "Who's the boss here?"

"Me," muttered Legros, his mouth full.

"You got money?"

Legros coldly studied the old man for a long moment before he answered.

"Yes; plenty."

"That's good. Down below you'll need it. This lad here is going to take you out—over the mountains and to the head of the Rio Jary. There's a small town there and a few troopers. They won't bother you unless you bother them. Just swipe a canoe from the bank there at night and shove off downstream. I ain't ever been that way myself, but I know that the Jary brings you out down at Villa Nova and the coast. You'll have to do the rest yourself."

"Good guy! But, why all the rush?" Legros, from long years in the penal colony, had small confidence in his brother man. Old Labec spat vehemently into the fire, colorless eyes squinted.

"I'll tell you why, *bagnard.* . . . You mugs stay around here any longer, I'll want to go with you. Now, I don't. I'm happy here. This country licked me; this, and the place. France—*la belle Paris*—don't mean a thing to me, any more. I'm an old guy. I'll kick off soon. And, it's a long way there. See?"

There was a tragic undertone in the old man's voice that all three felt.

"You're a good guy, Labec," said Legros simply. "And you're sure pulling us out of a hole."

"That's all right. Maybe, if it wasn't for this bum peg of mine, I'd try it with you anyhow. But—" He spat again into the fire; was silent for a long time. "If you use your heads you mugs'll probably find some Brother of the Coast down in that country who'll fix you up. You come from the old home town, Legros; you're a smart mug—shouldn't go wrong there."

"I don't think I will."

The old cripple nodded, waved a gnarled, flabby hand toward the pile of pelts in the corner.

"Take a couple of those apiece. You'll need them going through the pass; your blood ain't used to this country yet. The lad there'll fix you up with food. Don't try to talk to him; these mugs ain't much on chin music, anyhow. That's all."

Manifestly, it was. The young Indian was already on his feet, adjusting the string of his dart case over his shoulder, his blow gun in his hand. Legros swung up the canvas pack; it was heavy with salt meat, packed there during their sleeping hours by Labec. Lambson and the little Provençal picked up the rest of the gear, then followed Legros's example and selected two pelts apiece from the pile. Labec scrambled painfully up from beside the fire, limped to the door of the hut.

Cold white sunlight played across the

clearing, where Indian women and girls ground maize silently. The young Indian beside them seemed to be the only man of the tribe now in the village; the rest were seemingly out on their day's hunting. Old Labec stared from one to the other of the trio, face a wrinkled, expressionless mask.

"Well," he said abruptly, "take a drink there for me!"

He turned back into the shadows of the hut. As if that act were some signal, the Indian lad started ahead at a swift walk. The three gaped at one another for a minute. No sign, no sound, came from the interior of the hut. They had been dismissed! Wordlessly, they followed the guide.

THEY slept that night above tree level, on the bare flank of Mont Lorquin. At dawn, great gray vultures and eagles circling high overhead, they stumbled on through the bluish wall of the low clouds, boot soles cut to shreds by the sharp rocks. It was an hour past noon, they figured, when they crossed the divide and began the descent. Onee free of the cloud banks, the Indian stopped and they followed his example, glad for an opportunity to catch their wind.

Behind and below was Guiana, the jungle which had all but claimed their lives. Ahead, at the foot of the gray-brown mountain shoulder, was the infinite purple and green roof of the Brazilian jungle. Even from here they could sense the dangers, the unknown horrors of that place which they must traverse before they at last found real freedom.

Their breath made small silver clouds of frost about their blue faces; even the *nike epidia* was shivering. They went ahead again, joltingly, heads and shoulders thrown back to balance themselves. Small rocks, dislodged by their careful feet, sent vast boulders stumbling and spinning off into space down below them. Brochan shuddered uncontrollably, thinking of what would happen should he make one misstep.

They camped that night among the gray stunted trees on the lower slope, made a roaring fire, ate the last of their salted meat. The next day, before noon, they came into the jungle again. The Indian refused the machete, did not seem to understand the use of one. Striking ahead by what proved to be infallible landmarks, he found a small, clear trail, went on along it without even a grunt of self-satisfaction for his own woodscraft.

Twice they crossed fetid, morasslike lakes, leaping from hummock to hummock, knowing that if they ever fell into that reeking quag poisonous eels and snakes would end everything. At sundown of the third day Lambson grunted that he smelled smoke ahead. Half an hour later the *nike epidia* swung abruptly to his left off the trail and began the almost hopeless task of traversing the actual jungle.

"What in the name of a name did he do that for?" croaked little Brochan, brushing the gnats and mosquitoes from his face, arms and legs bloody from thorns and branches, heavy pelts long before discarded.

"Must be some village ahead where him and his bunch ain't liked much," grunted the big American. "He won't be doing this much longer, though."

After what seemed an infinity to Legros and Brochan the *nike epidia* made a sharp oblique to his right again and came out on the trail. All four of them were lacerated and bloody from contact with thorns, limbs and creepers. Every inch of naked flesh was covered with gnats and mosquitoes. Minute chiggers were already at work beneath their toe and finger nails. Once more the jungle ordeal had begun.

The Indian killed two wild monkeys with his blow gun that afternoon. They camped about two hundred yards off the trail when night came and made a small smudge fire to roast their game and drive off the insects. The Indian lad took the empty water bottle and went off into the complete darkness. When he came back the bottle was full. He passed it to Legros

who gazed wonderingly at the American before he drank of it.

"Where did he find fresh water in this dump?"

The big negro grinned.

"That's all right, chef! There's some kind of hollow stem the bush guys call the water plant that's got good water inside. Look, he wants a drink himself!"

That night and the next two days were things of torture to all four men. The *nike epidia* himself was a forest hunter, was not a jungle runner, suffered almost as much as the convicts. Faces, hands, wrists and ankles were puffed with pain and the poison of the ever busy gnats. Beneath their nails the industrious chiggers had done their work, then exploded putrescently. Brochan and Legros were already shaking with fever; asked incessantly for the water they could not have. The whole thing was once again taking on the quality of a mad, hopeless dream.

All four of them were willing to keep on traveling at night, for the hours of darkness were those of keenest suffering. But the flashlight they had taken from Van der Schleemans had long ago burned out and been discarded and they had no way of moving in the dark. The young forest Indian had not before attempted to speak with them, but now he poured forth a quick torrent of gutturals and held up two fingers. Two more days.

Actually, it took them three. For, during the second one, Legros went raving mad with the fever and his fear of the jungle. The Indian lad and Lambson were forced to carry him, loading the half dead Brochan with all the gear. How they made the last day's trek to the river the three could never afterwards clearly remember.

Before night of the third day, taking a side trail that branched off from the main one, they came without warning out on the clayey bank of a small and swift river. There was no sign of human life or habitation. Manifestly, the young Indian had purposely avoided Jelemen. Uncaring, Lambson and the Indian started a fire, kept it going throughout the night, covering their wounds and open sores with the cooling bank clay. Before dawn the Indian got silently up and disappeared upstream. The American was the only one of the trio awake to see his going. Dully, he pondered on it for a while, then exhaustion claimed him.

When he awoke it was again night. The fire was out. Monkeys made their nightly bedlam in the tree tops. Legros and Brochan raved and mumbled, caught deep in the hot wells of their fever. The big negro got up and, chancing the attacks of poisonous eels or electric fish, bathed from head to foot in the river. Just as he was crawling painfully up the bank he heard the faint clack of a paddle against gunwale side.

He sprang for the Mannlicher, levered a shell into the breech, lay flat, motionless. A low, grunting cry came from the river. Lambson answered; it was the *nike epidia*. Dawn sent slow red flame down through the jungle roof. The Indian wordlessly rebuilt the fire, went off into the jungle with his blow gun, came back with a black and gray hided monkey.

The two men ate. The Indian gestured toward the jungle, rose up, put his right hand briefly against the American's left shoulder. Lambson stared at him, only half comprehending. The Indian divided the remainder of the monkey meat, wrapped it in fresh, wet leaves. Mysteriously, without further sign, he was gone.

Labec had done his bit as a brother convict; again the three were alone.

With the mechanical calm of his people Lambson killed the fire, lifted the two down into the long dugout canoe, put in the water bottle, the pack, the guns and machete. Then for fifteen minutes he crouched on his heels on the slippery bank, listening. There was no sound except that of the jungle and the rustling rush of the current. No man moved on that river within earshot. Lambson got into the canoe, pushed off from the bank, settled down on one knee in the stern, brought his craft full into the center of the swift downstream current. The last

lap of their journey of escape was beginning.

ROUGHLY, he followed the procedure they had used on their trip up the Maroni in Guiana. But, for some reason, he already felt a sense of victory, of confidence. His old fear of capture was speedily leaving him. He paddled more and more by day, somewhat hesitant about trying to negotiate this strange turbulent stream in the darkness.

After five days the two Frenchmen whipped themselves back into shape and took their places at the paddles. But it was Lambson who led, who tacitly directed their movements; he it was who knew and did not fear this jungle, which, to them, was forever a place of abysmal evil and horror.

Several times they were overtaken and passed by well manned canoes carrying rubber hunters and river runners. Once, attracted by their shielded camp-fire glow at night, two *mestizo* nondescripts attempted to approach them, only to be driven off by a volley of Mannlicher shots into the water and Legros's curses. Eternally, they were on the lookout for the Brazilian Army river patrols. Never, by some strange chance of fortune, or, perhaps, the extreme caution of their movements, did they run across any. All three were now imbued with Lambson's calm confidence; their lucky star seemed surely in the ascendent.

Legros and the little cabinet maker talked perpetually of France, all personal inhibitions gone now. Already the terrible years of the penal colony, the tortures of their escape through Guiana, the trip over the Tunucs-Hunucs and through the up-country swamps to the river were dim things. France, Europe, freedom and the future were the brightly gleaming things which drove back all shadows. Lambson, for his part, was silent, listening, his gentle half grin on his broad face. He laughed when they laughed, was quiet when they were solemn; spoke very little ever about his own plans.

They had lost accurate count of the days, but Legros estimated they had been gone almost five months from the Isle of Silence when they reached the Grand Teppen Falls of the Jary. River plantations and hut villages were becoming steadily more numerous. Every hour or so during their daylight travel they were forced to head in swiftly for the cover of the bank or a back bayou and tie up while some craft went by, the rivermen chanting dismally at the paddles. Soon, they knew, they must abandon the canoe and go on by foot—into the jungle.

They spent one whole night in discussion about the fire. That day they had been driven to cover a dozen times. Studying the thing sanely, they realized that their phenomenal good luck could not hold out forever: sooner or later they were going to bump full into a river patrol, be overhauled, questioned, imprisoned. Brazil's good natured blindness toward the actions of escaped Guiana convicts was a glorious thing of the past. They must be careful; must play safe after so far consummating their plans. Briefly, they must give up the easy, swift river travel and strike inland and take up the safer jungle paths toward the coast.

The nature of the country below the falls they did not know. What lay there in store for them they could only conjecture, knowing but one thing: that by following the river they would come ultimately to the Atlantic coast, civilization, a ship which would, sooner or later, take them back to that France which Legros and Brochan so devoutly loved. How they would accomplish that end depended on chance and Legros' nimble wits.

At dawn they sank the canoe, smashed through the bottom, headed into the jungle, Lambson leading, as ever. For two weeks they traveled so, skirting plantations and several small villages. At dusk one night, threading through the tall, wind whipped grass of a broad *campo*, they saw, to their left and toward the river, the dim sky nimbus of the lights from a large sized town. Brochan halted first

and stared at it longingly. There was civilization—houses, women, clean beds, good food, wine—all they had been denied for so long.

"Legros!" he called out.

"What? Be easy, will you? This isn't the jungle!"

"There's a big town. Why not jump over; my feet are worn up into my ankles now. You got money—money talks any language."

The thing appealed greatly to the Parisian. He, too, was impatient for all that which the Provençal desired. He turned to the big American.

"How about you, Big One? What do you think? Take a chance on it?"

Lambson shrugged.

"You're the boss, Legros. You and him know more about towns than me. Sure. Only, we don't get caught."

"All right! We make a crack at it, then!"

"How you going about it?" demanded Brochan, a little jealous of the Parisian's monopoly of the leadership.

"I don't know—quite. I got to swing it alone, that's sure." He nervously fingered the bridge of his high arched nose. "I don't know what town it is. Maybe San Antonia, maybe Maracapas. If its Maracapas, we're all right."

"Why?"

"One big reason, flea chaser: there's supposed to be one of the old Brothers of the Coast in Maracapas."

"You believe in that outfit?" challenged Brochan, enraged at being labelled "flea chaser". "You believe that those mugs who have escaped are going to help poor bums like us? And take a chance of getting thrown back into the place themselves?"

"Do I believe it?" Legros snorted, making his thin nostrils tremble. "How else, in the name of a sacred dog, do you think I got the dough I have with me now? How else do you think I got the file to cut loose that bunk bar that I killed the swine of a guard with? The raft we used?"

"All right! All right, *chef!*" placated the little Provençal, startled by the Parisian's array of proof.

"You're damn' right it's all right!" pursued the angered Parisian. "What do you think I was in France, some sort of a mug, a gutter swab? Those guys—the Brothers—fixed things up for me, got the money, the file, into me; don't mind how! Of course, they got theirs, but I got mine, and who minds paying a bit for freedom? Now, shut your foolish head or I'll shut it for you. Big One, you stay here with this young pimple. I don't get back by dawn, you'll know I'm not coming back; see?"

"That's right, *chef.*"

"So long, then."

Legros went down on his hands and knees, both automatics in his waistband, and disappeared through the fawn-colored grass of the *campo.* Brochan and the American sat there throughout long hours, staring wordlessly at one another.

Night came. A vast, rusty gold moon climbed up the obsidian of the sky. About them the wind-murmurous *campo* grass stirred and swayed. From the town came dimly the sounds of barking dogs, the slam of a door, the untimely crowing of a rooster, the falsetto of a woman's voice raised in anger.

The moon passed its zenith. The stars faded one by one, veiled by cirrus banks of cloud. The rooster was still. Only the intermittent barking of the dogs kept up. It was cold, there in the grass. They shivered, teeth clicking.

"I'm hungry!" husked Brochan once.

"Shut up! The pack is empty; talk won't help it."

For once the big American had become bad tempered, nerves on edge. Suddenly he reached out for the Mannlicher, pushed the Provençal softly to his face. The dim green moonlight made a small sea out of the grass tops; the two could hear the rustling progress of a body through it now.

"Come on!" hissed a voice they recognized at once as the Parisian's. "Make it quick!"

Lambson caught up the greasy, worn

pack, handed the machete to Brochan, pushed him ahead. Ten paces away, down on his knees, they found Legros, a wolfish grin of triumph on his bearded face. In single file, crawling on hands and knees, they went through the grass, the stiff stems slapping at their faces. On the edge of the *campo* Legros stopped, to listen.

"You hear anything, Big One?"

"No."

"All right. Right behind me, now!"

They came to their feet, walked at an even pace along a rough cart track, came so to the first line of low mud houses. Dogs barked at them raucously in the pallid moonlight, but they kept on, unheeding. Where a black alley mouth gaped between two crazily akimbo houses Legros turned off the narrow way they had been following. They stumbled from pile to pile of stinking refuse, hands out against the rough dobe walls to keep from falling prone. There was no light in that place; into it the wan moonlight did not penetrate.

Legros turned another corner—to his right this time. Brochan and the American followed. Across the void ahead was a thin bar of brassy light. For a second Legros's body broke that bar in two, then it disappeared. Wood creaked. A low, calm voice spoke out—

"Come softly; straight ahead."

Like men hypnotized, the Provençal and the negro obeyed. Behind them the outer door creaked gently to. Another door opened ahead. They stood blinking full into a bright cascade of light from an upheld lamp.

"This way," directed the same calm voice.

Again they obeyed, stumbling clumsily into a low dim room. Legros and a tall, dark woman stood side by side before a dull fire, heads together in conversation. Brochan and the American stirred uneasily, staring about them in wonder. They could make out heavily shuttered windows, stout chairs, a big table, and, in the shadows at the far end of the long room, the unmistakable bulk of a small mahogany bar. The place was, or had been, the main room of a *posada*—a tavern.

Suddenly Legros and the woman looked up at the two. The woman picked up the hand lamp, came over, the Parisian at her side, to them. The two stood blinking at her, her tall, darkly gracious beauty, the quick sheen of her black silk dress, the cast of her long, oval face. This woman was beautiful, they recognized dully, trying to recall old visions of other women, visions that had lain semi-dormant for gray, long years.

"Brochan and Lambson, Senhora Buehler," introduced Legros suavely, making a little half bow. "Lads from the Isle of Silence, like myself."

Brochan, more receptive to the nuances of civilized life than the negro, stared with quick, shrewd eyes at the Parisian. In a moment, completely, Legros had dropped his rough manners, his faulty grammar and prison accent, had reassumed the polished, even magnificent, attitude of a Parisian *boulevardier*. A great mug, this Legros! Show him a good-looking woman, and *pouf!*—his rough and tough manner was thrown away like a lousy shirt.

"Madame feels kindly for us, who come from the place?" stumbled Brochan, making his own attempt at civilized gallantry.

The tall woman inclined her head, permitting herself a small half smile.

"Yes. My husband, Fritz Buehler, escaped in '12; got to Para."

"Senhora Buehler's husband was one of the Brothers—a fine lad," cut in Legros, a quick, hard note of implicit warning in his voice. "He owned this place here; died last year of the river fever. Is that not right, senhora?"

The tall woman nodded, as did little Brochan, efficiently silenced. The widow of ex-convict Buehler put down the hand-lamp on the table, moved away, motioning to the three to sit down.

"How did you swing it, *chef?*" demanded Brochan eagerly, as soon as he thought she was out of earshot.

Legros scowled at him balefully.

"Why go into that? We're here, aren't we?"

"That's right!" boomed Lambson, eager to restore peace between the two and sensing the developing tension. Brochan started again to speak, but the woman was moving back towards them, carrying a big tray on which were plates, glasses, bottles, piles of food.

"I know how Fritz ate when he first came out," she said softly, putting the tray down on the table before them. "Go ahead lads!"

A gulping, savage cry of ecstasy came from Brochan. This was real, white man's food, those bottles real wine from his beloved France, his sun-gold Provence! They ate and drank, while she turned her head away and dug her fingernails into the wood of the table. At last all the food was gone and only a half dozen bottles of the golden champagne remained.

The three were already half intoxicated by the effects of the rich food and the liquor. They drank bottle after bottle, discarding the glasses on the table. Brochan made wild toasts to France, to freedom, to the senhora, to himself and to his companions. Finally he fell unconscious, a half-filled bottle still in his rigid hand. Lambson, his own head reeling from the unaccustomed stuff, suggested that he take the man to bed. Silently, the woman indicated a door at the end of the room. Lugging the limp form of the Provençal to his shoulders, Lambson staggered away, pushing open the indicated door with his hand. Once, he looked back. Legros, very drunk, was making passionate, ornate love to the tall, calm woman.

Softly, the negro shut the door.

HE STARED sleepily up, to see above him the vaguely lurching form of the Parisian.

"Get up! Get up, Big One!"

"What's the matter, *chef*?"

"Nothing's the matter! Just going to get married, that's all. Want you as witness!"

"You're drunk, *bagnard!*"

"Sure I'm drunk—and in love. Come on, or I'll have to get some mug off the streets."

"You're crazy, *chef!* The gendarmes 'll nab you!"

"Like hell they will! This girl's husband, Fritz, ran this town. And she does now. I'm not crazy, Big One—only drunk. Look at me. Am I? Am I? No! She and I talked it all out last night. I can't go back to France, to Paris. She showed me that. A man gets kind of cracked in the place, and I thought I could. But, I forgot; she showed me. They'd nab me as soon as I walked down the dock in Para. You can; that pimple, Brochan, can. But, they got my picture everywhere—Edouard Legros, who killed his wife's lover, a guard, another convict, wounded a good Dutchman. See? They'd hand me to the widow in a minute. You—you, and him, got more of a chance. But, come on; the priest's waiting. Can't keep a priest waiting!"

Lambson's was not the nature to sustain argument for any period of time; his psychology, his mental processes were too primitively simple to do so. For months he had been under the impression that Legros valued his return to France and Paris above all things. Now, if this woman had shown Legros that it was wild foolishness for him to attempt such a thing, it was not up to him to try to change matters.

He shambled erect, jerked on his trousers and cracked boots, a clean cotton shirt he found at the foot of the bed. Wiping his eyes with the backs of his hands, he came out into the main room. Standing before the black fire place were three people, the woman, dressed as she had been the night before; a gray frocked Portuguese priest; and Legros, strangely and strikingly handsome now that his beard and hair had been trimmed, that he had encased his long, powerful body in new riding boots, whipcord breeches and jacket.

The big negro stumbled nearer. The bland faced priest looked up at him.

"This is the witness?"

"*Sí, padre.*"

The priest looked down at the slip of paper on the table at his side.

"His name is Jose Pinos, a plantation worker from Gunani?"

"That is right, *padre,*" answered the tall woman in her calm voice.

"Very good."

The priest nodded. Lambson had not said a word.

Briefly, it was over. The priest picked up the slip of paper, his Bible, took the heavy envelope handed him by Legros and padded softly out the door on sandled feet.

"All right if I go back to bed again, *chef?*" asked Lambson.

"Sure!" Legros laughed boisterously, still drunk. "Go ahead! But don't wake up that Brochan yet!"

A shaft of late afternoon sunlight through a high window awoke both men during the afternoon. The little Provençal rolled over, holding his aching head, asked the American—

"Where's that swell, Legros?"

"He just got married."

"What!" Brochan thrust his bare, spindly shanks out of bed. "He did! When?"

"This morning. To the tall woman who owns this dump. I was witness."

"Oh, ho-ho! Ha, ha! Name of a name of a name!"

The Provençal shook the stout bunk frame with his laughter.

"What's the matter?" grunted the American.

"I'm thinking about Legros, the poor mug!" gasped the other. "One look at a pretty woman and he throws his chances of ever seeing France again right over his shoulder!"

"Why? He says that she says he's crazy to try; that they'd nab him on the dock at Para."

"Sure! Sure! Of course she'd tell him that! A high tone mug like Legros don't strike this fever hole every day!"

"Huh. Well, he can leave her if he wants to."

"You think so? You're crazy if you do! Don't you know she'll throw a knife through his ribs if he ever mentions it again? She ain't the kind to stand for that. Ho, ho! Thank the good God it was me that passed out first!"

It was all getting too complex for Lambson; he went to sleep again, covering his eyes with the bedding. Legros awoke him after dark. The Parisian was still drunk, his freshly trimmed beard redolent with wine.

"Come on, Big One!" he husked. "The girl and I have fixed things up for you two—passports and everything. You're going down-river on the night boat. Come on, get dressed, come out for a drink—your share of the dough!

Lambson got up, once more tugged on his boots, shirt and trousers. A roaring fire was in the stone place. Before it the table had been pulled. Brochan, weak, drunken tears of joy on his worn cheeks, was standing up beside it, champagne bottle in one hand, new passport in the other. He saluted the American with a raucous cheer, pushed the wine bottle into his hand.

"Drink, Big One! You and me are getting out of here for home tonight! Truly! Legros and his woman—the senhora—fixed it all up. She sure runs this neck of the country!"

Lambson shook his head, drank sparingly, put the bottle down on the wet ringed table. Legros and the woman, now across the table, stared at him.

"What's the matter, Big One?" demanded Legros, "doesn't it give you a kick to think you're going back—with all the chutes greased?"

Lambson shook his head again.

"I don't want that."

"What do you mean!"

"What I said, *chef.* I ain't going back to France. Me—I'm a great big guy; they'd spot me a mile off, send me back to the place again. Brochan, he's a little guy, looks different with the beard and the whole thing; he can get by into Para, into Europe."

Legros scowled, forced to admit that

there was logic in what the negro had just said. He waved his hand grandiloquently.

"Well, you're an American—maybe that's why France doesn't make you excited. How about the States? This girl and I, we got money. How about it if we fix things so that you get to that place—New Orleans?"

"No."

"No?"

The Parisian's face became hard, sullenly suspicious.

"What do you want? You can't stay here!"

"I know, I know, *chef*. I don't want that—I don't want anything from you. You've played square with me. I'm just going back, that's all. I like it there. . . ."

"Where?"

"Up-country. The jungle."

"You're crazy! After what we been through there? You'd be an outlaw. No tribe 'd take you in. You'll die, in there!"

"Maybe, *chef*. But I belong in a place like that. I never felt happy in a dump like Birmingham, Brest. That's all."

He moved over swiftly to the corner picked up the Mannlicher rifle, the machete, the pack and the battered tin water bottle—all the old familiar symbols of their jungle existence. He opened the rear door, then looked back, trying to speak. He could not. The three stared at him with incredulous, stupid eyes. He shut the door behind him.

Two hours later, from the shadows of a rubber shed, he watched little Brochan, shiny new bag in his hand, go up the gangway of the rattle-trap river steamer, pass beneath the gangway light and go forwards toward the passengers' cabin. The river loafers cast off the warps. She screamed twice at the night, backed into the stream, paddlewheels slapping at the black water, sparks spitting redly at the stars. Brochan, weakest of the three, was fulfilling his desire, his time-bright dream.

Lambson turned, headed silently out of town. Once, in the tall grass of the campo, he looked up and smiled. Ahead was the jungle.

A moving little story of a cowboy who knew he had but

TEN DAYS TO GO

By GUTHRIE BROWN

"CAN'T you put it in American, Doc? I ain't no infant. I'm a tolerably male man and I been used to hearin' the truth all my life."

This time the doctor's words made sense, and Bud McClellan stared thoughtfully out of the window.

"You say there's been somethin' wrong a long time and that this here tumble I got off o' that hellcat I rode Saturday kinda started the ball. And I got ten days to live, if I'm careful. Ain't no chance o' that decision bein' reversed?"

The doctor shook his head. The pity in his eyes convinced Bud more than any words.

The cowboy got to his feet, wincing a trifle from that savage little pain in his middle.

"I'm much obliged for the truth, Doc. We sure had nice weather for the rodeo, didn't we? Did you see Slim Paul ride that black son of a gun from Taos County? Some buster, that bird! No, I'll be gettin' along. And say, Doc, just keep this little business under your sombrero, will you? Thanks, a lot."

Bud went out into the glaring day and looked up and down the street. It seemed oddly unfamiliar—a white road that dwindled into the sage beyond the town's limits, just as it had always dwindled; but it was suddenly new and strange.

"I think," Bud ruminated, "that I'll just sashay around and meet up with that Plute buckaroo. I know he furnished that piebald devil that did for me. Plute's never forgive the trimmin' I handed him in that stud game. Me, a mere cowpuncher, and him a breeder of pure blooded Herefords!"

The pain leaped through him again. He continued to himself after a gasp:

"Yes, I can polish him off, and then up and die before the law gets goin' good. Sweet little joke on the United States of America."

He chuckled to himself as he sauntered along the boardwalk.

From a poolroom door a cowboy hailed him—

"What'd Doc say, Bud?"

"Said my machinery was jammed somewhat."

"Oh, well, you'll come out all right. Let's shoot a round of pool."

In the middle of the floor Bud met Plute, a lean, grim visaged Westerner with an ugly eye. The visage grew grimmer as Bud stopped and looked him over casually from top to toe.

"What's the idea?" demanded Plute.

"Wonderin' where was your ticklish spot," murmured Bud, squinting in the direction of Plute's breastbone.

There was an assured coolness in Bud's manner, a complete absence of his usual good nature, that moved Plute uneasily. He blustered:

"It's where you'll never find it, fella."

"Yeah," returned Bud as he thoughtfully chalked a cue. "Yeah," he repeated as he sent the triangle of balls flying.

Plute walked out, puzzled and angry.

Bud noticed his employer, Langdon, watching the game from a barber's chair. Bud had never accorded any one else such respect as he did Langdon. Although the young ranch owner was only six or seven years older than the cowboy, he had been old enough to go to war and that gave him heroic proportions in Bud's eyes. Sometimes Langdon would talk to him of the war, to Bud's great joy.

Langdon's voice spoke at his elbow as he again walked into the sunlight.

"You're blaming Plute for your fall Saturday, Bud."

Bud hesitated, then—

"You know about that, as well as me, Al."

"Well— But a man never helps things by trying to get even."

"No?"

Bud's eyes were soft, his voice dreamy. Of course, Langdon didn't know that Bud was no longer an accountable citizen. Bud must not let him guess it.

"Mebbe not," he conceded.

Langdon was puzzled—something new in the puncher's manner, something quiet and indifferent, and yet deadly.

They drove back to the ranch in Langdon's car, and the owner concluded that he had been mistaken, when he saw Bud after supper shooting crap as usual on the bunkhouse step.

BUD LAY in his bed, staring upward through the dark, trying to think things out. He was mightily determined on one point. He was going gamely. That was not a thing that needed to be thought out. But Plute, now. That was something else again.

The cords in his wrist and throat grew taut, for life beat strongly in him, despite the stabbing pain. The taker of life must be made to pay. He had done a thing more foul and cowardly than direct murder, because here was no penalty attached, no fear of pursuit or detection.

Bud knew that Plute would be over to help with the branding within the week. The chance would come and Bud intended to be ready.

"I AIN'T a-believin'," grumbled a cowboy, "that there's a darn' thing wrong with you! Here you've won eighty-three cents off'n me, at a penny a throw." He juggled the cubes disconsolately. "It's downright spooky for a man to have such luck. See there!"

He had thrown a three and a six.

Bud shook and threw while he hummed:

"There's four blue bottles, a-hangin' on the wall;
Take one blue bottle away from the wall,
An' there's three blue bottles, a-hangin' on the wall . . .

That's another natural, Bill."

"Yeah," growled Bill. "I wish you'd stop that fool song!"

"I take one bottle down every day,

boy. It's—necessary. Come on. We'll divide up the profits and start over."

"Aw, I ain't no piker!"

"I got to do somethin', Bill. I can't ride. I can't even throw a rope—yet. Got to roll these bones, when any of you are around. If it wasn't rainin' today I'd have to go out and look at the scenery."

He went out, later, when the sky had cleared and the smell of the wet sage hung in the morning air.

Why did that smell so take hold of his heart? A wave of nostalgia swept him, for the sage, that he must leave, for the moist brown earth and the rocks and the hills. The light was good to the eyes. He drank the moist air down in gulps.

His absorption in these sensations transcended for the moment the relentless pain under his heart. Any lingering hopes he had entertained that the doctor might be mistaken had vanished. The pain had grown steadily worse. He walked upright now only with the utmost difficulty. But he still walked upright, and no one dreamed the gravity of his condition.

He moved toward the corrals, where things were in preparation for branding and dehorning. He saw Plute, but he felt a queer indifference toward him. Of course, Bud would kill him, but that affair could wait. Bud intended to live the next three days to the utmost. He was going to get every ounce of life that was coming to him.

It might be best, he concluded, to leave Plute to the last. After that they would probably shut him up, away from the sun. Well, they'd have a chance to shut him up in earnest pretty soon.

He took the rope from his saddle and entered the corral. He knew he couldn't use it, couldn't even swing it over his head. But it felt good in his hand.

The work was now in full progress and he stood against the fence, watching. He wanted horribly to sit down, but he stood and unconsciously played out his rope in a widening loop.

They were having a lot of trouble with that big red steer. The animal had somehow escaped dehorning each year and was putting up an unusually good scrap. And there was that fool Plute, who never would learn to swing a rope, getting tangled in his own lariat right in the path of the crazy brute!

Three ropes snaked out into the corral, but it was Bud's that dropped over the wide horns as they swooped toward the helpless Plute.

The rest was dreamlike—the exquisite shot of pain as he set himself against the rush of the steer, the slackening relief as the other ropes brought him down.

"Boy—O! Didn't that hurt?" demanded Langdon, springing toward the white lipped Bud.

"The worst is over," the cowboy answered quite truthfully as he turned away.

"That's funny!" he muttered, and swung about to grin at Langdon. "Why don't you make the ground stay put, boss?"

"You're dizzy," said Langdon. "Lie down, you young fool!"

Bud waved an airy hand as he moved toward the bunkhouse. Langdon was never to forget the smile that the puncher flashed back over his shoulder.

IT WAS late that night that the cowboys stood listening to the doctor, an unaccustomed sobriety in their bearing.

"And he knew it all the time," said Langdon.

The doctor nodded.

"H-mm." The ranch owner stared at the yellow flame of the lamp. "It isn't just on battle fronts that men go to their death with a joke in their teeth."

The SHIP HANDLER

A story of American destroyers on convoy duty in dangerous seas

By
L MURNEY MINTZER

INTENT upon having a last look about before the early winter darkness doubled the difficulty of moving around the unsteady decks of the *Walke*, Lieutenant Elliot, her executive officer, emerged from the ward room hatch into the rushing clamor of the weather deck. The instant the canvas flap of the hatch hood closed behind him, his eyes swept hastily over the sea to starboard. For the moment he saw nothing and, while his fingers fumbled at the draw strings of his windproof hood, he stepped over to the rail and looked aft with the intentness of one who has been so long familiar with responsibility that it has become more than half unconscious.

Hardly more than a thousand yards on the starboard quarter of the destroyer and so nearly directly astern that he could not see her until he leaned out clear of the midships deckhouse, the object of Elliot's interest loomed up against the faint remaining glow of the western horizon. The *Ajax*, twenty thousand ton ex-liner, had been impressive in her peace time days. Now, all her outlines broken and distorted by the weird futuristic designs of her camouflage, and viewed from the deck of a destroyer, barely one twentieth of her size, she looked like the embodiment of a child's nightmare.

Her speed and bulk creating for the convoying destroyers a constant source of danger, her apparently shapeless mass dominating the scene, disdainfully thrusting through seas that even now were ceaselessly tossing the *Walke* about, she

conveyed a definite threat. But satisfied that the transport was where she should be, Elliot turned away, noting as he did so that the *Payne*, the *Walke's* companion, was already half invisible in the gathering night on the starboard bow of the *Ajax*.

As he turned to go aft, the officer bumped into a man who was poking in the darkness of the oilskin locker just inside the deckhouse.

"That you, Kelly?" he shouted, to make himself heard above the roar of rushing air in the intakes of the forced draft blowers a few feet behind him.

"Yes, sir," the chief boatswain's mate answered. "Tryin' to find a whole suit of oilskins, if the last load of survivors has left us any. What's the use of pickin' up torpedoed sailors if they steals the very angle irons off the deck?"

Elliot grinned, thinking that the noise of the blowers did not worry Kelly when he wanted to talk. He glanced again at the sea, noted the long comparatively easy swell and then looked up at the low hanging shreds of cloud overhead.

"Looks like a bit of weather for tonight."

The old chief stuck his head around the corner of the deckhouse and peered upward briefly.

"Plenty of it before we gets under the lee of Land's End, sir." As he spoke the ship jarred faintly, as if she had touched a yielding wall. An instant later a handful of spray spattered down over the high structure of the bridge forward of them. "Feel that, sir? And no white water showin'. Us makin' speed two-five. An them limey militia nurses over there—" he jerked a contemptuous thumb in the general direction of the transport—"they don't know they're under way. Now if they had some service—"

"How about the bow guns crew?" Elliot broke in. "Getting a bit too dusty for them on the fo'csle, isn't it? Better move 'em up to the waist guns. And have a look at the dory gripes, will you?" He turned to go aft. "She's been working in the cradles all day."

Kelly stood a moment longer eying the complacent ease with which the big ship astern of them ploughed along. He glanced once at the spray washed forward stack above his head, felt the destroyer shiver as she ran her nose into another sea, and spat angrily over the side.

"Drivin' the guts out of her, that's what they're doin'," he muttered and turned back to his task.

For winter in the North Atlantic the sea was really behaving quite well. At any ordinary speed, even on craft as small as the destroyers, the swell would have been hardly noticeable. But at the twenty-five knots which they needed to keep their stations on the bows of their twenty-knot charge, the *Walke* and the *Payne* were already working out of the comparatively even keeled peace that a day of exceptionally smooth weather had brought. However, in the security of daylight, their crews were below now enjoying supper, unworried by the threat of thick weather for the night.

AN HOUR later the wind had freshened noticeably. Oblivious to the sting of flying spray in his face, Elliot, who had taken the deck soon after nightfall, leaned far out over the bridge railing ceaselessly staring into the darkness ahead. As the little ship rolled, flinging herself in corkscrew twists along the slopes of seas that loomed above her bridge, and lying over until her rail ripped long gashes in their sides, the wind, its apparent force doubled by her speed, scooped up the torn water and dumped it with a thundering sound on the canvas canopy over his head. Huddled behind the glass bridge front, three or four men were grouped amidships, more fortunate than the lookouts who crouched in the wings and manfully tried to imitate the officer of the deck's disregard of the elements. Below the bridge front the dull red of the freshly boot topped forecastle disappeared frequently under swirls of water that lapped up over the flaring bows and crashed around the bow gun, even at times slamming with solid force

against the base of the bridge itself.

Beyond the bow over which Elliot and his lookouts stared, their visible world ended vaguely in a gray black blur, now and then faintly illuminated by a bit of greenish white that hovered for a moment above the jackstaff, then grew swiftly into the dull threatening bulk of a sea.

At the end of an interval of tense silence, Hilder, the chief quartermaster, moved over and shouted in Elliot's ear.

"Got 'er yet, sir?"

Elliot shook his head without looking back, then stiffened suddenly. An instant later he cried out to the helmsman:

"Left rudder! Hilder! Bring her round sixty degrees!"

"Sixty left, sir!" The wind whipped the words from Hilder's lips as he turned back to supervise the helmsman.

"There she is, sir!" The lookout behind the officer of the deck came to life and pointed. "Two points on the starboard bow!"

Ahead, a slightly larger patch of white was visible, but one that seemed to move across the line of the seas. Then as the *Walke's* stern swung sharply, a deeper shadow took form to starboard, a shadow that materialized into uncompromising solidity at a rate of thirty or forty feet a second. Above, far up in the clouds, it seemed to the men of the destroyer's bridge that the faint line of her lighter colored upper works brought out the profile of a ship. Showing no lights, her rails empty of men, the *Ajax* was plunging along, apparently unaware of the nearness of the little ship.

But already, as their ship swung in a short arc, slapping her low stern broadside on into the swells, the bridge watch of the *Walke* was losing interest in the transport. Hardly a minute had passed since her presence was first suspected, but she was fading into the general gloom almost as quickly as she had appeared.

"She's steering about forty true," Elliot muttered to himself; then in a shout to the lookout, "Sing out when you lose her!"

After a moment he turned to the helmsman to steady the ship on her new course. As he stooped over the dimly lighted binnacle to watch the compass, his face was faintly illuminated. The strain that had been apparent in his expression while he talked to Kelly down on deck seemed to be intensified here in the tense surroundings of the bridge. Since afternoon his face had acquired a look of doubt that contrasted sharply with the positive tone of his voice in giving orders. In his eyes and mouth and set of chin there was a contradiction, an arresting contrast of fitness with uncertainty. Here on the bridge too there was a contradiction in the bearing of the men toward their executive officer—a queer blending of frank respect with a faint bewilderment. A moment before, when the *Walke* was swinging in upon her unseen charge, that bewilderment in the men had swiftly grown taut with submerged hysteria.

For the *Ajax* it wasn't such a bad night. A bit of spray in the air perhaps, but then so much the worse for the U-boats. Besides, she was in a hurry. In addition to her usual complement of three thousand troops, on this trip she carried an Allied Commission whose safety meant more to the High Command than a dozen regiments of infantry. Because their safety was all important, she traveled at twenty knots instead of in company with a dozen other transports limited to twelve or fifteen. Alone, that is, except for the *Walke* and the *Payne*, the luckless pair of destroyers assigned to bring her through the danger zone.

On the face of it their task was simple. Eight months in the rush of convoy and patrol had done much to simplify everything in the destroyer force, even the standing orders. The *Ajax*, the operation order directed, would "zigzag independently at discretion", and the two destroyers would "patrol the area forward of forty-five degrees on her bows, with particular regard for the danger of losing contact at night or under other unfavorable weather conditions . . . As an additional precaution against submarine attack the *Ajax* will continue zigzagging

independently at night and will maintain the highest speed possible."

But between the lines of that order were demands that did not appear in its terse official phraseology. It meant that there would be no clockwork-like cooperation between the three ships. The *Ajax* would, without lights or other signals, obviously alter course and speed at will and frequently. The destroyers would merely exercise properly seamanlike care to avoid being run down. "Particular regard for the danger of losing contact," meant that they would also be particularly careful to keep close to the perpetual threat of the transport's bow. Finally, "the highest speed possible" meant one thing for the twenty thousand ton *Ajax*, built for speed in any weather, and quite another for the thousand ton destroyers built for high speed in good weather.

Add the margin of five knots continually, and ten knots occasionally, which the smaller ships were forced to maintain in order to run in and out on the bows of the big ship and you have several reasons why the drenched men on the decks of the destroyers cursed feverently whenever they glimpsed their charge.

DOWN in the close sogginess of the wardroom two officers lounged at the small table. The interval between the end of a cold dinner and a final look about before turning in afforded the *Walke's* captain and her chief engineer a short breathing spell. Their bearing was eloquent of the past thirty hours of sleepless intimacy with the doctrine of ultimate responsibility. Back of the thirty hours lay an endless stretch of days, of weeks and months of an incessant monotony of exacting detail—matters of inches of vacuum in condensors, of buckling framed and eroding steering gear pinions. Consciously they thought of it—when they thought at all—as the prosaic back stage of the popular romance of war, remarkable only for the quantity of details demanding attention, and not at all for their quality.

Later, years later, they might be able to recreate this experience as the conventional great adventure, but now the pressing demands of the job kept them with their feet on the solid ground of unsentimental reality. Ahead fifteen hours or so, they would drop this particular convoy off Birkenhead, if all went well, pick up another—a slower one, they prayed—and head back for the Atlantic.

Neither man had spoken since the other three members of the mess had left the table. They smoked silently, staring straight before them. Although their chairs were straining at the hooks that secured them to the table, the force with which the two men gripped the arms seemed a little out of place in two veteran destroyer men.

About them the very air pulsed to the drive of the ships' turbines. On the table the dishes rattled against the wooden battens of the fiddle board. A brass radiator on the bulkhead behind Dawson, the chief, jarred monotonously. Frequently, too frequently, the chief thought, the ship seemed to stop completely, brought up with a solid jar that made him wince. Then, with a slow weary twist, she would lie over on her side until they were forced to clutch the stanchions at their elbows and wait for her to right herself while the inch or so of water on the deck sloshed by their heavily booted feet and brought up against the transom seat at the side of the room with a faint splash.

Then a new sound broke in, a noise that instantaneously shattered their abstraction like a signal for which they had been waiting. In their metal housing on the after bulkhead of the ward room the wire ropes of the engine telegraph rasped harshly, once, twice, three times, in rapid succession. The ship, in the midst of a roll to starboard, stopped suddenly and rolled back to port where she lay at an impossible angle.

"Reserve speed!" Dawson exclaimed struggling to his feet. "Now what's up?"

The vibrations quickened and the ship seemed to lift under them as if suddenly shoved forward violently.

"It's all right, sir." Elliot's voice from the brass horn of the voice tube over the center of the table startled them. "The *Ajax* got a bit too close to me in a squall. I've got her under my fantail now."

Captain Lane sighted quietly. Dawson looked at him a moment then chuckled unconvincingly.

"Shad got under my skin that time." He pointed toward the source of Elliot's voice, then nodded aft. "She isn't worrying any. Wouldn't know it if she did walk over us," he added grimly.

"Different story if we hit her." Captain Lane seemed to get a certain grim satisfaction out of the idea. "Square up for the pounding they're letting us in for. Nice night for boating, too. Her people wouldn't have a chance of getting off. If we hit her in this sea at twenty-five knots I wouldn't give her five minutes."

"They might think of that," Dawson grumbled, "and slow down a bit. It's asking a lot of a man to expect him to keep up twenty-five in this sea, and the visibility under five hundred yards. Shad thinks so." He pointed upward.

They both fell silent again. After a long interval it was the captain who voiced the thought of both.

"I'm afraid Elliot won't do, Chief. Eight months of it and he's getting worse."

Dawson nodded agreement, then caught himself and rallied to the defense of the classmate who had been his closest friend since the Naval Academy days.

"Good man though, Captain. Only executive I know who can keep men bucked up like ours, what with cold meals and wet bunks and steaming seven or eight thousand miles a month. A good man, sir."

"Do you suppose I'd be talking to you about him if I didn't know that?" the captain asked warmly. "I never saw a better executive in the boats, but look what happens every time he has the deck. He's either losing the convoy or backing full under her nose half the time. No nerve, Chief."

"Nerve, Captain?" Dawson moved impatiently in his chair. "How about the oil fire below last month? And taking off the crew of that ammunition ship, the *Westgate*, in the worst blow of the year? Did those stunts look yellow?"

"Hell no!" Captain Lane rapped out. "But there are all kinds of nerve you know. Look here, Chief—" He paused and met the look of his subordinate squarely. "What can I—we—do? I can't ignore it. Elliot can't, or doesn't, handle her. There's something wrong. Either we find out what the trouble is or I've got to turn him in to be sent back to the States with the next bunch of misfit weak sisters. Now you've known him longer than I have. Why does he lose his nerve on the bridge?"

DAWSON relit his pipe and sat for a moment twisting the burnt match into tiny splinters. Finally he looked up at the other.

"I've mulled over it a bit, Captain," he began slowly. "The only thing I could dig up doesn't help much but here it is. Happened first class year at the Naval Academy. We roomed together, you know. Shad never talked much, but he showed plenty savvy. We all liked him, same as here on the ship. Seamanship, practical and theoretical, he just ate up. Well, you know those old thirty foot steam launches—the ones they used for ship handling and maneuvering drill? Our last year we had a lot of it. Two of us in each boat; one handling her while the other read signals, and three or four under-classmen for a crew. Three boats to a division.

"We had six divisions out one day, supposed to be a destroyer squadron screening a division of battleships; namely the two old tugs, *Standish* and *Mohawk*. You know the usual thing: fleet cruising formation à la Battle Signal Book, torpedo boats spread all over the Severn around the imitation battleships, then changing on signal to battle formation, column, with all the little steamers closing in, cutting through ahead of, be-

hind and in between the tugs, to concentrate on the disengaged flank.

"Not much chance of bumping anything more than one of the other steamers, but the game did give us a thrill in spite of that. Before you're at it long, you think you're handling a sure enough torpedo boat, your ten knots become thirty, and the six or seven the tugs are making seems like twenty-one or two. Of course that's part of it—the illusion I mean. Makes good training out of what would otherwise be dull play. Well, that day Shad was in my boat, or rather I was in his, for he had the deck. As usual he was handling her like an old torpedo boat man. Old Bellowing Bill Foster—your class wasn't he, sir?—was in charge and he had twice found occasion to praise Shad's seamanship.

"I was making the usual mess of trying to interpret the signal book, so I paid little attention to anything else. I remember we had just got a signal to assemble on the port quarter of the formation and we were heading back from our old station on the starboard bow, cutting across the base course of the tugs. Anyhow at a loud blast from a whistle close alongside, I looked up to see the bow of the *Standish* looming up over our port beam. It was the look of Shad's face that startled me most, though. He was staring at the blunt nose of the tug with a gone expression that scared me. It seemed like utterly unreasoning terror, which was ridiculous, for if the tug did bump us it would mean no more than a bawling out from Bellowing Bill, and possibly a ducking.

"Anyhow, there we were squarely across the tug's bows. It was too late for her to sheer out or back, and up to us to crack on speed and trust to luck to slip across her bows. Shad revived suddenly and shoved over the launch's dinky little engine telegraph. We made it—close, but as far as I know, outside of our boat nobody saw how close it was. Those drills were always tangled up, and Bill was away down the bay chasing some boat that had missed a signal.

"But when I turned around to kid Shad about it I noticed the dial of the engine telegraph. It read 'back full'.

"He was staring at it too, but he didn't meet my look. Of course, when I had thought that he had taken hold of himself and given the only signal that would pull us out of it, he hadn't at all. He'd done just the wrong thing."

"I thought you said your launch went ahead across?" the captain asked skeptically.

"I did say that but it wasn't Shad's doing. He had signaled 'back full' all right. But the second classman on the throttle probably never looked at his annunciator dial. You know, those steamers have open engine rooms. He could see as much as we could in the cockpit. Knowing what was necessary—anybody could see that—he had simply carried out the order he expected.

"But one glance at Shad was enough to convince me that he had made no mistake in giving the signal. He had wanted to back. The trouble was inside of his head—not in his hand—when he pulled over the annunciator. However nothing came of it. I wouldn't have thought much of it myself if it hadn't been for his actions afterward. For the next month or so he seemed to go all to pieces, said nothing to anybody, fell away off in his work and seemed half out of his head with some secret worry."

"Then you think that he is in the same condition now?" Captain Lane still looked doubtful.

"I don't know," Dawson replied slowly. "I never did understand it, but Captain, sometimes on the bridge when Shad is taking her across the bows of a fast transport like the *Ajax* over there, I see the same expression that he had that afternoon on the Severn." He laughed a little sheepishly. "Sounds as if this thing were getting on—"

A knock on the door interrupted him. After a moment's talk with the man who waited in the passageway outside, he called over his shoulder to the captain, "I've got to go below, sir," and went out.

IN THE lee of the midships deckhouse a little knot of men huddled, crouching against the blower casings for protection from the incessant volleys of spray that hissed out of the darkness and searched out the few half sheltered corners on deck. The deafening scream of the blowers swelling the lower, deeper clamor of the wind and sea, discouraged conversation. Inured to the reeling frenzy with which their craft hurled herself at the succession of waves, they clung to whatever projections offered—hatch combings, grab ropes or the wire netting doors of the life jacket lockers. Overhead the griped-in whaleboat creaked against its strongback. Under it they could see a narrow strip of rushing water, ending indefinitely in a veil of spray filled darkness. Hardly admitting it even to themselves, they were all enduring the discomfort of the upper deck just for the privilege of watching that strip of water.

"Who's on the bridge?" Back of the others, in the angle between No. 3 stack and the galley bulkhead, Brown, the chief machinist's mate, roared his question into the ear of the chief boatswain's mate.

To make himself heard above the clamor, Kelly reluctantly withdrew his gaze from the sea and shouted in the other's ear—

"Elliot—" then, after pausing to glance hurriedly back to starboard—"an' the convoy's makin' twenty."

Brown nodded grimly, his mind on the strain to men and machinery entailed in keeping the necessary five knot margin over that twenty. Then as if to put themselves right in their own minds—

"Boats, he's the best exec in the force."

"I'll tell the world he is!" Kelly agreed heartily. "But—"

The ship heeled far over to port, and they both struggled to keep their footing.

"Full rudder agin! Kelly shouted as he regained his balance. "That's him. Can't handle 'er!"

Above the general uproar they both heard the faint jangle of the annunciator bell in the engine room below. As the starboard side reared, the two men scrambled up to the rail and stared out. The familiar quickened beat of vibration told them that the officer of the deck had once more "given 'er the gun". Kelly drew himself up against the whaleboat davit and searched the sea to starboard without success. Brown suddenly clutched him by the elbow and pointed aft.

"There she is, Boats! Christ! She's got us!"

Above the low after deckhouse, as the ship squatted under the terrific thrust of her screws, the phosphorescent glow of the wake showed a dull white mound of boiling water that seemed to tower half way up the short stub mainmast. But instead of fading out, the white spot ended abruptly; a high black knife split it into two heavy streamers. An immense bulk loomed up so close that the men in the waist of the destroyer looked up at a sharp angle to see its top. Brown wondered at the tiny round white spot at the tip of the huge wedge that rushed down upon them, then suddenly realized that it was the face of a man, watching to see the *Walke* roll under. For hours, it seemed, the bow of the transport hung over them until the breathless men realized that almost imperceptibly it was edging over to port. The *Walke*, then, was holding her own.

"Close that time." Brown turned to see the chief engineer at his side. About him the figures of the other men were relaxing. Although barely fifty feet of water separated the ships, the men were confident that their engines would pull them out of it. The ship rolled suddenly back to port, and Brown lurched down upon the chief engineer. He clutched the hand rope that lined the passageway.

"Slowin' down, sir?" he shouted in the other's ear.

Dawson shook his head; then realizing that Brown could not see his gesture in the darkness answered briefly—

"No."

"She's makin' heavy weather of it, sir," Brown responded, striving unsuccessfully

to see the other's face. "Chips just had a look at the for'd compartments. Three frames sprung in now. An' Mallow says his pumps is laborin'. They'll all be out of line before mornin'. It's murder to drive her into this."

"Can't help it, Brown." Dawson moved over into the lee of the deckhouse away from the blower. "We'll be under Land's End in another hour or so. That ought to ease her a bit. Meanwhile—"

He gripped the frame of the galley doorway as a blast of spray swept over them, and watched for a moment, estimating the height of the rollers that towered close alongside; watched and flinched as the ship struck another of the soft walls and staggered under the impact. A smoke pipe guy at his elbow, a heavy twisted wire line twanged like a string as a gust of wind thrust at the broad surface of the funnel.

"Can you get back to the steering engine room, Brown?

"Yes, sir, she's not shippin' much aft."

At the prospect of something to turn his mind to while waiting for his watch below, Brown brightened.

"Better have a look at the steering engine. Can't afford any trouble there tonight. And watch your step, Brown. The fantail is covered with oil. We don't want to lose you over the side. I'll need you on those pumps when we get in."

"Aye aye, sir," Brown acknowledged cheerfully and turned away as Dawson started toward the hatchway to go below.

HALF AN HOUR later on the bridge the men of the watch were beginning to think of being relieved. Hilder turned away from the cluster of dials beside the steering stand and felt his way over to Elliot's side.

"Two ninety-eight turns, sir," he shouted. "Shall I tell 'em to speed up?"

Without turning Elliot answered:

"No, but call up the engine room and tell them to watch their steam. I may want res— Left rudder!" he shouted suddenly, gripping the rail and leaning out as if to project his body into the obscurity ahead. "Full speed! Give her the gun Hilder! There she is! Dead ahead!"

Instead of obeying instantly, the quartermaster stood for a moment staring over the bow, then shook his head doubtfully and turned to the annunciator to signal the engine room. But as the ship heeled over with full rudder, the executive officer slid by Hilder and rattled it himself; then he straightened and brushed the back of his hand over his eyes.

"Didn't you see her?" he challenged the old petty officer.

"No, sir," Hilder answered shortly, taking a bit of bunting to wipe a clear spot on the windshield. "I must 'a' been lookin' too far aft, sir." He spoke without conviction.

"Shall I ring back to standard speed?" he asked after an interval during which nothing appeared to justify the officer. Dimly he could see Elliot leaning dejectedly against a stanchion. Both men knew now that there had been nothing to see.

In his years of destroyer service Hilder had seen many officers, young and old, lose their grip, see ships where there were no ships. Some didn't have the right kind of nerve, others he classified simply as "yellow". But this one didn't seem to fit into his classification somehow, just seemed bewildered and puzzled at something in himself. But Hilder was never accustomed to long periods of thought. He turned to Elliot.

"Have a cup of java, Mr. Elliot? I'm sendin' one of the boys below."

"Thank you, Hilder, I will." Elliot looked up with a feeble smile.

Ten minutes later he stood sipping his coffee, keeping one eye on the sea to starboard. The lookouts, temporarily relieved by other men, were drinking their coffee and attempting to carry on a shouted conversation. One of them, a huge Irishman, had a voice that carried above the clamor. Elliot listened idly.

"She can't catch this wagon. Too damn'— 'N if she did, you says? The

damn' murtherin'— Smash us flat— An' skin yer hide off—"

"Skin yer hide off!" The phrase struck Elliot's memory with the force of an explosion. First a feeling of strange uneasiness full of associations of unknown horror, the feeling that he could not beat down with the logic of maturity even now. Then as his memory cleared, dimly like a dream, a picture took shape in his mind. A wide, quiet, elm bordered street; big square faced houses set back behind broad strips of well kept lawn, graveled drives sloping gently down to the street—

"Right rudder, Isaacs!"

"The other part of Elliot's mind functioned without disturbing the picture: Four or five children riding tiny tricycles down one of the drives, coasting joyously down the barely perceptible slope and stopping short of the vague danger of the street. Now and then, at rare intervals—for this was one of the streets from which mere tradesmen's carts were banned, relegated to the back alley—a carriage, noiseless except for the clop-clopping of horses' hoofs, rolled decorously by on its rubber tires. A fat, blue clad figure, a creature whose towering blue helmet and majestic tread roused a delicious terror among the children, paused on the walk where it crossed the drive and ferociously shook his club at them.

"Don't yez dare cross this path!" he shouted at them with an enormous grin which they barely half believed. "D'ye see that thing comin'?" He pointed up the street. "If that brush runs inta yez it'll skin yer hide off an' smash yez so flat that yer mithers 'll niver find yez!"

Down the street slowly rolled a huge revolving brush affair, a monster that to the imagination of one four-year-old seemed to be animated by a tremendous ferocity, towering above the trees and existing only to flay and flatten out rash children who ventured within its reach. It fascinated him as he pedaled laboriously up the hill and turned to start another thrilling ride. As he started down, the thing was just in front of the next house, rolling close to the curb. He felt himself being carried helplessly in front of it, powerless to check the speed of his wheel. Faster and faster went the little tricycle and higher and higher loomed the engine of a horrible death ahead of him.

Already he could see that they must inevitably meet if he crossed the sidewalk and slipped down the last pitch into the street. He tried to scream, tried to throw himself sidewise from the seat, but his scream died unuttered in a paralyzed throat and his hands remained fixed to the handle bars . . .

"No signs of the *Ajax* yet, sir," Hilder spoke apologetically at Elliot's side.

"We've been on this leg for eight minutes."

"Left handsomely," the officer spoke quietly to the helmsman. "Stand by the annunciator, Hilder."

"Left handsomely," the helmsman acknowledged.

The ship curved slightly away from the base course, throwing up thicker sheets of spray as she took the wind on her port bow. For some time they all stared anxiously, watching for the first gleam of white water. Ten minutes passed without a sign. Elliot walked over to the starboard side and stared earnestly astern for a moment, then settled himself in the corner and called to the helmsman:

"Right rudder. Bring her around about a hundred and twenty. Mark when you are on."

"Right rudder, sir," the helmsman acknowledged.

The attitudes of the men stiffened noticeably. They drifted over to the starboard side and watched intently. If the transport had not changed course she would be showing up any time now.

ELLIOT'S mind reverted to the old memory. That instant, the utter terror of it, now that he had dug it out of the bottom of his mind, seemed unforgetably horrible. The moment when he had looked up and seen the thing rear-

ing above his head, felt his tricycle stop squarely in front of it while he sat powerless to move a muscle. They laughed at him afterward, explained that it was only a street sweeper, that it had stopped ten feet from him, could not hurt him anyhow. But the moment had etched itself upon some deep cell of his memory, covered up by other things until apparently he had forgotten it completely. Forgotten it?

Suddenly Hilder jumped and stared. The officer of the deck had laughed aloud. Bewildered, Elliot found himself unafraid.

"But," in his astonishment he spoke aloud, "was that what I was afraid of?"

He laughed again at the trick his mind was playing upon him. And then he realized that he was looking almost eagerly into the darkness, hoping for an opportunity to test and prove his new found self-command, bouyantly awake and alert.

Still no sign of the convoy. The *Walke* was well across what should have been her course. Visions of losing her, of suddenly uncontrollable emergency he found himself brushing aside cheerfully.

"Keep your course, Isaacs!" he ordered sharply. The helmsman, far less interested in sighting the transport than in keeping clear of her bow, was edging away. "Right a little!"

The men about Elliot tautened again. The ship thumped heavily into a trough and they instinctively rose on tiptoe, striving to see over the hill of water ahead, overwrought nerves tense at the thought of what might be waiting there. With maddening slowness the destroyer twisted up to the crest, the quartering sea rendered apparently stationary by her speed. A burst of spray, a quick dip, and she plunged again.

A long minute later Elliot saw the significant white spot take shape on the bow.

"Close, sir!" Hilder sucked in his breath sharply at the officer's elbow.

It was close, closer than ever before. Elliot had turned to the helmsman when at a gasp from the quartermaster he looked back. What a second before had merely been another tight pinch, had instantaneously altered to a certainty of tragedy. The *Ajax* was swinging, and not away but toward the *Walke*, fairly across her bows. Accustomed to ignoring the nimble destroyers, her officer of the deck had ignored them once too often, and Elliot echoed Hilder's groan as he saw what was coming. No room to swing or check his headway! The destroyer must strike the *Ajax*, slice into her frail side plating fairly amidships, a gash more damaging than torpedoes could make.

Four hundred yards. Elliot computed hurriedly—

"A minute at most—can't back—can't turn—can't get—"

He whirled and flung himself at the annunciator, conceiving on the instant a remote chance to save the big ship. Once more the long suffering instrument was wracked with the force the officer brought to bear upon it.

"Left a little!" he called to the helmsman, his voice sounding strangely subdued. "Never mind the compass—Keep her bow abaft of our windshield!"

Hilder gasped and fell silent as he realized the meaning of the officer's order. He was going to try to lay the *Walke* across her bow, throw away all chance of saving his own ship for the remote possibility of saving the big fellow!

LIKE the bellow of a stricken animal the siren of the *Ajax* shivered the air. A searchlight flared on and bathed the destroyer in cold light. Hilder caught a glimpse of Elliot's face. Its expression had changed subtly. Behind its grim lines the old uncertainty was gone. Instead, the old chief read a suggestion of satisfaction, of absorption in the nice problem of seamanship involved in combining the effects of wind and rudder and engines to slip the destroyer across the bows of the *Ajax* before the two ships struck. The same expression, Hilder recognized, that he had seen the executive wear while bringing the ship along-

side of a dock in a difficult landing.

The raucous clamor of the alarm klaxons on deck below arrested the Chief's thought. Somebody had tripped the general alarm. And it was time. A flood of lights snapped on up on the decks of the *Ajax*. The tiny figures of men could be made out now, running to her boats. Hilder hauled on a wire hanging overhead, and the scream of the *Walke's* siren answered the furious bellowing of the Ajax.

But the destroyer's bow had crept ahead of the other now. Elliot whirled and yelled—

"Off the bridge!" He seized the wheel and thrust the helmsman violently toward the ladder. "Down you go! Every man for himself!"

In a flying surge the destroyer lifted along the crest of a sea, the starboard rail on the forecastle ripping at it as she heeled. Calmly Elliot twirled the wheel. As she lifted, her engine thrust her bow clear of the water while the sea flung her broadside at the transport. The big ship seemed to gather herself as she plunged down and forward.

Hilder ripped Elliot away from the wheel and hurled him aft toward the ladder to the deck below. For an instant the officer caught himself wondering at a vertical row of rivet heads that had miraculously appeared in the darkness above the starboard rail. A white hand clawed at the rivets. They seemed to be in the center of the bridge now— A rending scream of torn plates—a stunning concussion— And as he looked his world was blotted out by a rushing black wall.

AN HOUR later a small group of men were gathered in the waist of the *Payne*. Over their heads two or three more were climbing down from the whale-boat which had just been hoisted in. Black from head to foot with fuel oil, they were readily distinguishable from the crew of the *Payne*. An officer, bareheaded and oozing sticky oil from every fold of his clothes, held up a grimy paper in the light of a recklessly displayed flashlight and droned through a long list of names.

Occasionally one of the black figures answered dispassionately, "Here, sir," or tendered a brief explanation, " 'E was in the chief's quarters. Nobody got outa there." Or more briefly, "Caught in the foremast— Saw him go down."— "Beside me in the water—swallowed a lot a oil an' sunk."

One of them—he had answered "here" a moment before when the officer had called "Kelly"—gripped another man by the elbow.

"That you, Brown? Couldn't sink a greasy engineer, could they? Did they find Elliot?" he asked eagerly.

Behind his mask of oil and weariness the other almost grinned.

"They sure did. Cut up pretty bad though, some of the *Payne* people says."

"Pretty neat it was, I'll say—the way he handled our bucket in the pinch. If it wasn't for him it would 'a' been curtains for the whole army on the *Ajax*, generals and all."

"Guess they'll pin a few medals on 'im when we get in."

"The hell they will!" Kelly jeered. "Who'll report it? You an' me? A lot we'll have to say about it! They's regulations about them things, you know. About bein' reported by a superior officer, an' seen by three witnesses. Our Old Man is scuppered; he can't help. Naw, who wants medals in the dungaree navy? The force'll know about it. That's enough. Me and you and the rest of the gang will see to that. Not that he needs any press agentin'. He's a ship handler, he is. Didn't I tell you so just before we crashes. You couldn't fool me just because he was a little too fond of takin' chances. I knew, I did."

AUSTIN PICKS A RANGER

And All He Had Were the Credentials of a School Teacher

By RAYMOND S. SPEARS

CAPTAIN SAM BUNTIN belonged to the old line of Texas Rangers. He had in his soul the most earnest appreciation of the honor done him, an humble and modest man, when he became head of the Western Company. He had weathered thirty years of Northers and fusillades of bullets; he had worked from the wet Pine Belt of East Texas to the high aridity of the Staked Plains. He had come up out of the days when a man's horse was his best reliance. Time had been, though, when the company captain chose his own men, hiring and firing them. Now Captain Sam viewed with disgust what Austin had wished on him.

In the first place he read on a slip of paper:

The State of Texas
Adjutant General's Department
Warrant of Authority and Descriptive List.

This is to certify that the bearer, *Robert Reed*, is a Private in Panhandle Company Ranger Force, State of Texas, and this is his Warrant of Authority as Ranger under an Act of the 36th Legislature of the State of Texas, approved March 31, 1919, and Descriptive List for identification and will be exhibited as his authority to act as a Ranger when called upon for his credentials. This warrant must be surrendered to Company Commander by Bearer when discharged. This Warrant of Authority and Descriptive List is signed by The Adjutant General under Seal of Office and Attested by Company Commander.

Name, *Robert Reed*	Rank, private
Age, 36 years	Where Born, Lincoln, Nebraska
Hair, dark	Occupation, school teacher
Eyes, brown	Enlisted where, Austin
Complexion, fair	Enlisted by whom, *Gen. Joe Rudder*

This Warrant of Authority is void after January 7, 88th Year of Force. (Good for Two Years)

Given under my Hand and Seal This

Seventh Day of January, 88th Year of Force

—JUDSON DOLLIVER
(Acting) Adjutant General

Attested
CAPTAIN RANGER FORCE
Commanding Panhandle Company

In the second place the Captain Sam's sparkling gray eyes, with pupils like pinpoints, turned up to view the new arrival from Austin, to wit: Robert Reed, school teacher—*school teacher*—SCHOOL TEACHER!

Captain Sam had learned to ride on a calf when he was two years old. His wife had taught him to read and write when he was twenty-one years of age. Captain Bill MacDonald had appointed him Private Ranger, and then Sam Buntin had had his schooling, fit and proper. Captain Sam had owned but one white collar, with a shirt to match. The collar had caught fire and exploded while Captain Sam was drying the dad-blamed thing by a mesquite fire after attending a dance in El Paso in disguise, looking for a man. Then Captain Sam's wife had made a collar for the otherwise disabled shirt.

And now here stood a school teacher with a white collar, creased pants, vest to match coat and pants, and a pink silk stripe in his detachable shirt. He was wearing silkeen socks and oxfords, yellow laced shoes that'd fill right plumb up with sand, stickleburrs and cactus thorns and serve the dad-blasted—uh-h—right. And *him* a Ranger! That showed what politics had done to— Oh, well.

Captain Sam jerked the warrant of authority back to Private Robert Reed. He didn't sign on the dotted line at Attested, over Captain Ranger Force, he bet he didn't! The private thus insulted whitened a bit and his lips pressed a trifle tighter, thinner.

"You gotta gun?" Captain Sam inquired, lifting his nose.

"Yes, sir."

"Prob'ly one of them automatics?"

"Yes, sir."

"Thought so," sniffed Captain Sam, gazing out into the street where dust was puffing up yellow with passing automobiles and the glare of the sunshine from a chill, crystalline sky cast purple shadows.

The room in which the Texas Rangers were installed at Brager had been some time since a café, with a long lunch counter, a back room with tables and a huge oil cook stove, and other paraphernalia. The proprietor had been killed by two hold-ups who stole about $450, after eating a large barbecued meal, and had taken their departure leisurely. The arrival of Capt. Sam Buntin with two Rangers a few hours later disclosed the fact that the Lone Eagle Café was the only vacant floor space in Brager, where some thirty-five thousand population was endeavoring to occupy home and business facilities ample for something less than five thousand. The Rangers were lucky to find a home of any sort.

This was a new oil field. The conditions had run the Keepawa County sheriff right off his feet. Brager was wide open—gambling, shooting, dance halls and all kinds of difficulties. Strangers had come in and been taken up dark alleys, knocked on the head and left stripped to their union suits. Old-timers had met one another at the Busy Corner and with the utmost enthusiasm and bad marksmanship emptied their .45's at one another and wounded innocent bystanders and damaged large plate glass windows of drug stores and furniture establishments whose proprietors never had known such violence and such trade; for an entirely peaceable community of sixteen hundred population had been inundated by thirty-five thousand barrel gushers and throngs of fortune seekers.

CAPTAIN SAM had ridden into town with the two privates on horseback. He had circled around the old town once and viewed the scene of the hold-up which had killed off the Lone Eagle Café proprietor and left him

intestate. Just before Captain Sam arrived, an enterprising new arrival of much previous experience had discovered the closed café and pried off the padlock which the city constable had put on the door, the jumper intending to open up some kind of an establishment in it. But Captain Sam asked him for his credentials, which he tried to establish with his tongue and gestures. Talk, however, failed to impress Captain Sam, who thus was lucky enough to find a place all his own.

Captain Sam needed another man, and here he was—a *school teacher!* Moreover, Robert Reed had arrived in a nice, bright roadster, with black fenders and a dark blue body. Robert Reed, private, wore a fine brown fedora, gloves of the softest suede imaginable, and he flicked some alkali dust off one sleeve with a soft haired brush which he carried in his pocket for the purpose. And Austin had sent that fellow to help uphold the arms of Captain Sam, whose record was one of efficiency and accuracy all over Texas! And Texas so big it takes five kinds of weather, and no one ever did figure up how many kinds of population, to look after its varied needs!

There's one way to be rid of an inefficient namby-pamby Texas Ranger private. One can go up and down Texas from Brownsville to the New Mexico line, and from Greer County above Red River into the bayous of East Texas, hunting for a namby-pamby Texas Ranger—but right there the low whispering voice of the Ranger habit of conversation loses even its whistle. Oh, there are certain Rangers who didn't survive their appointments very long, of course. When somebody shoots up a Ranger, the Ranger captain always has to be convinced the Ranger didn't need shooting. The idea of a private getting hit by somebody he has shot at, anyhow! Of course, Rangers are mighty slow in a fracas—till after the enemy shoots first. That establishes the Ranger alibi, perfectly.

"A'right, Reed." Captain Sam's voice had a certain edge. "Oveh northeast end of town's an old sod shack. Got my s'picions of 'em. Go'n' find out what they're doing."

"Yes, sir." Private Reed nodded and went out into his roadster, backed into the middle of the street, let in the forward gears and, with a puff of dust from the exhaust, headed away with a promptness that bade the captain pause. When a private doesn't stop for details or suggest a line of argument, the outlook is hopeful to that extent, anyhow.

Captain Sam didn't have anything on the Sod House. He had not gotten that far, yet. He had started next door to Ranger headquarters in Brager, stopping a gambling den in full blast. Then he had gone across the street and uprooted a confidence game, also in full blast. Then he had visited a large, ornately gold and silver business establishment with a long and hopeful line of investing newcomers. He remembered seeing the president of the World-Wide Hope and Pray Oils, Inc., the last time he visited Huntsville, with some inbound prisoners. President Cluck Bluchen was just checking out, after two years in the pen. Now he, too, was going full blast. Captain Sam walked in on him, and Cluck sagged mournfully in his chair. The former convict had $19,783.40 in evidence on his person, and sadly his prospective patrons and beneficiaries went looking for other one way chutes for their money.

Brager kept Captain Sam happily busy. Every once in a while he met somebody he knew and whom the State of Texas, or some other State wanted. He picked up thirty-four hundred dollars in rewards the first week. He disjointed a number of questionable enterprises. He had to fill up the back room of the former Lone Eagle Café with illicit gambling apparatus, and large numbers of samples of illegal articles and fluids, to be used when the Keepawa County courts came into the circuit of Brager activities. And so, having business to attend to, Capt. Sam forgot for a time that he had sent Private Robert Reed forth on investigation duties at the Sod House.

PRIVATE REED however, rolled out to the northeast side of town. In that direction there was just a scattering of oil derricks, most of the Brager field being west and south of the town. Board shacks, shacks made of tin cans flattened with a sledge on an anvil or piece of railroad iron, canvas stretched over a frame of inch by inch and a half sticks, several former automobile house cars whose cabins had been let down on posts and their running gear worked up into light trucks. It was an odd and rather squalid square mile of rabbit hutch and badger burrow residences, on the far side of which rose the thick two stone walls and the water washed edges of the Sod House, whose name was plainly to be read on a red, black and white signboard standing like a roadside advertisement on top the old-time ranch building.

Reed circled along the tortuous rutted alleyways till he struck into the old No Man's Land trail past the outfit. He pulled out beside the highway, stopped the motor and put the key into his pocket, entering the building at the front door. Within, on the left, was a counter, where several customers were being served lunches, drinks and groceries. Ahead of him was a board partition about seven feet high and two feet short of the hewn timber supports of the floor above. Through the partition was a small door which was open, but leaning against the thin board wall was a doorkeeper, about six feet tall wearing a fancy long frock coat, a colorful waistcoat, a gayly figured cravat, tall flat heeled boots of exquisite leather, and a nutria sombrero about thirty inches across, a dark leather belt showed above his gray trousers. His left thumb was hooked in his waistcoat arm hole, and he grandly flicked the ash off a pale long cigar held in his other hand.

Through the doorway the unexpected visitor saw a good many small round tables, a long green covered rectangular table, with high sides, over which galloping bones were performing. Probably many a day had passed since a Texas Ranger had walked in upon such a lively scene of assorted games of chance, from whirring roulette marble to the fast action of banker, the gamblers' favorite of faro. Whatever a man wanted was there.

Quite without showing any emotion, Private Robert Reed sauntered the length of the soft drink and commissary parlor lobby to the man at the door. As he neared the doorway the ornate lounger suddenly became conscious of the stranger's presence. He stiffened and leveled a pair of questioning eyes at the newcomer.

"Who are you?" the man demanded.

"Bob Reed," was the quiet answer. "And you're—?"

"Dan'l Longmont."

"So? Not Snowstorm Dan?"

"I reckon."

"And this is *your* place now?"

"It sure am. But what's it to you, anyhow?"

"I'm Private Bob Reed, of the Texas Rangers," was the answer, "and you're my prisoner—charge of public gambling, running a disorderly—"

As to what then happened, there later was ever a discrepancy in the testimony. The neutral observer, Jerry Hazlett of the Brager *Starlight*, who had by lucky chance arrived there two minutes before on a hot tip from Deputy Sheriff Wanger, saw Snowstorm Dan go for his gun. The firearm was a .45 caliber with a seven and one-half inch barrel and pearl handles. As the point was clearing the top of the too deep holster, a .45 automatic crackled and Snowstorm Dan sagged in a discouraged sort of weakness. Two white aproned men behind the alleged soft drink counter on the left saw the beginning, and as they were both good—in the shooting sense—they started something.

Pete Curring reached for a sawed off shotgun and Jack Halfhead threw a heavy beer glass. The glass passed Ranger Reed's head and, as he ducked, the shotgun roared. The range was too short and the slugs went over the intended victim's head probably two inches—

just high enough to slam the already limp Snowstorm Dan in the lips and lower jaw, spoiling one of the handsomest faces in all that part of Texas. The charge went through the half-inch boards of the partition and broke a looking glass used by house dealers in reading opponent's hands from behind. Breaking a mirror always was bad luck for somebody, and every player either sprang to his feet or dropped on his hands and knees.

Guns were drawn and there was promiscuous shooting. Some went out through windows, some through rear doorways, and some sagged to the floor on their way to oblivion.

"Texas Ranger! Texas Ranger!" somebody yelped shrilly, unaware that he was saying anything.

Ranger Bob Reed lifted his .45 automatic around and Pete Curring was thrown back against a stack of glassware behind the soda fountain, so called. It looked as if one could draw a vanilla soda from its silvery and filigreed brightness, but this appearance was to show the Rangers, as the saying was.

"I'm shot! I'm shot!" Curring began to blubber and bellow. He was weaving back and forth, red foam welling to his lips.

RANGER BOB REED was now moving with the uttermost activity. As he sprang through the doorway into the big gambling hall in the rear he swung his left hand down and snatched the great gold plated, engraved gun from Snowstorm Dan's loose grasp. There was business in back—Ranger work to do. Some of the nerviest gamblers and some of the deadliest of banditry were whiling away a leisure hour in Snowstorm Dan's Sod House. Out yonder on the outskirts of the boom oil town they had found a place after their own first choice. Occasional and haphazard crooks were not wanted, though suckers were not infrequently introduced there as good ones for the hook.

Slithering, undersized wretches; long, bowlegged riders; dandies of the slums and open range—all had come to the Sod House, and no Ranger had been there, though uptown the devastation of Captain Sam Buntin's presence had made some people think that Snowstorm Dan had "protection".

After that first three seconds of surprise, the habitués gathered their wits. The newcomer was like unto no Texas Ranger any one of them had ever seen. He didn't have chaps, nor a wide hat, nor boots, nor a loose woolen shirt. He wore a fine brown fedora, he wore a white collar, and his trousers were creased . . .

"Hell!" some one shouted. "He's a faker—he ain't no Ranger!"

They presumed they could kill an impostor, several of the cool scoundrels did, who had so often been in scrapes, rows, raids and mêlées that now they took no stock in what was going on. They were angered by the idea of some crooks trying to take advantage of the Texas Ranger reputation to run them out—probably attempting to stick them up for whatever they possessed—well, some went for their guns, belatedly.

Even less coherently narrated were the events within the big rear den of the Sod House. Guns cracked, filling the place with the choking fumes of smokeless powder. Tables were upset. Men darted hither and yon. No one stood still, especially not the visitor. There was a lot of shooting, mostly high and futile. Some bullets were found which had gone straight up through the floor or into the supporting beams of the second story. Dust from the inner sod-'dobe walls was knocked off in puffs. The crap table was stood on end and several light round tables were heaved into one corner, while light chairs were scattered where everybody seemed to take turns in tripping over them.

Darting in all directions from the Sod House, men raced on foot, on horseback, and especially in automobiles. The roadway northward toward the old No Man's Land of the Indian Territory Neutral Strip was the favorite of these departers. The parking places around the resort

were vacated with the utmost speed possible, and no less than six cars in their haste had head on or broadside smashes. Two of these cars caught fire and black smoke rolled up like a sump-hole smudge. The crashes, combined with the muffled fusillade in the Sod House, brought all the hovel dwellers in the northeast part of town scrambling out of their holes like prairie dogs, stretching their necks to see what they could.

WORD was relayed uptown that there was a gang war in the Sod House, and an excited deputy sheriff rushed around to the Lone Eagle Café to tell Ranger Captain Sam Buntin that eleven men had been killed and thirty wounded in a row which had broken out in the Sod House. Capt. Sam had become an expert in false alarms. He pinned the deputy sheriff down to the fact that there was shooting over at the Sod House, but it was only a rumor about the killings and woundings.

"You can see the fire!" the deputy sheriff declared, and Captain Sam stepped out to where he had a clear view toward the northeast.

He noticed a string of running streaks of tawny alkali dust going northward on the No Man's Land trail. No less than ten automobiles were stretching away to the Oklahoma line. They were hurrying. Three cars were heading eastward toward the lost and lamented Greer County, Oklahoma, which Texas had once claimed in vain. Unquestionably, too, the darting figures coming into the depths of Brager were significant.

Captain Sam seemed to take a long time in his deliberate observations. By the second hand of a watch it would have been less than forty seconds. He turned and stepped lightly to where he had his horse standing at mark-time rest in front of the former café and, rising into the saddle as a desert raven flies up on a fence post he rode away down the alleys and around the corners heading for the Sod House.

"No use cussing that dad-forsook, pressed ridge pants, linen collared, clean necked son of a school professor! He w'an't to blame. But—uh-h—Austin! Austin wishing a pedagogical dude-a-damn, baby nursing man into the Ranger companies for to disgrace genuine he-man old-time rip-snorting genuine 'Pache huntin', cattle rustler hanging, desperado shooting privates, lieutenants, captains and such! Uh-h—"

So Capt. Sam Buntin thought and observed.

As he landed, running, he noted that the nice pretty roadster of this blamed, basted private of Austin's was standing in front of the Sod House. In the alkali round about were all the indications of hasty departure, places where large balloon tired cars had turned around and spewed deep through the dust, footprints gouged out in eight or ten feet jumps, and the blessed hoof prints of those old-timers who—praise be their old-time hearts!—still knew which side of a horse to mount from.

Captain Sam heard some glass falling within, a cascading of shattered fragments dislodged from some high point. He drew his own trusty .45 and went in the front door.

Fumes were coming out through the partly open entrance. Within, the dust from the walls and the smoke from the few old guns were even less rasping on the throats than the nearly invisible combinations of nitro, carbolic acid and sundry fancy specials and semi-smokelesses. Stooping low, ready, Captain Sam sidestepped inside and surveyed the scene.

Right under his nose was a figure lying prostrate—not the professor Ranger from Austin, but he might just as well have been, for the fellow had a white collar, a black and white barred necktie and a long cut through the perfumed oil of his slick, city gunman scalp. Hanging over the bar negligently was a man in a white jacket with a large red stain on the right shoulder.

Over by the partition Capt. Sam saw the Austin school teacher Ranger with his coat off—nicely spread out to keep its

shape, on the back of a chair in the back room, he noticed—and his silk stripe shirt-sleeves rolled up, displaying a wide, wiry forearm, stained with the administration of first aid to those who sadly need it. Private Reed was trying to save the life of Snowstorm Dan Longmont who had a painful flesh wound through his shoulder and seven buckshot through his chin, jaw and neck.

Captain Sam slithered to look around the rear room; and by the cash, poker chips, dice and upset roulette wheels surmised that business had been as good as it was unreliable. There were several disgusted looking men in the room, who were handcuffed and hitched temporarily to a trace chain which attached them to a pool table. There were three on the floor who needed no hitching to keep them there.

Tending to his first aid job, Private Robert Reed did not even look up at his captain, who wandered around reading signs with the regretful look a Ranger always has when he just misses being in at the thick of something very exciting. A little later two deputy sheriffs and a constable arrived, followed by two surgeons and a great many spectators whose partial innocence was immediately greatly improved, in the main, by the conditions of which they became witnesses.

The reporter who had been helping the private Ranger then became exceedingly busy getting down the names and the nature of the injuries as disclosed, so far. By keeping low, Jerry Hazlett of the Brager *Starlight* had escaped injury and had the news story of a lifetime.

CAPTAIN SAM BUNTIN didn't ask any questions. He just casually went about the things which needed to be done. He looked after the prisoners, putting them under a proper guard from the sheriff's office. He set two or three reliable men to gathering up the scattered money. He himself made sure of the seizure and transportation of all the gambling paraphernalia, wondering the while where in Hades he was going to store it. And then he stacked in the rear yard all but what would be required as court exhibits, and there the stuff was set on fire with acclaim and kerosene.

No one had been killed, curiously enough. Five went to the hospitals maintained in the oil fields for the injured of this tremendous activity. One of the doctors dressed Private Robert Reed for a cut in the hip, where a bullet soiled his trousers and made two holes which had to be darned neatly. Then the new Ranger went over to the Ranger headquarters, where he sat down at the typewriter desk and swiftly wrote off a report which contained about as emotional a quality as a record of recovery of a cow baby and its return to a parsimonious and alarmed rancher. On a half page of letter paper, supplied by the Lone Star Government for reports, Reed gave names, date, occasion and charges filed. He handed the paper to Captain Sam Buntin who inferred from it a loquacity even less marked than his own.

Captain Sam filed the report and mailed the carbon to Austin. He went out to supper at the Oil and Alkali Restaurant. He started back to headquarters but stopped in the Happy Pavilion, where he told Fatty Stovel for the first and last time to get his nickle machines out of sight, out of business and out of order, forthwith. Fatty said, "Yes, sir!" with a look of alarm on his features. There was positively no telling what a blamed Ranger would do if disobeyed—now—in Brager. And all along Greasy Lane was assumed such an air of virtue and respect for the nuisance law as regards games of chance and appliances that every one wondered if humans could be so positively good and well behaving.

Captain Sam presently returned to the Ranger headquarters. He found Private Robert Reed sitting by the coal briquet stove carefully manicuring his hands. Opened on the wide arm of the chair was a leather case with just such a set of tools as Captain Sam had seen spread out in a beauty shop one time when he made a

business call on a back room in El Paso. Captain Sam started to say something impulsively but on the instant minded his own business.

He knew, by reading some three columns in the special extra of the Brager *Starlight* the exact details as described by a cool, accurate and competent young reporter. There were some things missing from the account—all that had happened could not have been seen by four reporters, probably—but Captain Sam had imagination and numerous episodes of his own experience to draw from. Jerry Hazlett had kept his eyes on the Ranger and described that man's slashing assault, his instantaneous disabling of two counter jumpers of the soft drink side, the dropping of Snowstorm Dan—one of the fastest draw men in the Southwest of the day—and the rush into the rear room where the crackling of the automatics mingled with the bass accompaniment of the old-time .45's; and then Private Reed presently hand-cuffing the prisoners and giving first-aid to the wounded.

"Uh-h, say, Reed!" Captain Sam remarked casually. "Le's see that warrant of your'n again, will you?"

"Yes, sir," Private Reed replied, tenderly taking the appointment to authority given to Rangers.

In these days that is all they get. If they want a badge, or guns, or whatsoever, they can buy them out of their wages. Captain Sam opened the six-folded piece of tough paper and squinted down through it, word by word, as if he didn't know it by heart already. Then he felt around in his pockets till he found the stub of his favorite indelible pencil and, screwing his face up, humping over his shoulders, wriggling and twisting in the manner of those unaccustomed to literary exercises, he wrote "Samuel Buntin" on the dotted line. And he reread "Captain Ranger Force, Commanding Panhandle Company" as it appeared there on the warrant of authority. Then he glanced back to that particular place which said "Occupation, school teacher."

School teacher! How the blazes?

Captain Sam handed the paper back to Private Robert Reed. The Ranger's hand trembled and Captain Sam turned his head away so that he wouldn't see the Private's quick dash of his fine linen handkerchief across his eyes. A man who has faced showers of bullets unflinching, winning a terrific fight against the most desperate odds, sometimes does give way a little to emotion when, later, he finds his superior officer backing him to the limit against every situation known to the Rangers.

Captain Sam Buntin wouldn't attest anybody for love, money or influence—not in a thousand years. But when a Private did his full duty to overflowing, then Captain Sam would put his fist down on the paper and keep it there through hell and high water, yes, sir!

Captain Sam wriggled, twisted, bit off a chew of tobacco and then threw the cud away because it was bothering him.

"Say, Bob!" he said suddenly. " 'Taint none of my business, but how 'n tarnation'd you ever get to be a school teacher, anyhow?"

"Why-uh—I went to Nebraska State Normal. Prof. Farnham, you know, was a great friend of my father's. Wanted me to have an education."

"Yeh, but honest Injun, did *you* ever teach school?"

"Oh, yes."

"Well—dog-gone! How long?"

" 'Bout ten years."

"Ten years! You don't look er act it!"

"Probably not."

"Where'd you teach?"

"Why—uh—New York, Texas, Colorado, California—around thataway."

"Ladies' society schools, I reckon!" Captain Sam couldn't restrain his snort. "Fashionable manners, I expect!"

"Why, yes." Private Reed gravely shook his head. "Reformatory schools—Illinois and so on."

"Well—I thought—" grunted Captain Sam, taking another chew. "Dog-gone! You had me guessing one spell!"

By F. ST. MARS

FUR *and* FAMINE

In view of the great popularity of F. St. Mars' colorful tales of the forest creatures, we are fortunate in having procured for our readers some of the last pieces from his pen, which came to light only recently on the disposition of his estate

IT IS not always a good thing to be a leader, as some have discovered before now. More especially it is not a good thing to be a leader of wolves. The job is unhealthy, you understand; and too prone to end in one of many crude and painful ways.

Now Fangs was a leader of wolves—his own grown family, and others—but he had somehow survived. No one knew quite why he had survived, least of all his followers. The latter, some of the jealously aspiring male wolves, had certainly at times, often awkwardly, done their best to see that he did not; but—well, there he was. You could see him for yourself—if you had been fool enough to visit that Godforsaken land—standing statuesquely stiff, stark and still on the edge of the forest.

Nothing remarkable about the size of his gaunt, hard trained, tough three and one half foot form, his brush less than half that length, or the nickel steel rods he called his legs. Nothing remarkable, that is, for a full grown, full blown, fully tried male wolf except his color. Fangs was black, or nearly enough so to look black against the utter purity of the all white world in which we find him. Black, sirs, in all save a patch on chest, feet and lean slavering muzzle, which were whitish. And not only black was he, but strangely woolly. And not only black outside, but in through to the heart; at least, so those who knew him best asserted. Thus Fangs.

For the rest—a snowed up forest; a snowed up plain as far as the wolf could

see, a snowed up plain, he knew, as far as he could not see beyond that, a snowed up low sheet of lead called sky, and a snowed up silence that weighed upon everything like lead, a silence that appalled, numbed, crushed.

Fangs, with one lean lip uplifted in an evil sneer, glanced over his deep shoulder back into the forest. The pack was there—asleep. You could not see them, but they were, just like curled up dogs, asleep. Presently they would be awake. Fangs knew it; knew that he had got to feed that crowd—when it awoke—here—in this white, frozen desolation, feed in this famine smitten, petrified dim lone.

Fangs lifted *both* upper lips, and flung away with a wave of the brush that was equivalent to a shrug of disgust. First he would feed himself; that was what he was on the warpath for at that less dark hour, while the sun was up. That faint, dull bloodstain low down in the sky was the sun, if it please you.

A herd of reindeer—alias caribou—had scraped for moss here and there among the trees; for strange lichen also on the stumps and windfalls. Pale it was, and, oddly enough, shaped like unto their own strange horns. Fangs scraped, too, where he could not find any uncovered already. Oh, no—he did not despise lichen or moss. Nor did he despise a few tightly packed sleeping buds he came upon a moment later; nor the little mouse, tucked up in dreamland all nice and comfy in her hole that he dug up among the tree roots also. He despised nothing, not even the wood pigeon, or parody for a wood pigeon, that flopped down from on high quite close to his path, and, falling, died—though I feel quite sure it was diphtheria that killed the poor thing.

Then Fangs really began to quest. You have seen him quest dozens of times perhaps—if you have ever seen hounds draw cover. There was a little difference, perhaps; Fangs missed less than the hounds overlook. He was quicker, too, working with greater ease, which masked his real speed. But, except for these things, there was not much noticeable difference.

Then occurred a strange thing.

Electricity seemed to have been switched on to Fangs, stinging him to sudden strenuous excitement. He flung down his head. He flung up his brush. He—was gone.

It was the time of shadows: gray mist shadows; faint, tenuous, pigeon blue, snow haze shadows; "snow devil" shadows, whisked up by the rapiers of the north wind; tree-trunk shadows, growing upon the white carpet, like a slowly developing negative, at the instigation of a strengthening moon; racing cloud shadows, and others— Some moved—not accounted for by any of these things. and one of these shadows sped more swiftly even than those clouds that ran before the moon.

Then there were two such hurrying wisps together. Then but one, and that one had stopped short at the foot of a pine tree, and had turned into Fangs.

He was looking up excitedly, but there was at first nothing to be seen alive there, till something moved, and what had appeared to be isabelline streaks of bark, white lumps of snow, tracery of twigs, turned into that living, compressed steel spring, a lynx wrapped in his beautiful winter pelt.

Then the lynx screamed! Not with fear did he scream, but with rage. And it was as if an escaped demon had been caught and was being dragged back to hell again.

Fangs reared up on his hind legs and snapped steel-trap jaws at the brute. A spitting explosion ensued, and a hugely swathed, gripping paw slid down. The paw flickered and drew back again, and Fangs leapt away with a howl and a crimson gridiron branded on his nose. 'Twas not the first time he had acquired that mark, for he was the wild dog that could never resist chasing the cat—and getting, in nine cases out of ten, more than he gave.

Fangs passed, loping his long, loose, lurching lope, that never seemed to tire, questing hither and yon, stopping at times to rub his nose with his forepaw,

till, all at once, up went his long, lean head, and he made a beeline for a certain object. It was a deadfall trap, and it contained a long, narrow, soft, exquisitely coated sable, hanging as in the stocks, and of course defunct—head and forepaws one side of the deadfall, body and tail suspended on the other.

A snap sounded upon the petrified air, ringing and metallic in that temperature —below zero—as the snap of a gin, and—the head and shoulders of that sable were still there, utterly unconcerned, in the deadfall, but the rest of the little animal, tail and all, was gone. Fangs had chopped it off as cleanly as a butcher chops a chump chop. Fangs was trotting away, licking his lips with a very red tongue, and with ten, fifteen, for all I know, perhaps twenty pounds' worth of fur to his credit.

At last Fangs stopped.

Questing had not proved much good so far, had not produced what he was seeking. He must put on his considering cap. And forthwith he began to trot, dog fashion, swiftly backward and forward over the same place, like a beast in a cage. 'Twas a little personal eccentricity of his; "a way" as we say, peculiar to this wolf—one of his characteristics. He was thinking, and the wild folk do not do that, as a rule, as easily as we do.

Finally Fangs burst away like an unleashed greyhound, at that effortless, lithe lope that can run down any beast that lives in the end. His point was the lake, and his idea was that to gallop round the shore thereof must mean to cross the trail of every deer that had gone down to drink.

But there was no water on that lake. Only a virgin white level sheet—snow upon ice, nothing but ice. Even the big wild swans, those last of all wildfowl almost to give up the battle against ice, had gone. Nothing anywhere but glaring, blinding white, unsullied even by the shadowy pockmarks of deers' footprints—nothing, though Fangs half encircled the lake at a hand gallop before the full truth sunk into him and he stopped.

Whither now?

Things were becoming serious. The moon, cynically aloof, hung unwinking in the dome of night, lighting all, showing up the frozen terror of it. A great eagle-owl was already booming in the forest depths. The cold, intense enough before, had grown terrifying to any not like Fangs, whose thick woolly underpelt defied what would have frozen mere man. The pack would be awake, or waking—listening for his rally call. And it had not come. He could not give it—dare not. He had found no trail to hunt. They expected him to find one. He was a leader and must produce what was wanted—must. His duty was to please at all costs!

Fangs turned swiftly where he stood, grim as sculptured coal, upon the blinding white. A taint had floated from that way.

Snff! Snff! What was it?

Bear. Brown bear.

Half an hour later, just as it began to snow again hard, and the moon jeered and fled at intervals, Fangs, all smudged and spotted with black and white, trotted unconcernedly out from among the indistinct tree boles bang into the middle of the pack.

The pack was not unconcerned at all. It was looking for its leader. It was quite silent in the process, but the inner wolf inside every hollow gaunt beast was not silent. "Food! Food! Food!" was the demand, and Fangs was expected to find it, since none of the other scouts had.

Fangs, with woolly head up and very red tongue lolling, looked at his followers with his shrewd, intelligent dog's eyes, and calculated perhaps how long they would likely be before they tried to eat him. And as he did so a head and a brush and a pelt stretched drum-fashion, that had been a she wolf and was now a she devil, walked up and sniffed Fangs' long, lean, immensely powerful—twice as powerful as the biggest hound's—jaws. She was cross-examining him, finding out for herself what, if anything, he had been eating on his own. She could do that.

Pack law, though cruel, guards the female. But if one of Fang's male companions had dared he would have remembered it ever afterwards.

Then the she skeleton set back her wicked thin ears. Then the pack, here and there, mostly those in the background, snarled. Then Fangs bristled and trod stiffly, his polished long canines shining against his dark coat like knives. He had a head, that old beast. Undoubtedly he must have been not young. He showed temper. Then—then, as one who condescends, he led the pack off to the food he had found, such as it was.

But I like to think of Fangs' cunning; it was so arch. Away through the forest he sped them like a hurrying silent gray cloud—but not toward the lake, not then. He took them his own old trail from sunset, cutting into it where he had chivied the lynx.

The lynx had come down long since, and was not far away in what is called "a forest open", stalking a mink—it may have been a sable, but at least it looked like a mink—and the first the pack knew of the lynx was seeing him explode out of the snow over which he bounded and bounded and bobbed upon his disproportionately huge legs for all the world like some great rubber ball. But if there was one thing about that lynx more arresting than his swathed limbs, it was his dazzling, his stupefying speed. The wolves could move some, and they did. But the lynx did not so much seem to move as to be gone.

There was a gathering together, almost without stopping, of two or three about the mink; but the main pack literally laid itself out flat to catch that lynx in the two hundred yards he had to go to reach the trees, and—he left them behind! He was a true cat, heading the bill as a sprinter, but his bolt was soon shot. He went up a tree at last.

Then an odd thing happened. The wolves bayed him in the wrong tree! They gathered at the foot of a tree he was not in. A man, of course, could have made him out with difficulty, motionless up another tree. The wolves could not with either eyes or nose, which shows their limits.

But even wild animals, whose patience would have turned Job giddy, can not sit for ever at the foot of a tree idiotically looking up at a dinner that is not there, and they turned away at last, snarling and vicious—the females especially—to settle accounts with a leader who had failed to produce results and had led them too long apparently, but Fangs was not there.

Still, Fangs must have been desperate anyway. Even leaders may not like starving, you know. Else it is not likely that he would have risked what he did then.

Nosing and sniffing away from the pack—oh, no. He could not give them the slip, not with their speed and those noses—through the still depths of the limitless forest, where the only sounds were the sudden crackling crash of a branch collapsing under its dead weight of snow. Fangs presently arrived back at a frozen river by the lake, and followed it. His hazy notion may apparently have been that deer might have come there for the drink that was not, but he found only a snaky, lithe ermine, who swore at him obscenely from a hole. On the other hand, I personally suspect that he remembered that taint of bear. Soon, he found also what had been a swamp, and seeking about in its dimmest, grimmest depths, all among the chaos of brushwood and brier tangle, for sleeping fox, hare, or lemming, he suddenly found himself precipitated through a tangle that had looked safe enough, headlong into a hollow.

The hollow was confined; the hollow was hidden, and matted over the top; the hollow was half full of dead leaves, and—*ough!*—the other half of—*bear!* The bear was not dead, only asleep for the winter. At least, he was asleep for the winter if no one was fool enough to wake him up—in which latter event he would be awake, and that some one would know it.

That some one, in the shape of old

Fangs, however, did not wait to know it. He just kicked off with his lean strong hind legs from that bear's tummy in time, and the rest was mainly a wild scramble, falling snow lumps, crashing of twigs and much bad language on the part of the bear.

Fangs said nothing, mainly perhaps because he had no time. He was glad enough to escape from that company with his life. And not till he had stroked half a mile through the snowclad forest did it strike him that he was not followed, and that he was still unfortunately leader of that infernal pack. Nor could he resign. There are no "has beens" in wolf packs. The only pension they get is death.

Wherefore old Fangs began to think. He sat down and scratched to think—a personal eccentricity of his, I guess too—and his breath steamed on the air as he did so. Only his woolly under fur kept him from freezing where he sat.

Then he lifted up his nose, also his voice, and howled. He ought to have been killed for that howl alone. All the regret, all the misery, all the loneliness, all the hopeless longing of a naked soul lost in the frozen spaces of time were expressed in that howl.

But it called the pack. Fangs knew it would. It was the rally cry, and the pack came racing through the white fog of the falling snow flakes like gray shadows.

Fangs did not wait; nor did he explain; but leapt away at their head, swift as a cloud shadow, racing at full speed—and full speed with a wolf is a thing to make you blink—straight back on his own tracks to the pit den of the hibernating bear. Into the swamp he crashed, through the clogging tangle—with the pack racing at full speed close behind, remember.

Wild with excitement and famine, headlong at the underbrush masking the bear den he raced, into the cover and, with one frantic convulsing leap—over the hollow! But the pack crashed through behind him, and—in.

Those who did not were lucky, because Bruin hates to be disturbed, and showed it—*bash! smash! crash!* And with each bash or crash or smash—a wolf. At least, a wolf might crawl away after being smitten by those huge-clawed paws, but it was not likely. Bruin is a one punch fighter, as a rule.

Then broke loose red chaos.

Half the pack, that half in the hollow fought everybody, though the bear chiefly, because they did not see any immediate way out. The other half fought—and ate, be it whispered—such members of the first half as did manage to drag themselves out. And, finally, the whole of the survivors fell upon what was left of the bear—he happened to be a small one—and, after a prolonged struggle—in which old Fangs took care to take the bear from the rear—ate him too.

Then did Fangs cock his tail, erect his hackles, and strut up and down the field of victory. He was leader now. His rivals, those who followed closest behind him in the hunt, had been the first to be killed. But fate had played prettily into the old rascal's paws, don't you think?

FIREWORKS

By MALCOLM WHEELER-NICHOLSON

CHAPTER I

"STRAIGHTEN OUT THAT TROOP!"

THE CAMP sprawled out in the Texas sun, somnolent, dispirited and dead to all outward appearance. On the picket line the horses of the troop stood, heads down, lifeless, almost lacking energy to switch their tails against the flies.

The place was filled with flies. They were almost the only active signs of life to be seen. They buzzed in a steady humming chorus over the kitchens, the picket lines and the carelessly covered refuse pits.

Near the picket line a stack of baled hay furnished the only shade in the camp. Huddled into its shelter were several men in khaki. They talked together in low tones as they gazed bitterly out over the shimmering heat waves that rose and quivered above the bare brown mesa.

"My hitch is damn' near up—two months to go—and oh boy! Will I go?" a red headed, freckle faced youth declaimed with fervor.

"Two months! You lucky son of a sea cook! Me, I got a whole year to put in yet; I dunno how I'm goin' to stick it out," mourned a lanky boy with a shock of mustard colored hair.

The sharp blast of a whistle shrilled from the far end of camp.

Tense silence fell on the group. The whistle blew again, stridently, impatiently. One nervous soldier started to rise.

"Sit down!" growled his companions. "It's only the top lookin' for a detail to unload forage. Leave him alone; he'll grab a gang o' them hunky recruits."

The first sergeant walked to the nearest tents and kicked out several sleepy men.

"Come on Palooski, Kobotschick and the rest o' you lousy foreigners, get on that forage wagon and unload it. Step out!"

The foreign legion stepped out, not knowing as yet the approved manner of avoiding annoying fatigue details. It spit on its hands and wrestled forage.

The group of native born *intelligentsia* in the shade of the baled hay relaxed into comfort again, as befitted men

A Novelette of the Cavalry Border Patrol, in which Major Davies arranges a Fourth of July celebration for Mexican marauders

who had won surcease from toil by the exercise of superior acumen.

"The top will be back poundin' his ear in five minutes by the clock," announced the red haired youth.

"You said it. I never see such a feller for bunk fatigue," agreed some one.

" 'Cept the lootenant," amended the red haired youth. "He's a bear at blanket drill. I'll bet he ain't been in camp today yet."

"Oh, him! That guy has his shoes nailed to his room. He don't aim to weary himself none walkin' all the way across town in the heat o' the afternoon."

"Lucky stiff, it sure must be fine to be a officer," a voice sighed in gentle envy.

"Bein' his kind of an officer don't result in much wear and tear on the system." The red haired man rubbed a five days' growth of stubble, pinkish whiskers which curled in riotous confusion over his otherwise youthful features. "Sometimes that guy don't even sign the morning report for two-three days at a time. Pretty soft!"

"Pretty soft!" echoed the crowd.

"Pretty soft, all right," a leather faced sergeant spoke up, knocking the ashes out of his pipe. "All the samee it's gettin' too damn' soft. I'm aimin' to transfer outa this outfit."

"How come?" Every one looked at him in surprise. "It's pretty blame' easy around here, nothin' to do but sit on your tail."

"Yeah. I seen these easy outfits before; they generally ends up in a big hurrah for everybody concerned and the air full o' courts martial and innocent bystanders gettin' hurt. No, sirree, I aim to put in for transfer to M Troop."

"M Troop!" Every one looked at him for explanation.

"Yeah!" The sergeant was half defiant. "I know what you're thinkin'; that guy Davies 'll work the pants offen me. Mebbe so, mebbe so. He's a hard guy. But believe me, I been in this man's Army a few hitches. I'll take the hard work and know where I stand rather than sit around on my tail under one o' these here sleep hyenas. Workin' for a sleep hound don't get you nowheres."

"But listen here, Carter. You don't mean to tell me you aim to leave this soft

and glorious life o' ease and sashay over to M Troop where like as not they'll have you out drillin' by moonlight?" The red haired youth was earnestly seeking information.

"I mean just that. I ain't aimin' to stick around here no longer than what I have to. I'll be gettin' this sleepin' sickness first thing I know and where in hell would I be then? Up the crick a mile without a paddle."

"Well, all I can say is, you sure are loonier than a jaybird." The red haired youth was explicit.

"I may be loonier than a jaybird, Hassfurther, but kid, I've had my nose in the old Army feed bag too long to let 'em fool me. Why supposin' this greaser Sanazar comes lopin' in here some fine night, which he's blame likely to do from all accounts. What happens? You know what'll happen? Mr. Sleepy Lieutenant Ferguson is poundin' his ear way down t'other end o' town. There ain't no guards out. Mr. Greaser Sanazar shoots us up, steals a few horses and slides out stickin' his thumb to his nose at the U. S. Calvary. Me, I don't aim to be mixed up in such doin's at my time of life, not on your tintype, I don't. I ain't aimin' to put in any requisitions to the supply sergeant what issues wings and harps yet awhile. I'll let a few of you wise young fellows try your hand at that!"

Sergeant Carter rose and stretched and sauntered away.

"GEEZ, what a calamity howler that guy is gettin' to be!" some one remarked.

"He sure can pull a long face."

"He's sadder lookin' than a doughboy adjutant's horse."

"All the same," the red haired Hassfurther spoke up, "what in hell would happen if Sanazar should take a notion to jump us?"

"You sure can count on one thing, ain't nothin' goin' to happen around this dead dump; we'd ought to pass around the hat and pay old Sanazar to start some fireworks."

Hassfurther chuckled. A grin went round the group.

"You said it; me, I'm goin' to hunt up some excitement. Anybody wanta hop the freight with me tonight and head for El Paso?"

"Sure. I'll go. Count me in," several voices spoke up.

"I'd go with you but I sure as hell lost my hind legs playin' stud poker with the top kick last night. The way that baby turned up aces in the hole was sinful. He won eight bucks offa me just like that!" The lank youth with the mustard colored hair was gloomy.

"And me, I passed over ten bucks without a whimper. I'm stayin' around till payday," another one added.

"Maybe you guys will get next to yourselves and lay off that top kick. He must 'a' cleaned up four- five-hundred bucks from you sons a gamboleers this month."

Hassfurther was scornful. A gloomy silence greeted his strictures.

"Well, as the Good Book says, the sound of a fool partin' from his money is like the cracklin' of thorns under a pot," he continued.

"It was the last pot done it to me," the lank youth with the mustard colored hair reminisced sadly. "Two kings showin', I had, and one in the hole, and he ups and connects with a measly little straight—"

"Straight, you says, straight? It might 'a' been straight at that," Hassfurther remarked as one in deep thought.

The rest of the men looked at him obliquely.

"You ain't insinuatin'?"

"Insinuatin'? Me?" The red haired one was guilelessness itself. "I wouldn't insinuate nothin', nor cast conspersions on the lily white character of our noble top kick who always wins—and always uses his own deck o' cards," he added innocently.

There was an uncomfortable silence. Some one finally cleared his throat.

"You goin' to El Paso tonight?"

"On the freight that slides through here at six-thirty."

"You gotta pass?" he was questioned.

"No, foolish, I ain't gotta pass and furthermore I ain't goin' to get one. The lootenant don't know whether we're here or climbin' the North Pole."

"And don't give a damn."

"No, nor don't give a damn."

"Well, I'm goin' with you, if you'll trust me with two bucks until payday."

The lanky youth with the mustard colored hair rose hopefully. Hassfurther nodded.

"I sure can't stand this lousy dump another night. Nothin' to do but sleep," went on the lanky one. "Boy! I'm that ahead on sleep I could scratch along for the next ten years without once hittin' the bunk. And believe me, I'm plumb anxious to get away from the goofy-eyed codfish that inhabits this berg. Take it from me, it's a strain on the nerves havin' to stand all the unfriendly looks a soldier gets around here. Why! Them God-awful bohunks looks at a soldier like he was some kinda moral leper."

"Which he is," remarked Hassfurther sagely. "At the same time its no use rubbin' it in. The people around this town is frostier than a top kick's eye. The milk o' human kindness has sure curdled to vinegar around this neck of the woods."

"How'd they get that way?"

"Search me. We ain't done any burnin' or slayin' as I knows of."

"It's the cowpunchers that don't like us."

"They're a bunch of flat tires," Hassfurther snorted.

"All the same I don't wanna get one of 'em unlimberin' his gat and usin' me for a bull's eye. They're pretty quick on the trigger, them guys. Did you hear they warned Sergeant Redd to lay off that biscuit shooter down to the railroad eatin' house?"

"No?"

"Yep. That guy with the round face and the cute black mustache is the one. He told Redd he'd fill him full o' holes if he monkeyed around that girl."

"But ain't Redd aimin' to marry her?"

"Sure. So's this guy. And Redd has the inside track."

"Well where does this big bunch o' bologny in leather pants come in?"

"He's just aimin' to chase Redd away."

"What's Redd goin' to do about it?"

"I dunno. Liable to mix it up, I guess. This guy with the mustache claims he's a United States deputy marshal. Sports a tin badge around. Claims he can arrest Redd and put him in the jug any time he wants."

"Well, can't the lootenant do somepen for Redd?" Hassfurther was perturbed. "Seems as if a officer in the Army could spring his rank on a deputy marshal."

"Oh him—" again there was that disgusted lift of the shoulders— "Redd's been to see the lootenant. Ferguson chases him away, cussin' him out for disturbin' his rest. It was three o'clock in the afternoon at that."

The men shook their heads.

Hassfurther heaved himself up.

"The lootenant ain't sacrificin' none of his beauty sleep for no lousy sergeant. I don't know as I blame him at that. After all, as the Good Book says, all is vanity and full o' bum spirits and there's little worth losin' sleep over. I'm goin' to mosey along down and shoot a game of pool. Anybody wanna come along?"

There were three volunteers. They picked their way through the camp, down the town's one street. As they approached the pool parlor they heard a sudden fusillade of shots followed by laughter and wild yells. Speeding up their progress they pushed open the door and stood transfixed at what they saw inside.

A SOLDIER, one of the recruits, judging by the oversize breeches which flapped about his knees, a worried looking youth whose broad features showed his Slavic ancestry, was hopping desperately and seriously up and down in some sort of a weird attempt at a dance in the center of the pool hall floor.

Standing a few feet away was a cowpuncher in leather chaps and Stetson hat,

a nickel plated, pearl handled revolver smoking in his hand.

"Faster!" exhorted the cowpuncher, and fired the revolver again, the bullet zipping close to the stamping feet of the perspiring and worried looking soldiers.

The cowpuncher was broad faced and black eyed. He wore a small black mustache, the ends of which were waxed carefully into tiny points.

Hassfurther and his friends faded silently out of the picture, closing the door after them without being seen.

"The blankety blank blank!" Hassfurther growled deep in his throat.

"The blankety blank blank!" echoed his friends.

The three avoided looking into one another's eyes. They had all the air of men taking a licking and not particularly enjoying it.

"Somebody ought to trim that guy into mincemeat!" asserted Hassfurther, his voice louder as the trio increased the distance between them and the pool hall.

"Somebody sure ought!" echoed his friends.

The three plodded along in silence. Suddenly they straightened up. Advancing along the road toward them came an officer, a pudgy, round barreled, little officer, a suspicion of a double chin beginning to show above the collar of his O.D. shirt. Ferguson was sallow skinned and pimply and ran rather to knock knees. Not by any stretch of imagination could Lieutenant Ferguson have been called the *beau ideal* of a *beau sabreur*. The three soldiers saluted. Hassfurther stiffened with sudden resolution.

"Lootenant," he reported, "there's a gang o' cowpunchers down there in the pool hall shootin' at the feet of one o' our men, makin' him dance. That had oughta be stopped, Lootenant."

Hassfurther waited.

"What? What? What?" Ferguson was annoyed; he glanced toward the pool hall.

Another fusillade of shots came from its depths. Ferguson turned away a little worried and apprehensive looking.

"I'm sure I don't know—" his brow cleared. "Oh, they won't hurt him, it's just a little harmless fun," and Ferguson, relieved that he had solved the question, hurried on, looking as one looks who has immense and important affairs elsewhere, affairs that brook not a second's delay.

"Can you beat it?" Hassfurther looked after him, immense contempt in his face.

"Can you beat it?" echoed his friends. The three continued gloomily upon their way.

THERE was silence for several hundred yards. Finally one of them spoke up hopefully, a sidelong glance at Hassfurther.

"It's blame near supper time," he hinted. "They got some wonderful tasty blackberry pie at the railroad eatin' house."

"I'll set 'em up," returned Hassfurther gloomily. "Damn' if I can stand that garbage the cooks is turning out nowadays."

"Ain't it awful?" agreed his friends.

There was noticeable about them a new lightsomeness of mien. It was as if they had shaken off the miseries of the past and turned hopefully to the future.

"Them cooks sure ought to be lined up and shot," they complained, striding manfully into the eating house and seating themselves at the counter.

"It ain't the fault of the cooks," asserted Hassfurther.

"No, I guess it ain't."

The two friends were agreeable to anything he said as long as the pie and coffee were forthcoming.

"No, it's that lousy mess sergeant." Hassfurther bit deeply into the dark and mysterious pie and rose for air, his mouth stained a sanguinary purplish black. "He's playin' stud poker with the top kick and losin' his shirt *and* pants every night."

"Every night," agreed his friends, showing absolutely no mercy to the pie.

"I think he's spendin' mess funds on his rotten stud poker, that's what *I* think!" Hassfurther's voice was as serious

as a man's voice can be when impeded with about half a large and generous slice of blackberry pie.

"You don't say!" The two friends nodded solemnly. "I believe he's right at that," stated one of them to the other, his voice awestricken.

"Course he's right!" The other one stabbed the last morsel of pie on his fork and let it trickle ecstatically down his throat. "Of course he's right!" he asserted stoutly, wondering would Hassfurther order seconds on the pie.

Hassfurther did. The comely waitress obliged. There was silence for a space.

"You sure do hit the nail on the head," one of the friends stated admiringly, as he gulped down half the cup of coffee at his elbow.

"I always said Pinky Hassfurther had a head on his shoulders," chimed in the other. " 'Member my tellin' you that first time ever I see him, 'That boy's nobody's fool' I said," and he proceeded to get outside of a big forkful of the second slice of pie.

"But somethin' ought to be done about it," asserted Hassfurther. "That's Government money that guy is blowin' in, robbin' honest soldiers of their chow."

"Somethin' sure ought to be done about it," agreed the friends in unison, wiping their mouths.

"There's ways of fixin' birds like that," asserted Hassfurther darkly.

"Your damn' tootin' there's ways of fixin' birds like that," agreed the duo. "Count us in on anything you start," they volunteered.

Tacitly, the three avoided mentioning the scene uppermost in their minds, the sight of a cavalry soldier dancing fearsomely for the contemptuous amusement of a group of cowpunchers back in the pool hall.

"If that lieutenant of ourn was worth a hurrah in hell he'd fix him," Hassfurther declaimed, his tone disgusted.

"That baby is the world's worst fixer," asserted one of his friends.

"The world's worst," agreed the other.

Hassfurther paid the bill to the waitress. The three silently admired the calm eyed and clear skinned girl who moved with such quiet capable grace among the dishes and pots and pans.

"She sure is easy on the eyes, that girl," admitted Hassfurther as they passed outside.

"Ain't it the truth!" sighed the other two.

THAT night, long after Pinky Hassfurther and his friend had boarded the train, long after the camp had sunk into slumber, two shadows on the moonlit mesa crawled toward the picket line. There was no one to report their presence in camp in spite of the fact that they were Mexicans and had no business in that camp at that or any other time.

The two, after cautiously surveying the sleeping camp, rose to their feet and stole silently about, peering into tents and cook shack until they had made the rounds of the place. As silently as they had come, did they withdraw, flitting like shadows back on to the mesa where in the shelter of a dry arroyo their horses were tethered. Mounting, they put their animals into an easy lope, heading toward the Rio Grande.

"It will be an undertaking of the greatest ease," stated the taller Mexican, twisting his mustache very bravely. "*Madre de Dios*, they must be drunk at all times. There was not a single man on guard."

"Not one of the gringo scoundrels to see us," marveled the other.

"Sanazar will be very happy at our news," stated the first.

"Very happy," echoed the second.

IT WAS four o'clock in the afternoon down at Fort Bliss, some ninety miles away. Stable call had gone and men were busy at the grooming. At the far end of the rows of picket lines, picket lines belonging to the other two squadrons of the regiment, First Lieutenant Davies walked around his horses, talking with the newly joined second lieutenant fresh in from the Point that week.

An orderly rode up, dismounted and saluted.

"Commanding Officer's compliments and he wants to see Lieutenant Davies at headquarters as quick as he can get there."

Trying not to look perturbed, Davies strode toward headquarters. To be easy in his mind on the receipt of such a message is not in the make up of the normal lieutenant. Walking toward headquarters, Davies mentally reviewed all of his actions for the past few days. He couldn't remember anything in particular that should entitle him to a private and personal dressing down by the Old Man himself. But then, Colonel Frank North didn't need anything in particular to incite him to the exercise of a colonel's inalienable right to land on any and every lieutenant in the regiment.

It was therefore with outward composure but with much inward perturbation that the tall lieutenant stalked into the colonel's office, drew himself up smartly before the desk and saluted the frosty eyed, gray haired old man whose white mustaches curled belligerently like the whiskers of an angry tomcat.

"Takes you a hell of a while to get over to my office when I send for you!" The voice was high pitched and querulous.

"I walked over instantly on receipt of the message, Colonel," explained Davies, knowing that this was the Old Man's invariable prelude to anything.

"That damn', lunk headed, splay footed orderly probably stopped on the way over, married and raised a whole family," complained the colonel. "It would be just like him. Why you officers of the day always pick the most vacant minded imbecile on guard to be the colonel's orderly I don't know, but you do it every time; I'll begin to court martial some of these half wit orderlies and maybe I'll get some service."

Davies listened patiently. The colonel was always threatening dire and awful courts martial to all and sundry, whereas the whole regiment knew that the Old Man would rather cut off his right hand than sign a set of charges against any one, officer or man.

"Now look here, Davies—" the colonel waved him to a chair—"I'm picking you for this job because you happen to be available, not that you're any better than the rest of these giddy lieutenants around this regiment." The Old Man glared and twisted his mustache fiercely. "Trying to run a regiment with the sort of officers I have wished on me is heart breaking work, positively and absolutely heart breaking," his high pitched voice went on complaining. "Take that fellow Ferguson up the line, commanding C Troop. What in the name of ten thousand, pink eyed rat terriers he's trying to do up there I don't know, but, by God, I'm going to know damn' soon!"

The Old Man pounded on the desk. This was Davies' cue.

Leaning forward he pounded on the desk just as emphatically.

"Colonel—" he raised his voice—"I don't know a damn' thing about Ferguson; I'm not responsible for Ferguson; and I don't see what the hell Ferguson has to do with me and my work anyway."

The colonel leaned back, stroking his mustaches, a pleased look in his eye. If there was one thing the Old Man loved it was to have an officer with guts enough to pound one side of the desk while he hammered the other. Davies was one of the few officers who had learned the joy that this caused the old fire eater and regularly, at least once a week, he hammered his way through a conference with the old boy.

"Well, by God, you make it your business to find out about Ferguson, d'you understand? *You make it your business to find out about Ferguson* and don't waste any time doing it, d'you understand? And when I say don't waste any time about it I mean just that; I mean you hop a train from El Paso in three-quarters of an hour and get the hell up there and take over Ferguson's troop and send Ferguson back here in arrest. No questions. You straighten out that troop and don't waste any time doing it! I don't care what you

do to 'em, slaughter 'em, crucify 'em, but straighten 'em out, d'you understand? They'll have this bandit Sanazar hopping in on 'em first thing they know and disgrace the regiment. He's on the warpath again. No questions!" He glared fiercely although Davies had not opened his mouth. "Take my buckboard and mule team and go by the bachelor building and get your bedding roll; that's all, d'you understand?"

The colonel waved him away as if he had the plague. Davies saluted and strode to the door.

"Here," the colonel called to him again, his voice even gruffer, "there's no dining car on that blankety blank jerkwater train, so I told my wife to put you up some supper in a basket; you'll find it on the seat of the buckboard; goo'by," and the colonel plunged into his papers as if fearful of having to listen to further words.

Davies went out chuckling to himself. That last touch was so typical of the Old Man.

CHAPTER II

YOU'RE IN THE ARMY NOW

"He may be the world to his mother,
But he's a pain in the neck to me."

SO CAROLED Pinky Hassfurther, engaged in divesting potatoes of their tenacious outer wrappings. Incidentally, as any good mess sergeant would have remarked, Pinky was slicing away far too much of the potato's inner and spiritual grace to serve the best interests of economical troop administration.

"But he's a pain in the neck to me!" repeated Pinky.

Came one Saunders, sad eyed as a hound dog, and listened.

"Them's words, only words, Pinky," reproved Saunders.

"What did ya think they was, turnips?" retorted Pinky, unperturbed.

"How many days K. P. did he hand you?" Saunders was mildly curious.

"Days? You said days? Boy, I don't measure it in days nor weeks. I've took to measuring it in spuds. My figgerin' runs it about two carloads of these here pestiferous and monotonous tubers before I go back to a life of ease and luxury, manicuring horses and drillin' my guts out."

"But you kinda had it comin' to you," expostulated Saunders mildly. "Wasn't you pretty well steamed up when you come back A. W. O. Loose?"

"I'll tell the cock eyed world I was steamed up!" There was a note of pride in Pinky's voice, the note of pride natural to a man who has seen his duty and done it. "Not only was I steamed up but I was oary eyed, stinkin' drunk, walkin' high *and* frequent and steppin' on my left ear with my right hind foot. Yea, bo, if I do say it as shouldn't, I kinda done myself proud."

"So you only got what was comin' to you?" pressed the literal minded Saunders, with a dry, Scotch meticulousness that could be annoying on occasion.

"I kinda got everything that was comin' to everybody around here."

For the first time Pinky's voice held a slight note of grievance, a note of disapprobation, the complaint of a man who has been slightly put upon and, Atlas-like, bears a heavy weight upon his shoulders.

"How do you figger that out?"

"How do I figger that out?"

Pinky's voice became indignant. He put down the potato knife. A warning growl came from inside the cook shack. Pinky picked up the knife again and began to labor.

"How do I figger that out? You know how I figger *that* out. You know what's been goin' on around this dump for the last few months. I didn't do nothin' more than anybody else has been doing before this bunch of firecrackers, this new lootenant lands on us like a ton of bricks, all primed up with wim, wigor *and* witality. I just slips away quietlike, not botherin' nobody and laps up a couple o' quarts o' giggle gargle and comes sashayin' back, still not payin' no attention to nobody and runs smack into the

new lootenant as he steps off the train.

" 'How come you got so beastly drunk?' he asks, mild and friendly.

" 'Lootenant,' I says, dignified, 'I ain't beastly drunk.'

" 'What's your idea of a man's actions when he *is* beastly drunk,' asks the lootenant.

" 'Nobody ain't beastly drunk, Lootenant,' I says, very respectful, 'so long as he can hit the floor with his hat,' I says.

" '*Is* that so,' says the lootenant, kind of musin' like, 'let's see you do it,' he says.

"Well, sir, I takes off my hat and heaves it and believe me or not if that damn' hat don't land wrong side up atop of one o' them no account baggage trucks they push the trunks around with.

" 'Looks like you lose,' says the lootenant, 'but I'll be easy with you,' he says. 'I'll only give you six weeks kitchen police,' he says."

"Six weeks kitchen police, Je-e-roo-s-al-a-a-am the Golden!" breathed Saunders in awe. "That baby don't bear down hard, does he?"

"No, *he* don't bear down hard. He just kinda leans his whole weight down and then gets a pile driver to help give an extra shove. I says to him, 'Thanks for bein' easy with me, Lootenant,' I says. 'Excuse me, Lootenant,' I says, 'I sure would hate to meet up with you when you ain't easy,' I says. He cocks his eye at me, kinda funny.

" 'Don't,' he says."

"Six weeks." There was awe in Saunders' voice. "He sure is a bear on punishment."

"He's a lollapaloosa, he's a ring toed whozis, he's hell on wheels, is that guy."

Pinky shook his head despondently, studied the great stack of potatoes before him and picked up a fresh one from the pile, tackling it savagely.

"But he don't say much, that guy," remarked Saunders thoughtfully.

"Sandy—" Pinky's voice was serious—"there ain't a subject under the sun about which that guy can't look wise and say nothin'. No, siree, it don't take many words to say six weeks K. P. but, oh, boy, what a Gawdawful bunch o' potatoes them words do mean!"

Saunders sat in thought for awhile.

"Poor old Tubby Ferguson looked kinda glum when he pulled out!" he remarked at last.

"He had a right to look glum. What they got waitin' for that boy ain't nothin' to look happy over." Pinky looked mysterious.

"How come? He didn't bother nobody. Just sashayed in once or twice a week and signed the mornin' report."

"You wait and see—" Pinky refused to divulge his information—"but believe me, this lad Davies'll do more than sign the mornin' report. If there was an afternoon and evenin' report he'd be there signin' with both hands and feet in addition to botherin' his head about everythin' else in sight. He sure is one busy guy."

"Yeh, he sure is afflicted with energy and twitchin' with ambitions to get things done."

"You said it, bo, that guy Davies works with both hands and his head all goin' at once. He's ambidamdextrous, that guy, and I ain't meaning perhaps."

"Wha'd' you think is goin' to happen around here?"

"Don't you worry none about things happenin' around here. Things will be comin' your way from all directions to onct, like you was a cat tryin' out your voice on the backyard fence. That guy Davies is goin' to set off fireworks around here, and don't you forget it."

Saunders rose, sighing rather wistfully.

"Well, I wisht he'd go back from where he come from; he don't make much of a hit with me," he confessed, and lumbered away.

THIS somewhat unfavorable estimate of the newly arrived troop commander came not only from the cook shack, but echoes rose from the picket line, from the farriers' tent and from the orderly tent. The name

"Fireworks" was applied to him. The chorus of disapprobation rose steadily from the cavalry camp, the burden of its chorus being—

"Everything was going along all right and now this guy comes along raisin' hell."

And Davies, being really a sensitive soul, felt the lowering disapproval with which his troop regarded him and sighed a little over it. But, all the same, he sat alone in his tent that night, thinking up new outrages to perpetrate upon his new outfit in the morning.

The evening before, as he had stepped off the train, a red haired private considerably the worse for wear, had lurched into him as he looked about for the way to camp. Unabashed, the red haired private aforesaid collected his wandering wits and had attempted to right matters by asking, out of a clear sky, for a loan until next payday. And out of the same clear sky the inebriated red haired private had received six weeks' kitchen fatigue.

This first introduction to Davies' new command had scarcely time to register before he received a second shock, the camp of his new organization. Lugging his suitcase into the untidy confines of the camp, Davies looked it over with a baleful eye. It was just plain dirty and no other word could adequately describe it. Moreover, it spread itself over thrice the area that it should have occupied. Last and worst of all, it was so situated as to be at the mercy of any wandering band of bandits who wished to attack, being huddled at the base of a long, sloping hill from the top of which any one could have fired into the defenseless place with complete immunity from return fire.

After considerable delay a first sergeant, Banniston, had slouched up, his hands in his pockets, a week's growth of beard on his cheeks, the collar of his half unbuttoned, olive drab shirt thick with ancient grease and grime and sweat. As if he felt and resented the contrast of his down at the heels appearance with the fresh, neat trimness of the officer before him, Banniston was vaguely surly. After a half hearted salute, his hands went back into his pockets, his figure sagged from attention, he leaned negligently against the nearest support, an escort wagon wheel. The few soldiers to be seen about stood afar off and stared and whispered together.

These matters were of small moment compared to the picket line. Righteous rage pervaded Davies' soul as he inspected the horses.

"A cavalry outfit!" he fumed inwardly as he saw five very conspicuous sore backs showing up white with suppuration against the golden backs of the sorrel troop horses.

And the shoeing was in execrable shape —nine cast shoes, six wafer thin plates hanging on by the grace of heaven and a worn nail, and four horses barefoot all around! Nineteen horses that could scarcely travel half a mile from camp without going lame!

"Where's your horseshoer?" Davies kept his voice calm.

"A. W. O. L.," Sergeant Banniston replied carelessly.

Somewhere in the lieutenant's inner consciousness there registered the fact that the sergeant had neglected the customary "sir" in speaking to his commanding officer. But the absence of military respect, salutes, standing at attention saying "sir", all the little things so vastly important to little men, registered scarcely at all in Davies' mind, compared to the lack of a much greater thing, the obvious inability of this particular troop of cavalry to take the field with its full strength of horses.

"How many men are absent without leave, Sergeant?"

"Seven or eight."

Banniston was vague. Davies frowned. If there is one man in an outfit who should not be vague it is the first sergeant.

"Have you any one else in the troop who can shoe horses?"

"I don't know."

A devasting rejoinder leapt to Davies' lips but got no farther. Long ago he had

figured out that it wasn't a sporting proposition to lose his temper against men who would incur a court martial by replying in kind. But his hands trembled a little as he quietly took a sack of tobacco from his pocket, untwisted the string with his teeth, slipped out a rectangular piece of brown paper, dribbled a sufficiency of the tobacco flakes into the paper, twisted the combination into a long cylinder, wet it, lighted it and took a long puff.

"You are first sergeant of this troop?" he asked mildly.

"Yes."

"As first sergeant you have access to the descriptive lists of all the men?"

"Y-e-es."

"It isn't a difficult matter to find out from them what men have been instructed as horseshoers?"

"No-o."

"I would suggest, Sergeant—" Davies enunciated each word very clearly—"that you do that at the very first opportunity."

"Very well—sir." The "sir" came fumblingly and haltingly but it had come at last.

As if regretting his temporary lapse into the outward form of military courtesy, Banniston leaned even more heavily against the wagon wheel and glowered even more sullenly.

"I wish, Sergeant, that you would immediately see to the shoeing of those horses; find a man in the troop who can shoe and start him in at once, giving him all the help you can."

It was more of a request than an order. Men who knew Davies were accustomed to his polite way of giving orders couched in the form of personal requests.

Banniston didn't know Davies.

"That's the stable sergeant's job," he mumbled. "I got enough things to do around this troop without takin' over his duties."

There is a point beyond which forebearance ceases to be a virtue and becomes a weakness. When that point is reached the officer who possesses qualities of leadership above and beyond those automatically conferred upon him by act of Congress moves swiftly to his appointed ends, making no outcry, indulging in no threats, nor wasting breath with vain words.

"Who is the second ranking duty sergeant of this troop?" Davies asked.

"Sergeant Carter."

"Call him here."

SERGEANT CARTER appeared, saluted and stood to attention.

"Sergeant Carter, you are hereby appointed first sergeant of this troop in place of Sergeant Banniston, relieved this date. You will assume your new duties immediately, your appointment being V.O.C.O. Make out a written order confirming it for the troop records by tomorrow. Turn out the troop immediately and find a man who can shoe horses."

Keeping such astonishment as he felt well concealed, Sergeant Carter saluted and hurried down the troop street, blowing on his whistle like mad. Men began to turn out in driblets of three or four slowly, unwillingly but obviously curious.

Sergeant Carter's voice rang out.

"I'm the new first sergeant o' this here troop by verbal order commanding officer. Get that?" he shouted. Some of the men nodded. "When I blow this here whistle I want every man in the troop to come a-runnin'—I mean you down there behind the hay, and you guys up there next the cook shack and you bums a-layin' in your tents. Come a-runnin' 'fore I come after and blast you forty ways for Sunday!"

Men suddenly began to appear seemingly from nowhere. What had been a silent and deserted camp pulsed suddenly into life. The foreign legion rubbed its eyes and marvelled at the unanimity with which every man in the troop turned out. It had become a fixed conviction with the foreign legion that only men by the name of Palooski and Kobotschick and such manner of jaw

breaking names had to answer the strident notes of that whistle.

As Sergeant Carter's voice roared through the camp, Davies turned to Banniston who waited sullenly for dismissal.

"Look here, Sergeant Banniston—" the officer's voice was crisp— "there are two things I require from non-commissioned officers. One is that they keep themselves neat, shaved and shorn at all times; the other is that they do not gamble with privates. Gambling with privates is to the prejudice of good order and military discipline which comes under the Ninety-Second Article of War. I'll have to try you by court martial and have you reduced to the ranks if it occurs again. That's all."

Sergeant Banniston, his eyes bulged out with astonishment, saluted and went away, wondering how in blazes this interloping lieutenant had found out so quickly his principle source of income.

Leading a particularly unsanitary looking private, Sergeant Carter returned.

"This here man, Johnson, has been through horseshoers' school, sir."

"All right, Johnson, you're elected. Lots of rasp and little knife and remember the good God gave the horse bars to his hoofs for a purpose. Come on with me; let's see you trim up a hoof for a cold shoe."

Together the three repaired to the picket line. Johnson bent to his task. Davies watched him for five minutes.

"You'll do," he nodded. "Give him all the help he needs, Sergeant." And the two left Johnson to his task and completed the inspection of the camp.

"It's pretty much of a stinking mess," commented Davies.

"Yes, sir, it's awful."

There was a new light in Sergeant Carter's eye. He was busy with notebook and pencil.

"Never mind taking those notes, Sergeant," advised Davies. "I'm going to have the whole camp moved."

Sergeant Carter's eye went swiftly up to the hilltop above them, that hilltop which dominated the camp so completely and was so excellently provided with cover wherein an enemy might fire away to his heart's content without fear of reprisal.

"It's about time, Lieutenant," he replied with grave approval.

THERE was a lineup of the troop for inspection at retreat. Davies walked quickly along the line of men, each soldier bringing his rifle to the position of inspection with a rattle and clatter of opening breech blocks. Picking a rifle here and there, Davies swung it out and away from the rank, sticking the tip of his finger into the breech so that its whiteness should reflect the light through the barrel. He said nothing until he finished. Then he halted in front of the center of the troop.

"There will be another inspection in exactly one hour by the clock. At that time I'll expect this mob of weary Willies to look like soldiers. Sergeant, my stomach is none too strong. Dismiss this gang of hoodlums and get them out of my sight and cleaned before I lose my lunch."

The men flushed darkly. Black looks followed Davies as he walked away.

Now there are some officers who start in easily with a new outfit, taking hold in a placating spirit and gradually tightening up. The result is that by the time they get the organization in running order, the good sentiment they have managed to engender by their mildness is lost in a wave of hatred and disillusionment. "He seemed like a pretty good guy when he first joined but look at the son of a son he turned out to be!" is the verdict on this system.

Davies reflected on his own method as he went to his tent. It was harder at the start but better at the finish. For he commenced taking over by bearing down as hard as the law and the regulations would allow. He knew that he had already gained a reputation as a hard boiled, mean souled pest of the deepest dye and that the troop looked upon him

with black disapproval. Knowing soldiers, he had no doubt that the wildest reflections were cast upon his ancestry, immediate and remote, and that probably the expression "that long legged son of a son" was the mildest epithet applied to him.

But he also knew that when he got down to an attitude of normal businesslike strictness the contrast with his first rearing, stamping appearance would make a reaction in his favor. "That guy is turnin' out pretty good," would be the verdict, and contentment would reign.

The second inspection was a sullen but more businesslike affair. Men had shaved, had polished up their shoes and the leather reinforcements to their leggings, had brushed their hats and, best of all, had their rifles and pistols in decent order.

"Keep this up," Davies informed them at the close of the inspection, "and there's some hope of your being as good as a newly organized militia troop." Which was interpreted somehow by the troop as commendation.

A shambling private brought Davies' supper, a greasy mess kit half full of hard soaked fried potatoes gone cold and repulsive. A cup of pale and anemic coffee completed the bill of fare.

A roar came from his tent. The shambling private hurriedly returned to the cook shack. There was an anxious consultation between the cooks and the mess sergeant. Another roar filled the air. The mess sergeant sped to Davies' tent. He returned to his mess shack on the run. The kitchen began to hum with wild and frenzied activity. The troop watched, eager and curious.

An hour later there was a second call for supper. The men lined up. Their mess kits were filled with meat balls, cunningly concocted with tender browned onions; there was steaming, fragrant rice with rich brown gravy; there were hot biscuits and butter and syrup and last and best of all, coffee with a soul and an aroma and a new self-respect.

The men, their belts comfortably unloosened after this, looked speculatively up toward Davies' silent tent but forebore comment.

"I've seen these nine day wonder lieutenants come and I seen 'em go like a flash in the pan; this guy Fireworks ain't no different," averred Sergeant Banniston darkly to his cronies.

Silence greeted his remarks.

"But gee, that sure was some supper we had tonight!" a voice commented in dreamy contentment. The silence continued.

ALONE up in his tent Davies, after fixing the few frugal belongings of an officer in the field, his cot and folding table and folding canvas wash basin, sat in his canvas chair, smoking and staring out somberly over the mesa, which was gilded by the last rays of the setting sun.

The sun is unkind to the Southwest. It is like a strong light on the face of an old woman of the streets. It shows up pitilessly every wrinkle and the discouragement of the sagging flesh. Its remorseless downpouring discovers harsh cruel coloring, smashing yellows and blotched reds. But when the dusk of evening draws a kindly veil over the illimitable, shimmering distances, the face of the Southwest becomes poignantly lovely past all imagining. The harsh yellows, the glaring whites and the blotched reds are dimmed to amethyst and violet; the wrinkles and arrogant rocky crags are softened by the lavender dusk of evening into haunting enchantment. Peace broods on the face of the mesa in a transparent mystery of softly changing light. The evenings are pale purple. The nights are silver, nights such as only the mesa can achieve when she bares her perfumed bosom to the moon's cold fire.

In the face of such beauty Davies found it hard to be morose and lonely, found it impossible to take too seriously the illy concealed hatred of his men.

Below him the town stretched out its gangling length. Far at its other edge

where the adobe huts of the Mexicans untidily cluttered up the ground, a guitar tinkled forth and a plaintive Mexican voice rose in the song of lament of an ancient Moorish king.

"Mansion de amores, celestial paraiso,"

thrilled the voice, rising high to the pulsing sorrow of the last line—

"De donde nunca, nunca jamas volvore."

So that the moon drenched mesa was sad with the sorrow of ancient things long passed away, sad with the sorrow of a long dead Moorish king bidding farewell for the last time to Granada the beautiful.

But there was no song sorrowful nor gay, rising from the dark tents of the camp ranged neatly in order. Men were silent and somber and no laugh was raised to break the stillness of the Southern night.

It is not good that soldiers should be silent and morose at the close of day. Davies went to bed sighing a little.

THERE was no sign of his melancholy the morning following. Tight lipped and stern, he commenced the day with an order that elicted fresh growls from the men.

"What the hell," they complained, "movin' the camp five hundred yards away. What's the good of that, anyway; we're all right where we are; there ain't nothin' the matter with this camp."

There wasn't much the matter with it except that it was sour with much neglect and much carelessness about the disposal of waste from picket lines and kitchens and latrines, and as a consequence all the flies in Texas had joyfully settled upon it as their headquarters. And Sergeant Carter along with one or two other old-timers knew that it was very unhealthily situated in the event of an attack.

Orders are orders, however much men may growl. All that day the soldiers toiled at digging new latrines and pits, at making a new picket line and moving their belongings from the old camp to the new. They drew a breath of relief as the new camp became habitable at last, only to have their hopes of a rest blasted by a new order making them return and police up the old abiding place, burying old refuse, covering up old manure and garbage with clean sweet earth and smoothing out the traces of man's untidy occupation.

Thoroughly tired out, the men crawled into their tents at an early hour, all of them except the non-commissioned officers. They were lined up, assigned in businesslike fashion to command squads and platoons and told in no unmistakable language to get on the job if they wanted to hold on to their chevrons.

"I may be seven different kinds of a double dashed fool," Davies informed them, "but I am not the particular dashed variety of fool who tries to command seventy men. My job is commanding three platoons. If I am forced to wipe the noses of each and every soldier and tuck them into their little beds at night, if I have to run around telling them to be good boys and keep themselves clean and ride their horses like little men and all the rest of the thousand and one things that soldiers are supposed to do, I don't have much time to do my own job. You are promoted and paid to look after your men and your horses. See that you do it. Dismissed!"

THE NEXT night at retreat they realized that the old easy days for corporals and sergeants were a thing of the past. For three men with dirty rifles and one man with a sand clogged pistol were not even reproved by Davies. But what he said to the platoon leaders of those men left little to the imagination. The uncomfortable non-coms left Davies' tent with their heads ringing like Chinese gongs with his parting shot.

"Chevrons aren't pinned on you by a grateful Government because you're good looking. They're put there to show your extra responsibility. Another exhibition like that of today and I'll put you back

where you'll only have one man to look after."

Pinky Hassfurther sang to himself as he sliced away at a mountain of potatoes.

"You're in the Army now;
You're not behind the plow.
You'll never get rich;
You'll never get rich;
You're in the Army now,"

sang Pinky lustily, performing a major operation on a particularly warty potato.

"And they're all gettin' theirs," he informed Saunders, "yea, bo, they're all gettin' theirs! Know what he told old fat Dutch Schneider? No? It was good! He says to him, he says, 'You turn out another meal like that,' he says, 'and I'll dump you in the garbage pit and your cock eyed chow in on top of you,' he says. 'It's a shame,' he says, 'to put a reinforced concrete butcher like you ruinin' good food,' he says. 'You'd ought to go back to the job you came from,' he says, 'drivin' piles in soft mud,' he says! Boy, it was rich!" And Pinky jubilantly threw a nude and shining potato into a waiting tub of water and picked up its twin brother, illustrating by his very jubilance the well known fact that misery loves company.

"At the same time—" Saunders' tone was weighty—"you don't get far givin' people hell all the time and every time.

"Wait and see if that baby don't get far! He'll get somewheres or he'll bust a few wagon tongues over a few hollow heads around this burg, what I mean. This troop ain't soldiered for so long that it comes hard. A house builded on sand must be pushed up on the rocks as the Good Book says, or it will get pushed in the creek. He's a bunch of Roman candles, is that guy. Six weeks K.P! Whew!"

There was a note of admiration in Hassfurther's voice.

"Hello, Buggy Wheels." He broke off his labors to address a slouchy individual who had rambled in from the general direction of the railroad tracks. "How's little old El Paso? Didja have a good time bein' A. W. O. Loose? I sure hope you did, for your own sake, Buggy Wheels, 'cause, boy, you are sure goin' to catch particular hell when the new lootenant lays hands on you. He ain't been named Fireworks for nothing."

Hassfurther looked upon the new arrival pityingly.

"Aw, he won't do nothin' 'ceptin' sock me a couple weeks K.P. or two-thirds of a month's pay—" the freckled soldier who labored under the nickname of Buggy Wheels looked apprehensively up towards Davies' tent however.

It came over Private Bogashield that things had taken a sudden change around that camp. He had left it a sprawling, messy and idle place. He returned to it now, to find it compact, clean, busy. His former companions gazed upon him abstractedly. They looked unusually well policed up, they were shaved and their khaki looked clean. He felt half embarrassed as he rubbed his own three days' growth of beard and looked over his own grease stained uniform. A sudden wave of forlorn loneliness swept over him; he was a stranger in a strange land.

To add to his worries, not a word was said to him or to his two companions in evil who had returned with him. There was a lowering cloud of suspense weighting him down. He almost wished that something might happen to settle this awful uncertainty.

It did.

When the entire troop had started grooming to the cheerful click and knock of brush against currycomb the command "Cease Grooming!" came suddenly to stop them.

Sergeant Carter's voice fell on the ears of the three like the crack of doom.

"Bogashield! O'Rourke! Palmer! Report to the troop commander!"

The guilty A. W. O. L.'s came forward, blinking uncertainly. The idle troop listened, keenly interested.

"Had a nice time in El Paso?" Davies asked them.

The three squirmed.

"We haven't had such a good time here," Davies went on. "It's been a little

hot and we've all been working hard. The rest of the men were pretty good sports about it—they didn't say anything. They even groomed your horses for you while you were having a good time. Such treatment deserves appreciation. Now I'm going to dismiss the troop from stables and let you three show your appreciation by grooming all the horses. Let's see," he reflected aloud, "there are about seventy-two horses; that makes twenty-four apiece. By industry and application you should be through by midnight."

And there in the broiling sun the three luckless ones slaved and worked at the grooming of an entire troop of horses, slaved and worked to the hoots and shouted advice of the rest of the troop sitting in the shade at their ease, smoking and kidding the three toilers in the sun.

DAVIES let it be known that thereafter passes would be easy to secure *but* that any one going without pass would be handed the same treatment on his turn. Now the physical labor of grooming all those horses was bad enough, but what was infinitely worse was the being the butt of all the jokes of the rest of the troop. Going absent without leave immediately lost all its savor.

In spite of their reprieve from the grind of stables the troop looked upon Davies with no kindlier eye. In their minds he was an interloper from the Third Squadron who had come in there and busted things wide open. And Sergeant Banniston took particular pains to keep that idea constantly before them.

"That long legged son of a son," he spat out of the corner of his mouth, "who does he think he is, anyways? He's a hot sketch, he is. He's the kind that gets shot in the back by their own men, and serve him damn' well right."

Sergeant Carter had come up while he was talking back of the picket line. He broke in sternly:

"Can that line o' chin music, Banniston, that ain't no way for a non-commissioned officer to be talkin'. Maybe the lootenant ain't any too well liked by the men. That's neither here nor there. But he's doin' his duty as he sees it and there don't much else matter. Maybe he'd have better discipline if he tried to make the troop like him—and maybe he wouldn't. This ain't no National Guard outfit where a officer has to be popular to get elected. The guy that tries to get popularity at the price of discipline generally ends up by havin' neither."

"There ain't no law against a man expressin' his opinion," growled Banniston.

"No? Maybe there ain't. You keep up that line a chin music and you'll find out about a law that's got a few teeth in it," and Sergeant Carter moved away, disgust in the set of his shoulders.

"What law is that?" Banniston called after him truculently.

"It's a law against incitin' mutiny. You get to monkeyin' around with that law and you're liable to find yourself all tangled up with Leavenworth, makin' little rocks outa big ones," with which parting shot Sergeant Carter moved away.

Of course the troop was depressed and none too happy. But strange to say, the most depressed and most unhappy man in it was its commander. Davies, sitting alone in his tent with no one to speak to and with no kindly voice to relieve his gloom, found himself wondering sometimes whether his course of action was the right one. Liking happy, contented and cheerful men about him, he felt very keenly the thinly veiled hostility and sullenness of the troop which he administered. In some dim way he felt that he was falling down on the job; for in his heart of hearts he knew that the obedience which comes willingly from the heart is the real obedience—that the mechanical response of men to the whip of regulations and punishment is as nothing compared to it.

Sergeant Carter, coming up to report, found him sitting moodily, his chin leaning on his cupped hand. The sergeant cleared his throat, but not until after he had seen Davies' face.

"Ain't feelin' so well, Lieutenant?" he asked quietly.

"Oh, yes," Davies answered wearily.

Sergeant Carter hemmed and hawed a moment, then, half embarrassed, said:

"The lieutenant don't wanta take this grouchy troop too serious. Them kids ain't dry behind the ears yet." His voice was fatherly.

Davies looked up, startled. The old sergeant had unerringly put his finger on the sore spot.

"It does get under the skin a little, Sergeant, trying to absorb all the black looks an officer gets for trying to do his duty. I've always been able to make a contented troop heretofore."

"Sure it gets under the skin, Lieutenant. But that ain't here nor there. Them guys wouldn't be contented if the Archangel Gabriel was their troop commander. They wouldn't be contented nohow. What's that ad bein' run in the papers, somethin' about 'milk from contented cows'? It's better maybe havin' the cows contented, but first you got to make 'em sanitary—and that's a lot more important, Lieutenant."

Davies had to smile at the analogy in spite of himself.

"We'll have to make them sanitary whether they like it or not, Sergeant; you're right. And this troop is one awful unsanitary mob," and he wondered to himself what Ferguson could have been doing to allow the outfit to get in such a stinking state of unwholesomeness.

CHAPTER III

FIGHTING COWPUNCHERS

IN NUMEROUS little ways the troop made its rancor felt. The first day that he ordered drill he sent for a horse. Sergeant Banniston was down on the picket line when the order came.

"Give him No. 46," he advised the stable sergeant. "It's a big horse and he's a big man."

The stable sergeant looked a little dubiously at No. 46 but being uncertain of what was required he led the animal up.

Davies looked at the specimen before him, a cow hocked, raw boned, big hipped monstrosity. Turning his gaze from this equine horror, he looked curiously at the stable sergeant, who had the grace to blush.

"You didn't select that horse?" he asked the stable sergeant.

The non-com looked embarrassed. Unconsciously his eyes flickered toward the picket line where Sergeant Banniston loitered, seemingly totally oblivious of all that was going on.

"Oh, I see," Davies nodded. "Well, you tell whoever picked that curious beast for me that if his eye for women is no better than his eye for horses, he'd better lay off matrimony."

The stable sergeant grinned a little sheepishly.

"I'll get you a good mount, Lieutenant," he promised, and hurried away, leading the gangling horror, which, as it followed along stiff legged toward the picket line, developed that queer shuffling, dragging of one leg that spells "string halt" in an advanced stage.

As quickly as he left, did the stable sergeant return, this time leading a dancing, nervous footed mare, neat, tidy and compactly built, her haunches well under her and the carriage of her head and neck showing plainly that she possessed pride and spirit.

"Something like," approved Davies, springing into the saddle.

The mare, after a playful effort or two to unseat him, tried to bite at his foot in the stirrup. These attempts getting her nowhere in particular, she shook her head once or twice, rattled the bits in her teeth and decided to be good, moving out very sedately and gravely as Davies directed her toward where the troop was busy saddling up.

The stable sergeant shook his head at Banniston later.

"You better lay off tryin' to kid Fireworks," he warned. "He's goin' to play along all gentle until he gets you backed

up agin a stone wall somewheres where you can't get away and then he's goin' to cut loose with all four feet and his teeth and give you everything he's got."

"Aw, to hell with him!" growled Banniston. "I've seen them wet nosed lootenants before now. I've seen 'em and I've had 'em eatin' outa my hand."

"Any time that baby starts eatin' out of your hand you better make sure it's covered with a cast iron mitt," advised the stable sergeant gravely.

The men climbed dispiritedly into their saddles. The opened ranks closed raggedly. Davies watched the performance and shook his head.

A sharp order from him, and the troop opened out, preparatory to dismounting again. Another sharp order and they dismounted, looking at him curiously. Rank was formed anew.

"Now let's see every man bounce into that saddle as if his life depended upon it," he cautioned. "Some day it might. Prepare to mount!"

His voice cracked like a whip. The alternate members surged forward this time with life.

"Mount!" again came that ringing voice.

The men swung into the saddle as if propelled from the ground.

"Form rank!"

The intervals were closed smoothly and evenly.

"That's better!" he approved, and swung them around at "fours right" and moved them out, the scarlet and white guidon fluttering behind him.

The men slumped in the saddles again. They'd been through this a thousand times before, marching to the drill ground where an officer would gallop around barking "fours right" and "fours left" at them, varying the monotony by occasionally giving them "right front into line." Drill is a monotonous thing as perpetrated upon the soldier day after day. But Davies had a queer theory that it could be made interesting.

"Squad leaders take your squads!" he commanded.

The squad leaders looked up, their eyes brightening.

"Put your men through the school of the squad," he ordered. "If they do the one movement correctly, stop it and go on to another movement; if they don't do it correctly, stick by that particular movement until they do."

The troop split up into squads. The drill ground began to resound with commands. The men had heard the order. They worked hard to do each thing well so that it would not have to be repeated. Almost before they realized it had started, the squad drill was over and the order came for platoon leaders to take their platoons.

The squads drifted together into platoons. The platoon leaders took a sudden breath of new life and charged in. But as the units grew larger the privates had correspondingly less to do. They began to slack away again.

Davies called the platoon leaders to him.

"Your men are dead in the saddle," he said. "Get busy; wake them up. Pick out sleepy looking privates and make them drill the platoon for five minutes at a time."

The platoon leaders went back. Startled privates found themselves in front drilling their own comrades. The men in the ranks, not knowing when they might be called upon, and desiring not at all to receive the barrage of kidding they would fall heir to if they fell down, bent seriously to the task of getting ready when their turn should come.

Platoon drill was suddenly over; three quarters of the drill period had passed and none knew of its going. Davies combined the platoons into the troop. Sending out the guidon and several men, he made them act as an outlined enemy. Against this tangible objective he hurled the troop, mounted and dismounted, with sabers, at the gallop, with the rifle on foot, with the pistol as foragers, until every fighting formation had been gone through. As a final touch he picked out the flaming red head of Pinky Hassfurther

and made him put the troop through the same motions, which Pinky did with only about fifteen faults in his technique.

SUDDENLY the troop was going back toward camp. The drill period was over. Three hours had passed like ten minutes. With the command "route order" a perfect babble of voices broke out behind Davies. Hot discussions took place. Sweeping criticism of the other fellow's attempts at command were in order. Luckless inept ones were kidded until they swore to themselves that if ever the opportunity came to them again they would make good and retrieve themselves.

The bubble of originality had made the still wine of drill into the sparkling champagne of something alive and interesting.

"What time is it?" Davies heard a man behind him ask.

"Eleven o'clock!" was the reply.

"Come off it," scoffed the questioner. "We ain't been drillin' any three hours!" He marveled when he was shown.

Riding at the head of the eagerly babbling outfit, Davies felt the first glow of satisfaction since he had taken over this new troop. For he knew that stodgy, unimaginative officers make bored men and that bored men cry to high heaven of an officer's incapacity as an instructor; for the simple fact exists that interested men absorb instruction as the thirsty sands of the desert absorb the morning dew.

There had been only one fly in the ointment. That had been the platoon commanded by Sergeant Banniston. His men had been slack, "behind the bit" as one says of an unwilling horse. That it had not been the fault of the men was evidenced by the fact that they snapped out of it when commanded by privates from their own ranks. It came down to the fact that Banniston had put no energy into his commands and naturally got no energy out of his men, a leader being to a certain extent like a radio station. Without power behind the sending station the receiving end will register blurs.

Now there is a delicate problem involved in the handling by an officer of a persistently recalcitrant soldier. It is easy enough to take a dislike to a particular subordinate and unconsciously "ride" him. Davies analyzed himself carefully. Finally he came to the conclusion that he would give Banniston the benefit of the doubt and try to see some good in the fellow.

He had no sooner made up his mind than the telegraph operator from the station came to his tent, a penciled yellow slip in his hand.

> Sanazar mobilizing big detachment below Pilares. Watch him.
>
> —NORTH, COLONEL.

The telegraph operator left with a message acknowledging the warning. Davies paced up and down once or twice. After all, a platoon was a third of the troop. He had hurled Banniston's platoon at the outlined enemy that morning. So slowly had it gone into action that, had there been a real enemy, severe losses would have occurred. He had no right to risk the lives of the men entrusted to his care.

"Send Sergeant Banniston to me," he called down the camp.

Banniston came up sullenly and stood waiting.

"Sergeant—" Davies' voice was kindly —"your platoon was slack when you commanded it at drill this morning. It was full of pep when it was commanded by others. I'll give you one more chance to handle it properly. If there is no improvement tomorrow I'll have to put you in the file closers and let some one else handle those men."

Banniston said nothing, but saluted and shambled away. Davies, looking after him, sighed to himself. The depression that had lifted momentarily as a result of the good work on the drill ground descended once more in full force. Damn it, how he hated to drive men! The real leader shouldn't have to drive. He should

get loyal and enthusiastic cooperation from his subordinates. When he didn't get this, Davies felt that he had failed. And Banniston was constantly before his eyes as a visible symbol of failure. The worst of it was that he had a well grounded feeling that until he straightened Banniston out and had him working loyally he would not get the troop pulling with him full heartedly, that he would be a leader in name only.

SANAZAR was on the warpath. That meant extra vigilance and more hard work getting this slack troop into fighting trim. Life seemed very complicated somehow. Davies ate his supper alone in his tent and then through sheer desire for the sound of human voices he strolled down toward the town.

He drifted idly into the pool hall. The first thing that hit Davies' eye was a large sign on the wall facing the door.

SOLDIERS NOT ALLOWED BEFORE NOON AND AFTER FIVE O'CLOCK

"What's the idea?" Davies asked the proprietor, pointing to the sign.

The proprietor, a nervous little man, his face all pitted with smallpox, rubbed his hands together deprecatingly.

"You see, it's kinda like this—" he hemmed and hawed— "some o' the boys don't like the soldiers around and threatens to leave me flat if I allows 'em in all the time."

"I see—but the soldiers are well behaved, aren't they?"

"Never made me no trouble howsomever." The proprietor was definite.

Saying nothing more, Davies departed.

The saloon was next on his list of calls.

Above the bar was a big sign, written in soap on the mirror:

NO DRINKS SOLD TO SOLDIERS AFTER SIX P. M.

Pointing to this, Davies asked the barkeeper—

"How come?"

The barkeeper was informative, also slightly apologetic.

"It's them cowpunchers, officer; they don't like drinkin' with the soldiers."

"Do the soldiers ever bother them?"

"Nope, 'tain't that—"

"It's just that this town doesn't like Uncle Sam's Army?"

"Well, yes and no—the young fellers don't like 'em any too well."

"I see," remarked Davies, and departed.

Needing some few personal supplies, he next sought out the town's one store, which was as it should be, a long low building with a high porch for ease in unloading and loading into wagons, its dim interior rich with the smell of spices and cloth and cheese and all the thousand and one things with which its shelves were loaded.

It was complete even to the crowd of men lounging in its shelter. Davies nodded to them as he went by. The group, mostly cowpunchers, watched him silently, making no move to return his greeting.

The storekeeper was a dour individual who also failed to return his civil good evening. There was a snicker behind him from the group of cowpunchers. As the storekeeper made change Davies heard one voice remark—

"Me, I think it's one o' them there cannons."

The rest snickered again. Another voice dissented gravely.

"No 'tain't, it's one o' them there new fangled portable stoves." Again came that snicker and Davies felt himself being watched in sidelong glances.

Finally the spokesman for the group, a round faced, black mustached man who wore an extravagantly silk flowered bandanna around his neck, addressed Davies directly.

"That's a purty heavy weepon you pack there, stranger," he remarked, his voice full of studied insolence as he looked down at the .45 automatic that Davies carried on his hip.

"Yes, fairly heavy," agreed Davies quietly.

He might have explained that the lighter .38 revolver had been discarded because of the fact that the .38 bullets made no impression on a Moro *juramentado* who, blessed, oiled and fanatic with religious zeal, could be punctured by the entire contents of a .38 revolver and still come on and chop his antagonist into mincemeat with a *bolo* or *kris*. Davies might also have told him that he had personally tried out both in faraway Jolo and had himself fired swiftly at a charging *juramentado* and seen the fellow drop with the impact of the .45 bullet as if he had been kicked by both hind legs of a Government mule.

To have explained all this would have been putting himself on the defensive and Davies had no mind to take the defensive against a crowd of store loafers.

"Must make you plumb tired packin' that engine around," the black mustached cowpuncher went on.

"Haw-haw!" chortled some one in the rear.

Davies looked at the haw-haw artist dispassionately.

"You ought to try taking something for those hiccoughs," he advised gravely; then turning to the man who had spoken to him, "It does get a little tiresome at times," he stated deliberately; then with more deliberation, "but I assure you it isn't half as tiresome as listening to silly comments made upon it by halfwits."

This remark was greeted with silence. The dark mustached man flushed slightly. His eyes glittered unpleasantly.

"I onct heard tell that a soldier hit a barn with one o' them things once—but they do say he was standin' inside," he went on disingenuously. Another snicker went up from the crowd behind him.

"You'll hear a lot of funny things if you keep your ears open," Davies assured him. "I know of a lot of very ignorant people who've almost secured themselves an education by keeping their mouths shut and their ears open."

This time there was no snicker from the crowd. Something very like a growl went up.

THE COWPUNCHER, emboldened by the support behind him, grew more personal.

"Maybe you think you can hit somethin' with that young cannon," he sneered.

"Maybe I know I can," replied Davies easily, and reached into his pocket.

While the men watched him, he drew forth a roll of bills and counted out a handful of twenties.

"There's no maybe about it. The Government pays me my salary for being able to do that one thing amongst a lot of other things. Here's two hundred and fifty dollars that I'll put up in a friendly little bet that I can outshoot you afoot or horseback, at the walk or the gallop, at any range you want to select. How about it? Will you or your friends cover my little bet?"

There was a vast silence. Two hundred and fifty dollars is a lot of money to a cowpuncher and, incidentally, to a lieutenant. And the confident way he put up his roll left only two alternatives to the crowd, to put up or shut up. The silence continued.

"I haven't any takers? That's too bad." Davies replaced his roll in his pocket. "I don't want to seem critical," he stated, "but I don't like people to try to kid the Army on its own game. I don't care how much I am kidded personally, but when anybody gets flippant with the Army of the United States of America it's time to call a halt," and he turned away to speak to the storekeeper again.

To the surprised storekeeper he asked for duplicates of all the bills showing troop purchases for the last three months. While the proprietor was getting these, the group lounging against the counter began to growl among themselves.

"The Army!" one remarked with considerable contempt. "What the hell good is the Army? Ten good cowpunchers could clean up on all the greasers in Mexico with one arm tied behind their backs."

A murmur of approval greeted this statement.

Encouraged, the voice went on:

"And this here calvary! Shucks, not one of 'em could ride a buckin' bronc. And as for fightin' greasers—about three cowpunchers could clean up on a thousand greasers—and it takes five hundred soldiers to do it!"

Unable to avoid overhearing all this, Davies paid no attention. He'd heard immature Southwesterners talk like that before. The old-timers, the "river men", the customs and immigration people, mature frontiersmen most of them with many notches on their guns, and the hard bitten Texas Rangers did not indulge in any persiflage of that nature.

But the black mustached cowpuncher had been brooding over his temporary defeat. The more he brooded the madder he became. The encouragement of his friends and Davies' silence finally emboldened him to reassert himself.

The first that Davies knew of it a harsh voice broke on his ears.

"Hey, you, fella, listen!" The words and the tone were pointedly insulting.

Davies paid no attention, leaning negligently against the counter as if he were unaware of the man's words.

"Hey, you leanin' against the counter in that fancy uniform!"

Turning slowly, Davies looked over the man curiously, taking him in from the tip of his spurs to the top of his big hat.

"Where you come from I suppose they don't teach you any better than to talk like that," Davies remarked quietly, "but some of your friends ought to give you a lesson in politeness."

"That's all right, stranger," the fellow blustered. "I wanta talk to you straight."

"Your excessive verbosity is your fault and my misfortune," Davies replied wearily. "Get it off your chest."

"That's all right, that'll about do from you; I'm here to tell you you better look after them damn' soldiers o' yourn if you don't want 'em hurt. Specially one of 'em—a guy by the name of Redd. It'll be my painful duty to let some daylight into him if I catch him botherin' a certain young lady in this town, and don't you forget it!"

His tone was threatening, his manner blustering. Davies studied him thoughtfully, then spoke in reply.

"I don't know what you're talking about and don't give a damn." Davies voice was mild. "Sergeant Redd can look after himself."

His voice gradually grew in anger. Suddenly he walked over to the cowpuncher:

"But as far as your foolish threat to let daylight into any of the soldiers of my command goes you'd better change that idea here and now! By God! You raise a gun to one of my men and I'll tell you what *I'll* do—I'll hunt you down with my whole troop if I have to follow you to Mexico City. And when I catch up with you I'll have you filled up so blamed full of lead you'd make a first class sieve! Get that!"

His eyes blazing, Davies stood over the cowpuncher in a towering rage. The man with the black mustache shrank back, unnerved by the sheer physical bulk of the officer. Davies turned on his heel and walked out.

The men stood silently behind him.

"YOU HADN'T orta do that," the storekeeper reproved. "That fella come in here not botherin' nobody and you start tryin' to kid him, then end up by threatenin' to kill his sodgers. I don't blame him for gettin' mad. And furthermore—" the storekeeper's voice was getting nasty— "I don't want customers that comes into my store bothered and insulted by folks who jest loafs around and never buys nothin'. And that goes for you, Backus—" he shook his finger in the face of the black mustached cowpuncher—"and for all your friends. Them sodgers is sent here by the Government to do their duty. So far's I can see they ain't bothered nobody. *And* so far's I can see they're a heap better behaved than a lot o' people I could name around here."

The man called Backus growled some

epithet in his throat, looking to his friends for backing. His friends spat judicially and looked straight ahead.

" 'Pears as if you didn't have no call to bother him a-tall, Backus," a tall lean cowpuncher announced gravely. "Far's as I can see he done just right in callin' you."

The group began to unlimber its legs preparatory to departing from the hostile atmosphere of the store. Backus followed, his eyes angry, his lips moving in deep and sulphuric curses and promises of what he would do to the "blankety-blank soldiers".

As for Davies, he was far from pleased with the encounter and his share in it. He had allowed a boastful and arrogant cowpuncher to "get his goat" and he had let himself lose his temper over it. What was the matter with these people anyway? He'd been courteous to every one he'd met and still there was all this ill feeling seemingly directed at the uniform. But he did not like this discrimination against his soldiers shown on every hand. It was strange to him somehow; he could not find the reason for it.

As he went by the eating house he glanced in the window. There seated at the long counter talking to the buxom waitress was Sergeant Redd. Next him were two other soldiers, accompanied by girls, all happily eating ice cream and cake, the sole dissipation the town afforded in the way of social activity.

Light dawned on Davies. It was the old elemental question, a shortage of the feminine element. And so far the soldiers seemed to have the inside edge with the few girls the town afforded. But the soldiers were nice young fellows, the girls were daughters of the town's citizens; it was all quite innocent and above board.

At the same time, this hostility of civilians toward soldiers was something to perturb an officer who realized that after all the Army depended upon the civilian for support. It started Davies to figuring on ways and means to break down this wall between the two elements.

CHAPTER IV

"SANAZAR IS COMING!"

THE FREIGHT agent came over from the station.

"There's a fruit express busted down some three miles away," he told Davies. "Ef you and your men wants some fresh fruit go on down and help yo'selves. It'll all spoil otherwise."

Calling out the two troop wagons, Davies sent down a squad to load up. They returned with the two wagons heaped high with peaches and canteloupes. Saving out enough for the troop, Davies sent the remainder around to the housewives of the town, distributing an entire wagon load among the good ladies of the place, much to their delighted surprise. Fruit was a rarity in that part of the country.

The reaction was almost immediate.

A big, motherly looking soul stopped Davies as he walked down toward the station.

"We was wondering if we ladies couldn't kind of fix up a mess o' pie and doughnuts for the boys at the schoolhouse tonight?"

"Surely," smiled Davies, "they'd be delighted. I think it's mighty nice of you to remember them; they're all boys a long way from home and their own folks."

"Now ain't it the truth?" The motherly soul looked a little conscience stricken at the neglect they had shown to these youngsters in their midst. "We'll try to make it up to them," she promised, and hurried away, determination in her eyes.

That night saw the schoolhouse lighted up and filled with busy, energetic women, all bent on stuffing the soldiers with as much cake and coffee and doughnuts as the human frame could absorb. And the good women realized suddenly that these soldiers were not the ravening beasts that popular rumor had painted the soldier before the war, back in those days when some regular Army soldier had replied to a query by stating that "we ain't heroes, we're just regulars". It came over these

kindly women that soldiers were just motherless youngsters a long way from home, and their hearts were touched.

Coming into the gathering about ten o'clock, Davies felt his men grow suddenly silent at his entry. It cut him a little, that silence, but he gave no sign of it. Accepting a cup of coffee, he munched the cake and doughnuts thrust upon him and chatted cheerfully with the hostesses.

The five men grouped about the piano resumed their song. Slipping away quietly, Davies went back to camp with the voices of his men still ringing in his ears, and went back to his own silent tent more or less content.

THE NEXT day at drill Sergeant Banniston's platoon was if anything worse than ever. Very quietly Davies relegated him to the line of file closers and gave the platoon to Sergeant Redd. Banniston took his demotion silently, his eyes inscrutable.

"I know damn' well he thinks I've got it in for him," Davies communed with himself, "but I can't let him run things to suit himself."

Walking through the town, that evening he found many groups of soldiers visiting among the townspeople, gay parties sitting around the porches talking and laughing with the householders.

In the camp he found Pinky Hassfurther dispiritedly washing up the supper pots and pans in the kitchen.

"That's a mean tenor I heard you yodling last night," remarked Davies.

Hassfurther brightened up visibly.

"It ain't so much, Lieutenant," he confessed modestly.

"Thought I heard a bullfrog bass croaking along with you," Davies went on.

"Yes, sir, that's Palmer. You ought to hear him sing 'Locked in the stable with the sheep'!" Hassfurther paid his fellow artist the tribute of true enthusiasm.

"It must be good," hazarded Davies. "Look here, seems to me you could organize a pretty good quartette in the outfit if you set your mind to it. Tell you what I'll do, you scratch around and get a camp-fire going on the far side of the tents, then organize your quartette and get them to yodling—and I'll let you off the rest of the K.P. stuff. How about it?"

"How about it? Surest thing you know, Lieutenant!"

Hassfurther broke for the woodpile.

A big cheerful camp-fire soon threw its ruddy glow over the tents and took the chill out of the high dry air. Men flocked to its comforting gleam and raised their voices in song, Hassfurther's quartette leading the singing, sighing melodiously along through "The Old Oaken Bucket" and all the other tried and true standbys.

From his small tent Davies watched and listened to the cheerful voices of his men, sat alone in the dark, the only light showing being the tip of his cigaret. The camp-fire threw its gleam too far over the mesa for safety, so he rose and went out where he had a patrol of men constantly on duty and moved them about a thousand yards away from the tents so that Sanazar's outfit could not fire into the lighted camp if he should arrive.

But the place was fairly cheerful after nightfall. Davies found himself more content than he had been for some time.

The stable sergeant sat in the outer circle around the fire listening as the quartette led off with the "Massa's In The Cold Cold Ground," followed by the melodious moaning of the rest of the troop. Refilling his pipe, he lighted it and turned to Sergeant Banniston.

"The old place has kinda took a brace at that since Fireworks has took over," he commented.

"Hell!" snorted Banniston. "Boy Scout stuff!"

The stable sergeant looked at him curiously.

"The chow we're gettin' these days ain't no Boy Scout stuff, and don't you forget it. Same cooks, same mess sergeant, 'same rations, 'pears kinda funny we couldn't 'a' had decent grub afore this."

Banniston changed the subject.

In the following evenings the institution of the camp-fire led to other things, notably a minstrel show, organized on the spur of the moment and acted out on a stage made of bales of hay. This developed a lot of talent in the troop. The townspeople, starved for entertainment, began to drift over to the camp each evening. From somewhere came a banjo and a couple of guitars to add their note to the parties. Soon people began coming in from distant ranches to see the nightly performance.

In the same quiet and unobtrusive manner that he had started the camp-fire Davies introduced several sets of boxing gloves into the camp and the boxing bouts began to show up who could and who could not handle his fists.

ONE AFTERNOON Davies had a talk with Sergeant Redd about the man Backus who had threatened to shoot some daylight into him. And Redd told him for the first time about Backus and his friends lining up one of the recruits at the pool hall and making him dance to the tune of bullets shot into the floor at his feet. Davies was glowering mad when he heard it.

"I wish I'd known that when I was talking to him," he said regretfully.

Aside from Backus and some of his friends among the younger cowpunchers, the troop was getting along famously with the townspeople. The homes of the inhabitants were opened to the soldiers. Almost every night there were men invited out to home cooked dinners, a delight to the soldier who has been living on Government straight for months.

The work was beginning to snap up, drills were smooth, non-coms had taken hold of their squads and platoons, the men looked spruce and alert and clean, the meals were marvels of good food, well cooked. Certainly contentment reigned fairly well in the troop. The men admitted among themselves that conditions were far better even if they did have to work harder. But as to Davies they kept their own judgment. They refused to give him their approval.

"Fireworks won't last." Sergeant Banniston was always there with the doubts. "I've seen them nine day wonders before. He won't last."

The steady reiteration of that pessimistic and adverse comment had its effect on the troop's attitude toward the troop commander.

Davies felt it, as any sensitive officer feels it; he knew very well that he had nothing but a slim hold on the troop. The men were passively obedient and nothing more. They lacked that willing snap and surge of voluntary effort, that intangible lift and spontaneous energy that comes when officer and men are in close accord.

The days were not bad. It was the long, lonely evenings that Davies dreaded. And many long and lonely evenings he passed, sitting alone in his tent, watching his men around the camp-fire laughing and singing.

At times he half wished that Sanazar would come along and create a little excitement. Well, he was ready for him in any case. He had put guards at the river crossing; he had a Cossack patrol thrown about a thousand yards from camp; he had agents posted in one or two of the villages along the river bank. Every night between the dawn and the daylight, he prowled around, watching through that dangerous period to see that his sleeping men were not surprised and that the men appointed to guard the camp were at their posts.

FOURTH of July was drawing near. Several of the more prominent of the town's citizens called upon him one day in great state.

They came to ask his cooperation in a great Fourth of July celebration that should make history in that particular section of the country.

Nodding willingly, Davies acceded and offered to do all in his power to help the town out in its program. Together they sketched out the events of the day.

A big barbecue was to be held. The cowpunchers were to hold a roping and riding contest. They were also to stage a horse race.

"First," suggested Davies, "we should have plenty of fireworks. I'll contribute to a fund if you handle it."

The deputation accepted the suggestion and Davies' contribution gladly.

As the program was tentatively sketched out it was plain that the troop would be the headliner in the day's events.

Their contributions included a rescue race, a "monkey drill" exhibition, a sham battle with blank cartridges and a minstrel show. The evening was to end up with a big display of fireworks and a supper and dance at the schoolhouse.

The troop entered into the spirit of the occasion with much enthusiasm. Handbills were printed by the townspeople and distributed throughout the countryside.

The great day dawned at last. The soldiers rubbed their eyes in astonishment, convinced that the whole State had attended the celebration. As a matter of fact ranchers had come in with their families from as far away as fifty miles. Cowpunchers had ridden in from the range, far and near, until the streets of the town were lined with small cars and wagons and carriages and cow ponies.

Eager eyed girls, happy to be appreciated among crowds, after long staying in lonely ranch-houses, laughed and chattered in gay hued groups. The cowboys and the soldiers eyed them from afar, trying to seem indifferent, sitting their horses in negligent grace or galloping hither and yon, statuesquely stern but with many a sidelong glance to sense the effect.

Not to be outdone in color, the soldiers turned out to a man with golden yellow silk handkerchiefs knotted carelessly about their throats. And because the soldiers were fresh cheeked and clean limbed youngsters, and because since the days of bow and spear and long before, woman has always treasured a soft spot in her heart for the warrior, the feminine glances directed toward them were tinged with something more subtly intoxicating than curiosity.

As a result of the barrage of glances the troop dissolved and faded into various groups during the picnic lunches so that every spreading feast had its quota of young men trim in their khaki. The cowpunchers, being the home guard and a daily sight, were forced to take second place, and they reacted to this unpleasant status in the same manner as the young men tending flocks and herds in the vales of ancient Greece undoubtedly resented the smiles bestowed upon the bronze helmeted young spear bearers. They grew sulky.

Their sulkiness grew as a group of soldiers appeared in tennis shoes, mounted upon horses equipped with blanket and surcingle and did some surprising things. The enthusiasm of the crowd started when the troopers galloped their animals across the cleared space, running alongside and gracefully vaulting on to and off their horses while the well trained animals kept up their rapid gait.

The fervor grew as the men vaulted entirely over their mounts, landing lightly on the off side and leaping easily back again to the near side. The crowd began to cheer as the cavalrymen rode a race, with each man standing on the backs of two horses. The onlookers went wild as the *pièce de résistance* of this show was performed, when four horses were lined up, four men leaped nimbly to their backs, and three more men clambered to the shoulders of these and the whole pyramid went galloping down the field.

There followed a thrilling race, the rescue race, remnant of old Indian fighting days in the cavalry, when a line of troopers on bareback horses galloped to the end of the field where a line of dismounted men awaited them eagerly. Pulling the excited horses to a full stop, the dismounted men were swung up in rear of their comrades and the whole line, two men to a horse, galloped back.

This race was diversified by a wise old troop horse which decided, when halfway

back to the start, that he was being grievously put upon by being forced to carry two men, and then and there staged as pretty an exhibition of thoughtful bucking as any cowpony had shown that day. The men clung on; the rearmost man began to slip, then fell, unhurt. The lone rider hung on, his efforts marked by perseverance and immense tenacity, but finally ended in defeat. The triumphant horse, rid of all his burdens, came sagely galloping back to his picket line companions, shaking his head, very well satisfied.

AMONG the crowd Davies noticed a growing sulkiness upon the part of a certain element among the younger cowpunchers. Their leading spirit was the man with the small mustache, Backus. Somewhere they were finding plenty to drink and growing more sullen with the added fire of the heady liquor. Vaguely worried by these signs, Davies kept a close eye upon them.

But his worries over this were driven out of his mind very quickly when a dusty trooper, one of the men on the rover guard came up to him and spoke very seriously for several minutes. Davies gave an order and called to Sergeant Carter. The two conferred closely for ten minutes, poring over a map that the officer carried and examining their watches closely.

"That gives us about five hours, Lieutenant," stated Sergeant Carter.

Davies nodded.

"About five hours, I estimated. There's no use spoiling the party for a band of Mexican bandits. We'll carry on here as if nothing were in the air until it's time to get busy."

Davies made some notes in his notebook. The sergeant nodded and went toward camp.

The field was cleared of performers. The soldiers were preparing for their next stunt. What it was going to be no one knew. Suddenly the crowd noticed a platoon of men galloping up behind the schoolhouse. There they dismounted. Their led horses were marched off in column of fours.

From the direction of the camp came the other two platoons of the troop in column of twos, the guidon at the head, Sergeant Redd in command. They were preceded by scouts who galloped toward the schoolhouse. Watching breathlessly, the onlookers saw the unsuspecting scouts draw nearer and nearer to the group hidden behind the schoolhouse.

A sudden volley of blank cartridge fire broke out from the concealed enemy.

The scouts galloped back toward the troop. With swift silent motions the troop formed fours, three men out of each set of fours threw themselves out of their saddles, linking their horses up by the bits. The fourth man remained mounted. As the men hit the ground they threw themselves flat and commenced firing.

The horses were marshaled, and disappeared at a gallop in a long, swaying column, leaving nothing on the field but that khaki colored line of men, loading and firing. The rate of fire suddenly increased; on the left a section of the line rose and, crouching close to the ground, rushed forward a few yards, throwing themselves prone in the dirt again.

Other sections came forward and joined them until the whole troop was again in line. A terrific burst of firing took place. Suddenly the whole troop rose and, cheering wildly, ran toward the enemy.

But the men behind the schoolhouse were not napping. Their horses had been brought up. As the attackers ran toward them, they leaped for the saddles and galloped away, circling around behind the crowd.

Up galloped the led horses of the troop. Men flung themselves into the saddles. There was a sharp order. Like a wave of glittering steel, the sabers rose from the scabbards and were lowered to the point. The enemy had circled the crowd and now returned at the lower end of the field, their horses stretched to the gallop, the men bent low on their horses' manes, their sabers pointed at the charge.

The troop rode gallantly to meet them.

The crowd of onlookers drew their breaths sharply as the two lines of men and horses, at full gallop, neared each other. The distance between them shortened second by second until it looked as if a collision were unavoidable.

Women closed their eyes and put their fingers to their ears. Just as it seemed that the two ranks of maddened men and horses would hurl themselves on each other in inextricable confusion, the smaller rank executed "fours right" and drew away to one flank. As the troop thundered on down the field, the smaller group swung in behind them and the entire troop was united.

As a troop they went through some brilliant drill movements at the gallop, silently, with no orders shouted and nothing but a whistle blast and the wave of a leader's hand to show that the movements were coordinated and controlled by a commander.

From far across the field they suddenly deployed as foragers, the line galloping toward the onlookers with men and horses riding at long intervals, the troopers galloping with pistol in hand. As they neared the crowd they suddenly drew in to a compact single rank, returned pistols and drew sabers. Nearer and nearer came the thundering mass of horses, the sabers gleamed, the horses were foam flecked as they stretched out to a pounding gallop. The crowd grew nervous. Women shrieked. The troop was almost upon them when suddenly it came to a sliding halt, the horses thrown back on their haunches. Not fifteen feet from the mob of onlookers the troop stood statuesque and silent.

THERE was a sudden whistle blast. A long line of sabers went up in a single graceful movement and were held as the sergeant saluted the crowd.

Immense applause greeted the exhibition.

Davies and Sergeant Carter, standing near the crowd, heard a cowpuncher growl in disgust.

"It's mighty pert and purty but it don't prove them bums can fight."

Sergeant Carter grinned at Davies as the words fell on their ears.

"We're likely to prove it afore the evening's over," he said significantly.

"It looks that way," nodded Davies. "Sanazar ought to be about halfway here by now."

It was with a certain grim amusement that Sergeant Carter and Davies watched the sham battle, knowing well how soon the real thing would be breaking around their ears. But the crowd had no such idea in mind; they were whole heartedly enthusiastic over this exhibition of cavalry work and extremely struck with the smoothly functioning war machine that resulted when these trim youngsters in khaki got together and did their professional stuff.

Darkness had come on. The fireworks were started with a brilliant display of skyrockets, bursting high in the air in showers of red and gold and purple stars. Roman candles and giant pinwheels, great cannon crackers and firecrackers drew delighted gasps from the crowd.

The field was suddenly lighted up as bright as day by the red and white light from giant flares that drove away the darkness for hundreds of yards in the vicinity. Davies watched these with interest.

Calling Sergeant Carter he spoke to him at great length. The sergeant nodded finally and went toward camp.

Followed the minstrel show. Even Davies was surprised at the talent developed by his men. Equipped with the orthodox burnt cork get up, they indulged in a clever song, dance and joke performance that left every one holding sides with laughter. Even the sulky ones among the cowpunchers were forced to laughter at the sallies of the soldiers. But not for long. When the actors came down from the temporary stage set up at one end of the great schoolroom, the old situation returned with double force, the soldiers had made themselves too popular and the feminine element of the population insisted upon showing its apprecia-

tion too openly to suit several disgruntled native sons.

Every five or ten minutes Davies glanced at his watch, estimating the rate of march of a mob of bandits coming toward the town from the river. He glanced around counting the number of his men present.

A Mexican orchestra of some ten pieces was tuning up. Soon they flung into the strains of "*Sobra Las Olas*". Feet began to tap time on the floor; self-conscious young men began to sidle up to much less self-conscious young women and the dance was on.

Davies watching by the door saw Backus, resplendent in a huge white neckerchief above his new suit of store clothes, walk up to the girl of the railroad eating house, lean over her and pose some question.

Whether she heard him or not Davies could not make out. It was certain that her eyes were gazing over the cowpuncher's shoulder toward an approaching figure in olive drab khaki. It was Sergeant Redd, with whom she danced away. Backus walked out of the room angrily, jerking off his new white neckerchief as he went. Outside the door he joined several of his cronies, and together they walked into the darkness, whispering together.

The schoolhouse resounded with the efforts of the Mexican orchestra, an ill assorted looking gang who certainly could make guitar and violin and flute and cello breathe forth the soul of melody. The infinitely yearning, poignant note that a Mexican always manages to instill into his music only made the dance gayer.

Dance succeeded dance. Standing by the door, Davies chatted with the older men of the town and watched appreciatively as the couples circled around him.

A slight commotion took place at the door behind him. He turned around. Then stepping aside, he watched as Backus and several of his friends, considerably the worse for wear, came walking in unsteadily. This time they were bent on mischief. The better cowpunchers were dancing and enjoying themselves hugely, although the cowpunchers as a whole were outnumbered by the soldiers almost two to one.

THE DANCE came to an end. In the intermission Davies saw Backus talking threateningly to the orchestra leader. From the orchestra the cowpuncher went on unsteady feet to several of the cowpunchers who had been dancing. A group of them gathered at one end of the hall. The women began to look worried. The soldiers paid no attention, but flocked by the door smoking and laughing.

The intermission grew longer and longer. Finally one of the soldiers, growing impatient, walked over to the orchestra leader and asked him a question. The Mexican shook his head, pointing in fear at Backus who was haranguing the group of cowpunchers.

The soldier returned to his comrades at the door, scowling. Davies heard him say:

"Whad'ya know about that? That guy Backus has ordered the music to lay off as long as there are any soldiers on the floor!"

The soldiers growled among themselves.

"Let's go get the son of a gun!" one of them suggested.

"No," another one answered, "too many ladies."

Watching carefully, Davies waited for new developments.

They were not long in coming. A deputation of three cowpunchers came across the hall to where Davies stood. The soldiers behind him in the open doorway stood silent. A glacial stillness descended over the room.

The cowpunchers came up and halted in front of Davies.

"Lootenant," said Backus loudly, "the men o' this here place don't wanta dance any more with soldiers on the floor."

"What's the matter with the soldiers?" asked Davies steadily.

"Ain't nothin' the matter with them, I

guess," replied Backus. "but we jest don't wanta dance on the same floor with 'em."

"Are any of the soldiers misbehaving?" asked Davies, his voice quiet.

"No, 'tain't that; it's just that we don't want 'em around dancin' at our ance."

"I see," remarked Davies reflectively, the soldiers are good enough to provide entertainment for all the people the whole afternoon and evening but they are not good enough to dance on the same floor with cowpunchers?"

"That's about it," returned Backus, the irony lost on him.

"In that case, we don't care to stay where we are not wanted. We'd be the first to want to leave a place where obviously we are unwelcome."

As he spoke Davies heard a growl go up behind him where the soldiers stood.

Another of the three cowpunchers before him spoke up.

"Oh, we don't mean you, Lieutenant," he explained. "We'd like to have you stay. But we think that the soldiers should go away from the dance."

There was a pregnant silence from behind Davies. He knew what his men were thinking. He turned around and glanced into their lowering faces, then turned back to the cowpunchers.

"As far as we are concerned," he stated, "we men in uniform are all together. You touch one of us and you touch all. If you don't think that my men are good enough for your dance, that's your business. But as far as I am concerned I'm not staying under a roof where my men aren't welcome."

Behind him Davies heard a rustling and moving. A hand touched his elbow.

"Say the word, Lieutenant, and we'll give 'em the bums' rush," a husky voice whispered in his ear.

Davies shook his head.

"No," he spoke in a low tone, "join me outside and I'll tell you why." Then turning to the deputation of cowpunchers, "On behalf of my men I wish to thank you for your good sportsmanship and for the cordial welcome extended the United States Army in this town," and turned on his heel.

Outside the soldiers grouped around him. A glow went through Davies, rank was forgotten, his men had lost their grouch toward him. They crowded around eagerly, waiting his word. They were with him at last.

"Listen here," he told them, "never mind that dance and the drunken cowpunchers. The women will cuss the tar out of them. Tomorrow, when I lay an embargo against buying anything more in the town, the better element of the population will rise up and cuss out these inhospitable drunks. Besides, we've got a fight on our hands tonight. Sanazar is on his way to attack this town. He'll be here in about half an hour."

Eager voices questioned him, friendly voices, so that his heart lifted within him.

"You're damn' right," he answered, "and we'll give him the surprise of his life. Let's be on our way."

The men followed him as he strode toward camp. Behind them in the lighted doorway several of the older men of the town called after the soldiers, asking them to return. There was no response from the men, all of them intent on bigger game.

CHAPTER V

"FIREWORKS"

AFTER arrival in camp Davies issued a few low voiced orders. The men rushed to do his bidding. A vast stir and movement began among the tents. Getting his own equipment in shape, he walked down toward the end of the camp. Several figures passed him, his own men, each man carrying something concealed in his shirt.

Suspicious, he stopped one of them. As he had thought the man was carrying a .45 automatic.

"Where are you men going?" he asked sternly of one of them, the cook, a lean, lanky Tennesseean.

"Lootenant, there's a guy back there

got Sergeant Banniston standin' with his hands up and is wavin' a gun in front of his face. We oughtn't to stand for it, Lootenant."

"You're damn' right we ought not to stand for it," echoed Davies, swearing angrily, "but this isn't the way to go about it. You men get ready to move out. I'll look after Sergeant Banniston. And send Sergeant Carter to me."

Sergeant Carter came up on his horse, dismounted and waited.

Davies spoke to him in a low tone. The sergeant nodded.

Alone, his forehead creased into an angry frown, Davies strode back toward the schoolhouse.

In the circle of light cast by the open doorway there was a large group of men, silently watching something taking place in the center of the circle.

Pushing his way through the group, Davies came out in the circle.

In the center, standing upright, his hands high above his head, was Sergeant Banniston. Directly in front of him, waving a nickel plated pearl handled revolver in front of Banniston's face was Backus, half drunk and thoroughly ugly.

"You and the rest of the soldiers might as well learn this here and now—" Backus' voice was carrying up and into the schoolhouse where terrified women crowded the windows and door—"that we ain't goin' to stand for no more monkey business from you any more—" That was as far as he got.

A powerful arm shot out and knocked his revolver out of his hand. Davies stood over him.

"Backus, you have been roughing it up with my men about long enough. Now you are going to get yours. Put up your hands!"

Looking around wildly, Backus slowly obeyed.

Davies poised lightly on the balls of his feet, put his whole weight behind the blow, letting Backus have every ounce of bone and muscle, a slightly glancing blow that landed on the point of the man's jaw.

Backus, as if he had been hit by an earthquake, doubled up and collapsed, dropping to the ground like a sack of oats. There he lay while Davies waited. The rest of the townspeople stood around silently.

Davies turned on them.

"This is not meant for the decen kindly element amongst you," he said, "but for the trouble makers, the ones who have been insisting upon roughing it up with my men. We have tried in every way possible to show our good will. Evidently we have failed. Therefore we keep to ourselves hereafter. But it happens right now that Sanazar is about to attack your town. He's not more than two miles away."

The men around him looked startled. Some of the women screamed. There was a hasty seeking for weapons and many anxious inquiries.

"Maybe when we come back some of you hotheads will cool off a little and try to show some courtesy to your country's Army. It's a descendant of the same Army that made possible the Fourth of July you are celebrating today."

"But, Lieutenant," an anxious voice queried him from the crowd, "what are you goin' to do? We're liable to git the hell shot outa us and our women folks—"

"No, you're not." Davies pointed behind them. As one man they looked around.

Coming out of the darkness behind them loomed the head of a column of cavalry, completely equipped for the field, looking very fit and capable in full pack, with saddle bags loaded and extra bandoleers of ammunition over the shoulders of the men.

"We're here just to stop that very thing," and Davies turned and mounted the horse his orderly had brought up. As he fitted his feet into the stirrups and adjusted the reins, he spoke to the crowd once more.

"But there's no denying we'd feel a hell of a sight better about going out to fight for you if you'd straighten out some of your citizens who are down on soldiers."

"The lieutenant's right," some one shouted.

"Three cheers for the soldiers!" shouted another voice.

Three rousing cheers rent the air as the troop struck up the trot and disappeared into the darkness of the night, heading toward the river road along which was coming the column of bandits under command of Sanazar.

AS DAVIES drove forward into the night the steady click and clink and beat of horses and men behind him, a form rode up alongside. In the darkness he could not see who it was.

A voice came out of the void at his side. It was the voice of Sergeant Banniston.

"Lootenant, I wanta tell you I been actin' like a skunk." The sergeant's voice was husky. "I wanta tell you Lootenant if you'll let bygones be bygones I'll work my fool head off for you."

There was silence as Banniston waited for the reply.

It did not come in words. A hand came across the distance that separated their two horses. The hand grasped his and gripped it hard.

"Surest thing you know, Sergeant—" Davies' voice was friendly. "From now on bygones are bygones and we're going to pull together."

"You are damn' right we are, Lootenant," and Sergeant Banniston disappeared back in the column.

His heart high as he rode forward, Davies for the first time in weeks felt the surge and lift of his troop behind him, pulling with him, following him gladly and willingly, their individual differences merged into one unified whole, the gulf between them and their officer no longer existent, officer and troop pulling together at last, making a war machine of this troop of cavalry.

And Davies no longer the slave driver, but the leader with an eager following, trotted forward in the darkness surely and accurately, coming up at last to where two soldiers loomed up on the road in front of him.

"Is everything ready?" he asked them.

"Everything's ready, sir," they answered.

Turning in his saddle:

"Pass the word down the column," he said in a low tone. "Fight on foot, action left!"

The word rippled down the column of men behind him. Its progress could be told by the creak and jerk and thump as men dropped to the ground, by the snapping sound as link straps were fastened.

It took scarcely a minute until the entire troop, or rather the two thirds of it that dismounted at this command, stood on the side of the road, rifle in hand.

The led horses were taken up a dry arroyo that flanked the road.

Leading his men, Davies distributed them by platoon, two platoons spreading out below the crest of a hill that commanded the road. The other platoon was on the far side of the road.

Prone on the ground, their rifles at battle sight, the men waited silently. Bandoleers of ammunition were stacked up beside them. Rifles were loaded and the safety catch put on.

Pinky Hassfurther wriggled ecstatically.

"It's about time for the real fireworks," he whispered.

Davies whispered in the darkness with two or three messengers. They departed silently. All was dark. Strain their eyes as they might, the men could see nothing of the road which they knew wound away from this point across the mesa for a thousand yards without a stick or stone to give cover to any one attacking.

"How many men do they figger Sanazar's got with him?" Sergeant Carter's cautious whisper came to Davies' ears.

"Nearly five hundred," Davies whispered back, then gave a low warning.

Listening through the darkness, they could hear a faint stir out in the mesa in front of them. A tiny pin point of light appeared.

"See how far a lighted cigaret light

shows at night," Davies whispered to the nearest men.

Other pin points of light showed. After what seemed about five minutes they could hear the drum of horses' hoofs on the road. The sound grew greater in volume. Above this steady sound they could hear an occasional word of Spanish as some man called to another.

THE TROOP kept silence. Nothing could be seen in the impenetrable darkness, but the tiny pin points of light from the cigarets. It seemed that the Mexicans must be very close to them. The soldiers began to look uneasily toward the spot where Davies lay prone.

"When's Fireworks goin' to do his stuff?" they whispered.

But Davies gave no sign. Louder and louder grew the noise of the approaching bandits. They could not be more than three hundred yards away by now. One could plainly hear scraps of conversation.

Suddenly below on the mesa there was the splutter of a reddish colored light close to the ground and to one side of where the road should be. Other lights white and green spluttered. Dim figures could be seen running back in the darkness from the sputtering points of light. Suddenly the first light flared up into a great bulb of red flame lighting up everything within a radius of several hundred yards. The other flares burst into full flame making the mesa as light as day. The flares extended from a point about three hundred yards away in a straight line for about a thousand yards. Sergeant Carter had done his work well.

"Hell!" grinned the men. "He's usin' up the rest o' the fireworks!"

The intense light showed a large band of Mexicans, their big sombreros bobbing about in mystification as they halted their horses to study this sudden turning on of all the lights. They soon found out what it was all about.

"Rapid fire!" came Davies' voice, clear and steady.

A veritable sheet of flame burst out from the concealed troop on the hillside. It hit the Mexicans like a thunderbolt. Rifles worked swiftly, pumping lead into the screaming confusion that the bandit column had suddenly become. Shouts and screams rose from the horrified bandits. Plying whip and spur, they turned away from the hillside that belched death at them so persistently and so steadily and fought each other to get to the rear.

Every move they made was clear to the eye, as the flares lighted up the countryside for hundreds of yards. The bandits, a panic stricken mass, reeled from their saddles; men and horses rose and fell. The road became blackened with the bodies of slain and wounded men and animals. Slowly the still unhurt bandits fought their way through the wounded and dying and galloped toward the rear and safety.

Suddenly Davies' whistle blew.

"Range—six hundred!" he called in the lull that followed.

There was a hasty adjusting of sights, and the stream of lead sprayed the retreating Mexicans again. The sights were raised in a moment to eight hundred.

The led horses suddenly trampled up behind them. Watching through his glasses Davies gave "Cease firing" and "To horse".

If ever men mounted up quickly it was that time. It seemed that they literally bounced from the ground to their saddles. With most of the men half in or half out of the saddle, the troop set off at a gallop, the troopers adjusting reins and stirrups as their horses settled down to the rapid pace.

SLOWLY but surely they drew up to the inferior horses of the Mexicans. By now the flares were behind them. But new flares began to splutter ahead, so that the road lightened up as they advanced.

"First two platoons as foragers," the word came back.

Obedient, the first two platoons spread out on either side of the road in a long

line. Men reached for their pistols. They were on the tail of the bandits' column now. The pistols began to crack viciously. Davies in the lead drew down on the nearest bandit, a fat Mexican in a huge saddle. As he pressed the trigger the man threw up his arms and dropped from the saddle as if he had been literally kicked off his horse.

"Talk about this gun!" Davies said to himself grimly, and drew down on the next man, seeing him shoved as violently out of the saddle.

The troop, like a pack of gray wolves, in the flare of the torches drew remorselessly in on the fleeing bandits. Saddle after saddle was emptied. Horse after horse reared and plunged only to fall to the ground, throwing its rider.

The nearest bandits suddenly threw up their hands in token of surrender and turned toward the Americans. Davies called up the third platoon and turned over the prisoners. The troop pressed on after the remainder. Another and still another group surrendered until there were left only a handful of the fleeing men. These were mounted on better horses. Davies rightly esteemed them to be the leaders.

He waved to his men to follow, set spurs to his horse and bent low in the saddle, pressing every ounce of speed he could get out of his willing mare. Slowly he drew toward the rearmost of the fleeing leaders. Raising his pistol, he took a snap shot only to find the gun empty.

Hastily returning it to its holster, knowing well that he had used up the three full magazines he carried, he drew the long straight, keen, French saber he carried on the saddle. The blade leaped to his hand and he swept along, low on his horse's neck. As he came up to the rearmost Mexican the man suddenly turned and pointed something at him.

Davies felt a roar and a puff of wind past his ear, then he lunged at the fellow, giving him the sword point. The saber thudded home, the man reeled in the saddle, screaming, and fell heavily. Withdrawing his blade, Davies suddenly felt the air full of bullets around him. His men were firing from the rear at the bandits. The Mexicans evidently saw that the game was up. Three more dropped from the saddle before the remainder, a group of five men, threw up their arms in surrender. His men were about them like eager hounds on the quarry. The prisoners were disarmed, among them was Sanazar himself, almost hysterical with terror.

DAVIES rode back, Whistling for assembly, his men began to ride in from the darkness around him. By now the flares had died down and the mesa was dark again. Steadily the numbers of his men grew greater.

He called for the platoon sergeants and demanded reports. They assembled their men and called on squad leaders. The final reports showed three men missing. These three turned up a little later, one man having been slightly wounded by a Mexican pistol, the second remained with him to bind up his wound, the third man had been thrown by his horse and had a broken arm.

Thankful that matters had ended so well for his men, Davies gathered up the troop and, guarding the prisoners, headed back for the town.

Houses were lighted up; the streets swarmed with people. As the dusty, sweat stained column of troopers rode into town, more than two hundred prisoners with them, cheer after cheer filled the air. The prisoners were put into a deserted warehouse for the night and a guard set over them.

The horses were placed on the picket line and rubbed down. A crowd of townspeople asked to see Davies. Leading them was the motherly soul who had organized the first entertainment for the soldiers.

"We ladies have taken the liberty of fixin' up some victuals for the boys and some hot coffee; can they come over to the schoolhouse and have it soon's they're ready?"

"Can a duck swim?" asked Davies.

"They surely can. You're sure nobody will run us out once we're there?" he asked with a grin.

"Lieutenant, we ladies got hold of that worthless good for nothin' Backus and boxed his ears for him. We don't aim to have his like around this town again."

Seeing the capable fist of the woman and her brawny arm as she frowned vindictively in remembrance, Davies found it in his soul to pity the man Backus a little. For after all, he reflected, there's scarcely a worse punishment than having the women down on one.

As Pinky Hassfurther put it, seated with a group of friendly cowpunchers:

"He sure tried to put up a good Fourth o' July celebration for you people—and when we put up a Fourth o' July celebration we sure are strong on fireworks!"

The CAMP-FIRE

A free-to-all meeting place for readers, writers and adventurers

Calamity Jane

AN OLD-TIMER who knew her, arises to protest at the manner in which recently she was depicted in a fiction tale.

In regard to the letter decrying women, which Comrade MacAulay detests, may I suggest one thing? The Camp-Fire is free to all. If a man wants to argue that there is no such continent as North America—and does it interestingly—I'll grant him space—even in this magazine, published in New York. Opinions expressed in letters are not editorial opinions—and may often be far wiser and more informative. Therefore they get space.

Comrade MacAulay's letter:

I have been a reader of *Adventure* since the first copy was printed; in fact, I have not missed more than two copies of it. If that is not a criterion of my opinion, then what would be?

I lived in the Middle West from when I was three weeks old until I was forty years old. I have no school education, except a post graduate course in the "College of Foot and Fist." I was in the Black Hills, South Dakota, and the plains surrounding them, from '76 till '06, and I knew all the good and bad people who were in that country during that time, two-gun men, road agents, gamblers, and all the rest.

I first knew Calamity Jane when I was ten years old, and knew her well until her death, and, when a few years ago, I read a story of the Black Hills, written by a doctor author, in which he portrayed her as a house-runner to get girls for Al Swarengen's dive, a short haired, coarse voiced, short skirted, she-devil, I got so damn' mad that if I had the author who had allowed such a damn lie to get in his story, where I could get at him, one of us would have had a little more than a black eye!

She was a prostitute, yes, a drinker, yes, a fighter yes, a dare-devil, yes. But a procurer for a dive, *not by a million miles!* She did more to *save* girls and keep them from such a life than any ten preachers or any ten of any other kind of people you want to mention; she would meet the stage almost every time it came and ask the girls, if any came on it, where they wanted to go. If they said they had

answered an ad for girls to work in a "hotel" for Mr. Swarengen she would tell them what his "hotel" was and say, "His place is right down the street, the Gem Theatre, you can't miss it; if you want to live like that, that's your business. If you want to live decent, or want to go back home, go over to the Keystone Hotel and wait till I come. I'll see you get home all right."

This is not guess work or hearsay; it is a thing I know personally. Calamity Jane had a trim boyish form; she dressed in a scout suit of buckskin. She had long fine hair to her waist, was fine featured, level eyed, kind hearted, with eyes that would blaze in fun or frolic, or blaze with the fires of hell when she was roused. She feared neither life nor death, and asked odds of no one. She got the name of "Calamity" because she would take the part of the under dog; and when the person she interfered with asked her, "Who the hell are you?" she would answer, "I am just a calamity that has happened to you!"

I wanted to write of this before but put it off, hoping someone who knew the facts would tell them.

THE REASON I am writing now is to yell "Murder!" Another "Mush-bone" has an article in Camp-Fire!

What I mean is an unsigned letter in the July 15th issue condeming the authors who bring women and love into stories; yes, even abusing the Creator of the female sex for ever sending them on earth; how did *this* letter get by? If it were humorous, sarcastic, or even informative, there might be some good in it. But as it is, it is only drivel, and has no place in anything except a slime hole, or mud hole, and I hope our Camp-Fire is not built near either one.

The best thing this hombre can do is to go to some island where no one else lives and conduct it to suit himself, since he considers that his opinion is a better opinion of creation than the Creator had. If he does not like the way the Creator made things have him go tell the Old Boy about it; maybe He will make a new world to suit this worm!

—L. A. MACAULAY, Aberdeen, Washington.

Welcome Words

AND I MAY ADD as well that the old magazine has been climbing steadily in circulation. This makes me especially happy.

Adventure is becoming the magazine that it was some ten or fifteen years ago before the uplift movement struck it and it became so damned erudite, emasculated and esoteric that a common waddy was left gasping, wondering what the heck it was all about. When you get back on your staff such writers as Tuttle, Lamb, Friel, Pendexter, etc., then you have a he-man's magazine. I read fifty-six magazines, and if that gives me any authority I am here to state that *Adventure* is climbing to the top again.

We have an organization here that sends all donated magazines to logging camps and mining camps. This was originally started to offset I. W. W. literature; but since these men became acquainted with the better class of magazines the I. W. W. stuff has lost out. Don't get the idea that loggers or miners as a class are foolish in the face, for they are not, but anyone who has only one kind of literature to read is influenced more or less by his daily menu.

—C. L. ELLIOTT, 460 College Street, Portland, Oregon.

D'Artagnan

IN THIS issue our prize contest serial novel begins. As previously announced, the conditions of the contest are as follows:

Beginning with this issue of *Adventure*, patrons are offered a chance to read and criticize one of the finest adventure action novels ever published in the United States. It is "D'Artagnan", a sequel to "The Three Musketeers" by Alexandre Dumas.

The novel, which now will be published in three generous consecutive installments, is founded upon a fragmentary manuscript by Dumas (never printed heretofore), translated and completed by H. Bedford-Jones.

Adventure offers five double prizes, for reader criticisms—each preferably about 200 words in length. A book and a check go to *each* of the five winners.

THE BOOK

A hand-bound first edition volume of "D'Artagnan" in full leather. In each copy is bound one page of original manuscript—*in the handwriting of Alexandre Dumas.* To real book lovers, one of these volumes should be of tremendous and lasting value. But in addition—

THE CHECK

With each book goes a check prize for $100. For a critique of 200 words length, this means fifty cents a word.

Conditions of the Contest

1. Anyone, except employees of the Butterick Publishing Company and the Covici, Friede book publishing company, may submit an essay criticism.
2. No essays over 1000 words in length will be considered.
3. No manuscripts will be returned.
4. Winning manuscripts will become the property of the Butterick Publishing Company.
5. The general subject of the essays will be: "Is 'D'Artagnan' worthy to rank with the best Dumas—and why, or why not?" Pointed titles aimed at a sector of this question, will not be barred. If contributors wish to discuss briefly how much of this novel actually was written by Dumas, that is allowable.

6. Judges of the contest will be the editors of *Adventure*.

7. The contest will close December 1.

8. Announcement of the prize winners will be made in the February 1st issue of *Adventure*.

Lunch Wagon—Chuck Wagon

THEY BOTH had one common denominator—hot food. But there it seems the resemblance well nigh ends. Comrade Wells arises to speak briefly anent the latter vehicle.

I like to laughed myself to death at that letter of C. L. Edson which you reprinted from the *New York World* as to the origin of the lunch wagon.

Just imagine D Bar Charlie, or Sourdough Slim, or any one of fifty hard-boiled roundup and trail cooks that I have known, autocrats that ruled camp with an iron poker six feet long and let you eat when and how they had grub ready and at no other time, carefully bringing the mess wagon into Hays, or Dodge, or Wallace, or Ogalallah, in the old days, in order that the punchers might eat, when the said punchers were most likely loaded to the guards with red likker and didn't care three whoops on a rain barrel where in hell the wagon was, or the cook either. Likewise, in most cases the cook was right along with the gang, drunker than a boiled owl while the wagon and remuda were most likely left in charge of whichever of the wranglers was most easily bluffed or bribed—maybe both—into staying at camp and watching things while the rest celebrated. Of course, all this was after the cattle were either shipped or turned over to the new owners. Until then everybody attended strictly to business.

—WILLIAM WELLS

Back to Yesterday

I want to go back for a while—

Though I'm flabby and fat
  Where I used to be lean,
And a cowpuncher's hat
  Would look queer on my bean,
Still, I want to go back
  Where, to tell you the truth,
I hadn't much jack
  But I did have my youth.
I want to go back for a while.

I want to go back;
  —If the life is the same;
My old bones will crack
  And my muscles go lame,
But perhaps in my chest
  I may feel the old thrill
From the breath of the West
  That is tangy and chill.
I *want* to go back for a while!

I want to go back;
  Though it's useless to hope
That I've kept the old knack
  With a horse or a rope.
I can dodder along
  On a bronc that is meek
—For my spirit is strong
  Though the flesh may be weak.
I want to go back for a while!

I'm a city broke guy
  Since I roved from the range,
But—the sun, and the sky
  And the mountains don't change.
I could learn once again
  To sleep out on my pack,
And I sure have a yen
  For a chuck wagon snack,
I want to go back for a while!

I'll have to come home
  To the work-a-day grind,
But there's old ways to roam
  And there's old trails to find;
For a while I can stick
  With the life I once led,
Where you wake—like the Quick!
  And you sleep—like the Dead!
I *want* to go back for a while!

BERTON BRALEY.

Back Numbers

SINCE COPIES of *Adventure* more than one year old now are completely out of print, we have adopted the policy of running an occasional notice in Camp-Fire. If you want some particular issue—or a file—watch for these notices.

WILL SELL:—*Adventure* Jan. to Dec. 1925, inclusive except Dec. 30. Jan. 30 to Dec. 31, 1926 inclusive except March 30. May to Dec. 1924 inclusive. Also mixed lot of 1922-1923 copies. For best offer. Collect. Write direct to E. B. Chapman, Hollis Depot, New Hampshire.

East Side, West Side, All Around the World

IF THIS comrade's life has been commonplace, then Barnum & Bailey's sea elephant is a microbe. Most of us feel lucky in a lifetime to be able to explore just a single one of these outland trails.

Answering J. C's query concerning writers (he asks that his initials only be used), I am glad to say that three of

Adventure's most popular authors—Talbot Mundy, Gordon Young and Doctor John I. Cochrane—are all scheduled for long stories to appear soon in these pages. All of the other writers mentioned as favorites are represented in early issues—with the exception of "Shanghai Charley" Fischer. I deeply regret that we have published his last story; his name is burned upon the memorial tablet in this office.

One other old-time favorite who has shouldered his pack and passed into the sunset, appears in this issue with a story written during his last illness—"Fur And Famine," by F. St. Mars. This tale, and one more scheduled for a fall number, will complete the tally of his work.

From the motorship *West Grama*, at Santos, Brazil, Comrade J. C. writes:

After having listened in for quite some few years it seemed that now is a pretty good time to take my turn at the transmitter.

Have just finished "In The Year 2000" and will say that in my opinion it does not come up to the usual quality of Friel's tales of the river countries of S. A. I'd much rather read his stories of the mysteries of the jungle and the queer things that come out of the *igarapes*, the sinister and deadly snakes, the fights with the Jivero Indians, than about so many years hence.

Also I would much rather that he had not allowed Rand, *et al*, to die. He could very well have continued their adventures in the jungles of the Territorio Amazonas. He certainly knows his jungles!

It has been a very long time since Don Everhard has appeared in *Adventure*. Better get Young to give us some more with Don in 'em.

Also, how about Talbot Mundy? Where has he gone to of late? Used to be that most every issue had one of his stories complete or serial in it.

The following get my OK at all times: Lamb, Pendexter, Burtis, Nason, Georges Surdez, Charley Fischer, Wheeler-Nicholson and Newsom.

Go easy on the serials; one is good and sufficient.

Next summer a buddy and I are going to do a bit of prospecting in Alaska, after doing considerable navigating on the rivers, which time will be mostly occupied in taking movies and stills of the country. It is a fact that one sees very few pictures of any kind, of Alaska, so they should make the grade without any trouble.

Last summer and winter were spent with the United States Survey (U. S. G. L. O.) in southern California in an effort to regain some health lost as a result of the last war. Many long months were spent in the hospital and finally I got tired of that so I managed to grab a job with the G. L. O. Believe me, but I know the Tehachapi Mountains and the Antelope Valley and Mohave Desert about as well as could be known (in my own mind). Tramp, tramp, tramp: Anywhere from twenty to forty pounds of iron posts filled with cement from one to three inches in diameter. Also line ax, belt ax and numerous other paraphernalia which go with the survey job.

I believe we cut enough trails through dense scrub oak thickets to make one transcontinental highway from San Francisco to New York. Some of it was straight up or down mountain sides, along ridges and every other conceivable sort of mountain terrain. It was mighty hard work but fine for a man if he wanted to harden his muscles. Climbing three to six miles (each way and not counting the many miles sometimes covered in running lines) over game trails does a man lots of good. My lungs hurt like hell for the first week or more, but after that I felt better than ever before in my life.

We ran lines along the ridge of a mountain range that separated the San Joaquin from the Antelope Valley; and on a sunny, clear day, flashes from auto windshields could be seen in Bakersfield and Lancaster, each about forty miles from this ridge and in opposite directions.

We had our small camp up on a high canyon and we could hear the wind roaring down and could tell to the dot when it would hit our camp. Sounded not less than a cyclone. At night the owls started hooting and a little later the coyotes started their yelping. Let me tell you, some people might not like that kind of a life; but me, well, I am going back out there soon as I get a stake together..

Well, after this job ran out I went over to L. A. and bought myself a little Chevvy sedan and started out to do things right. Still had all my camping gear, so whenever the notion struck me, I hauled off the highway into the desert for half a mile or so and set up camp. This routine until I landed at Phoenix; and after a few confabs there I headed out for Roosevelt and Globe by way of the Apache Trail. By the way, if you ever want to see something in the way of scenery take this route; but for Pete's sake be sure and have new brake lining and some kind of a drag anchor out astern, as the grades are mighty steep, especially the one into Fish Creek Canyon. What a drive!

Anyway, on arriving in Globe, Arizona, I looked up an old-timer who was a puncher in the Ouachita River country in the time of the Comanches and Kiowas and who at the present time owns a cow outfit some few miles out of Copper Hill, Arizona.

Well, the outcome was that he supplied me with a string of burros and I packed my outfit up into the Apache Mountains, where I tried my hand at prospecting. This is all copper country with the usual silver and plenty of good high mountains to run around in. With me were two fine companions, a thoroughbred policer and ditto shepherd dog. Plenty of jacks, cottontails, foxes, wolves, coyotes, lions and millions of quail. I have seen coveys of quail which I estimated to be not less than five

thousand birds. A solid stream of them more than two hundred to four hundred feet long. You see it was out of season and the birds had evidently moved up into these canyons and ravines where no one bothered them. And I had no shotgun! Not that I would have used it. These birds were pretty tame.

After several weeks of working my holes, I discovered why the other prospectors in that neck of the woods had given it up. Also snow had been threatening so I made ready to pack my outfit out. The morning of the day I was to leave (about 3 A.M.), I was awakened by a thundering noise and my dogs were half wild to get out. I looked out of one window and by means of the moonlight, I saw a herd of about thirty head of cattle going hell-bent down the canyon. This herd contained numerous recently born calves and loping along behind them was a lion, evidently relishing a meal on fresh young calf. The punchers at my friend's ranch were inclined to the idea that he must have been quite some hungry.

After leaving here, I loaded up my little bus and set my course for Bisbee, Arizona. After passing through Tucson, a fine city, and Tombstone and passing through a heavy snowstorm at Benson (between Tucson and Tombstone) I climbed the steep grade of the mountain necessary to arrive at Bisbee. After a long steep descent I arrived at my destination. In the public library at Bisbee is a fine collection of the many minerals which come out of the earth in that vicinity. Very interesting to anyone who cares about mineralogy, and well worth seeing.

One day I decided it would be worth while to go across the line at Naco and try to break the bank on the roulette wheel; with the result they broke me. All of which necessitated my getting a stake together somewhere so I loaded up once more and lit out for the Pecos Country in west Texas where there are several oil fields. I went to Wink (correct name) just seventeen miles from the shipping town of Pyote and not so far from Pecos.

If anyone cares to see what resembles the old time frontier and cowtowns let him head for a new boom oil town. The high board walks, numerous wooden one-story buildings which are without exception drug stores (?) restaurant clubs (?) for the poor tired roughneck! And with the wooden sidewalks crowded with dirty, oilstained oil field workers, loafers, big city gamblers and bums, crooks, criminals and hijackers galore. All talking about oil, oil, oil. Several days before I arrived, one outfit was paid off in the field and hijackers came along and cleaned out the whole crowd Everyone suspicious of the other fellow and righteously so, too. And ladies, ladies, ladies—the very red lipped kind; a squabbling show troupe showing at the one cheap dump of a theatre. So and so struck water; flooded; laid off nearly all the crew. More wooden shacks goin' up all the time. More drug stores . . . never saw such queer drug stores. Sell mostly bum likker, 'sfar as I could see.

All the bums stand outside the restaurants and hit up those who are coming out. Rather a bit of psychology in that, too.

After making the round of about a dozen oil companies I finally got a job and soon as I got to work I heard that we would be lucky to get in more than two or three days a week. Men being laid off all the time. Lasted just about three weeks, so I figured it was high time to head for New Orleans and put my ticket to work and go to sea again for a spell.

Not liking conditions in N. O. I once more cranked up the old gas buggy and took aboard a pilot for New York, where I eventually landed after navigating some of the worst roads anyone could ever conceive in Mississippi and Alabama.

I believe I read something concerning the O. S T. in Camp-Fire on one or two occasions.

Oh yes! It is passable but that statement covers a multitude of sins! Rough and washboardy as it can be, excepting a stretch of about twenty-two miles which is smooth as glass. I can't say that it is fun dodging trees on a cattle trail wide enough for one car and hitting the same creek a dozen or more times. You have to drive through it!

I'd say it is in about the same condition as when the Españolas established it! This woody part is about eighteen miles from the small settlement of Roosevelt, as I remember. And between San Antone and Houston it was nothing less than a disgrace most of the way. I'll never forget U. S. 90.

Of course there is a very good reason or reasons for the difference, but I maintain and assert that California has the best roads of any state in the union and their road laws are far and above the best. I am not a Californian, either. My home address is the largest city in the Panhandle of Texas, where it blows and blows and then some.

As this has turned out to be a sort of personal autobiography, I may as well go back a few years and include the rest.

Part of my earliest years were spent in a city on the border between Arkansas and the Indian Territory. This same city was the point of administration of the Indian Territory. I dimly remember the day when the territory was admitted with Oklahoma as a State. There was a big celebration on the part of the Indians who did much dancing and yelling. This city also was where Cherokee Bill met his end (end of a rope).

The original name was given by Hernando De Soto who established a trading post there called La Belle Point as I remember the story. It was later changed, however. In the early part of this century it was a rather wet and rough city with the usual tough section known as "Texas Corner."

Did my bit in the last war and after my discharge gravitated to Chicago where things were pretty tight. Met a number of former members of my outfit and being kinda hard up took a job as "guard" at one of the big steel corporations. "Gunman" would have been a much more appropriate name for it. Few people at the time knew that this was more than a mere strike and that numerous people were killed and pitched battles took place. We

finally tired of this, especially being sniped at in the dark, so we left that job. One other hombre and I took a notion to hop down to the Wichita Falls oil field so by means of paid fares (few), blinds, tops, et cetera, we reached a point on the Katy some few miles above Dennison when the blooming ball went into a ditch. We luckily escaped with our lives.

Then to pass over a period of roughnecking in the oil fields, I took a notion to go to sea. For quite a few years I traveled the globe from one end to the other and saw many things. Happened to be passing through the Dardanelles during an artillery engagement between the Turks and Greeks in their fiasco of a year or two. We were in Smyrna a few weeks after Kemal Pasha occupied the city. It had been pretty well destroyed and Greeks, Jews, Armenians and other nationalities had been used as decorations. For squares and squares were the dead, some hanging from tripods of wooden poles. The streets were littered with bodies the Turks had mutilated in various manners.

Well, I guess my life has been rather commonplace and would not be of much interest to some others who have had their say in Camp-Fire but thought you might be interested in knowing where *Adventure* goes. Many of them go ashore in unheard of places such as Aden, Samarang, Balik-Papan, Macassar, Belawan-Deli, Bais, Pulapandan, Cocanado and other places to the lone Americans or English who very much relish getting an old much worn copy.

Best of luck to you, the pilot, and the ship *Adventure*.

Hasta luego.—J. C.

It Is To Smile

I SAW a contest once, in Childs, Arizona. With red chalk some backyard artist had drawn the picture of Two-Gun Gertrude (or whomever) on a plaster wall. Three men, each fancying his "quick draw" and accurate shooting, took part. The "timing" was done by an interested old-timer who wielded, not a stop-watch but an old, hunter case Waltham on the end of a chain which probably would have held an anchor of the *Mauretania*.

Eighteen shots were fired at a distance of ten measured paces. The winner emptied his gun in what was called "three and one-half seconds" after he started his draw. I took at least two seconds more . . .

Two-Gun Gertie suffered just four wounds, one of which might have been called serious . . .

"Whenever a fiction character plucks a knife from his boot, it causes me interesting speculation. Some of those tough old plainsmen hardly ever wore any socks, and a double-edged Bowie made from a high-grade file—I'd pluck it out and I *wouldn't* plunk it back! Of course it's just a knack.

Speaking of deadly weapons—they're mostly in urban hands (or pockets) now, I reckon. To the best of my knowledge, a cowboy quarrel would go about like this:

The Fastest Draw

Me an' Bob, my brother-in-law,
Argied about the fastest draw.
That mule stuck up for the shoulder-clip,
Tho' he KNOWED the quickest was from th' hip!
As a way to settle it him an' me
We went for our guns si-multanyusly!
Ol' Bob didn't have no show a-tall,—
My six-gun hung on the bunkhouse wall!
An' I got th' drop while he tried t' drag
HIS gun from th' top of his ol' war-bag!
"Quit it, boys!" says the "Old Man"—Jim.
Well, we didn't want no truck with Him!
He's a two-gun man—as we both well knew.
(A "scatter gun" and a twenty-two!)

—LEONARD NEWTON, Garden City, Mo.

Off-The-Trail

THE NEXT ISSUE of *Adventure* is one I heartily recommend—but concerning which a word of warning may be advisable. It is *no* bedside companion for a man with a weak heart! What is probably J. D. Newsom's finest complete novel of the French Foreign Legion begins the number—"Too Tough To Kill!" Then, with "D'Artagnan" rushing forward in action, mystery and suspense, there appear excellent tales by F. R. Buckley, R. S. Spears, Raoul Whitfield, Henry La Cossitt—and a truly sensational story by Edgar Young, the nature of which I dare not reveal in advance.

It is concerning a complete novelette—an off-the-trail story if there ever was one—that the bulk of the warning covers, however, "Digger Fool Brunn" by Dex Volney, is a story so genuinely terrible (in the best sense of that word) that it had best be skipped by those who did not thoroughly enjoy "The Pit and the Pendulum," "The Speckled Band," "The Hound of the Baskervilles," and "The Turn of the Screw."—ANTHONY M. RUD.

Ask Adventure

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Sailors' Braid

IT WILL be recalled that in the July 1st issue, a reader took Major Malcolm Wheeler-Nicholson to task for an allusion he had made in his story, "Lost Legions," to the color of the braid American sailors wear on their collars. The question then arose as to whether either the braid or neckerchief bore any significance as a symbol of mourning for Lord Nelson; and on this point numerous letters were received from readers—sailormen and landlubbers both. But unfortunately their opinions differed so widely that we finally resorted to the Ask Adventure Department as a court of last appeal. The following statement of the case, as handed down by Lieutenant Francis V. Greene, in charge of the Naval Matters section, we may with all confidence accept as authentic:

The white stripes on the collars and cuffs of the enlisted man's blouse and the black neckerchief have no historical significance. There is a popular tradition to the effect that three stripes commemorate the three victories of Lord Nelson, but this story is not borne out by facts.

In the English Navy the three stripes were adopted in 1857, when the enlisted men's uniform was standardized at that time. A committee was appointed by the Admiralty to consider the question of the enlisted men's uniform and adopt a standard design. This committee found that it was a universal practise with the enlisted men to ornament their collars with strips of braid in various designs as suited their own fancy and when the standardized uniform was adopted, the committee settled on three stripes on the collar as a standard ornament.

In the United States Navy, the stripes were first introduced in the uniform regulations issued by Secretary Welles in 1866, to designate the class of the wearer. An enlisted man of the first class wore three stripes; one of the second class wore two stripes; and one of the third class wore one stripe. The same scheme was followed in the taping on the cuffs. The successor to Mr. Welles, however changed these regulations so as to remove the stripes and it was not until the Seventies that the three stripes of white braid were again put back on the collar of all classes of enlisted men.

The black neckerchief was worn all the time that these changes were being made in the white stripes.

The uniform regulations prior to those of Secretary Welles provided for collars with white stitching, and in some of the very early uniforms it is found that this stitching ran into fancy designs.

IN REGARD to the other popular tradition, that the black neckerchief is a badge of mourning for Lord Nelson, this is another tradition that has no foundation in facts. In olden times, in fact as late as 1830, it was a general custom for sailor men to wear their hair braided into a pigtail. This pigtail was usually slushed in grease to make it rigid, and, to protect the collars of their jackets from this grease, the men wore a neckerchief around the neck. This neckerchief was sometimes black, sometimes red and one old English writer states that the colors of neckerchiefs seen at a gathering of English sailors at a tavern resembled the hues of the rainbow. The colored neckerchief disappeared with the braided hair and the black neckerchief became a part of the regulation "slops" as the clothing and small stores issued to the men were called in the early days of the history of our Navy. There is absolutely no foundation to the story that the black neckerchief commemorates the death of Lord Nelson, as this black neckerchief was worn in the English Navy many years prior to his death.

An early mention of the neckerchief is in an order of the French minister of marine of 1678, this is the first regulation regarding the uniform in the

French sea service, it reads, "The men are to wear a shirt of red cloth with copper buttons, blue pantaloons with red stockings, blue caps and a *black neck cloth*."

An English Naval officer can be quoted on this subject also, Commander C. N. Robinson, R. N., in "The Royal Navy" says:

"Red-and-yellow or bandana 'kerchiefs were frequent, but black predominated, the fable that black was introduced in memory of Nelson's death being of quite modern origin and without foundation. 'Kerchiefs were worn outside the jacket and with one corner hanging down to protect it from the hair; and they do not appear as a rule, to have been put under the collar of the shirt until the pigtail had gone. The frock collar was not worn outside the jacket, nor was it square in shape until well into the nineteenth century. It is said to have been copied from the uniform of some American sailors, the extra covering it provided to the lungs of the men at the back when their jackets were off protecting them against pulmonary diseases. The three rows of white tape around the collar were not introduced until 1857, and have no connection whatever with Nelson's victories. Rows of tape on the collar of varying breadth and number originated in the men's love of ornament.

Hot Tamale

SOME wag once called this the Tin Age, and it is not surprising that you can get this peppery Mexican delicacy in canned form.

Request:—"I operate a small lunchroom, and I would like to know how to make a real 'hot tamale.'

Can you help me out? Where can I buy supplies for making them?"

—EUGENE CRESSEY, Rockland, Illinois.

Reply, by Mr. Horace Kephart:—Tamales are slender sausage-shaped dumplings of corn meal stuffed with finely minced beef or chicken, seasoned with chile powder, wrapped in soft corn husks, dipped in oil and cooked by steaming.

You can get chili powder from any first-class city grocery, or direct from the Gebhardt Chili Powder Co., San Antonio, Texas. It is a Mexican red pepper, spelled either chile or chili or chilli.

Canned tamales are put up by Libby and also by the Workman Packing Co., San Francisco.

Caliber

WHAT the numerical designation means.

Request:—"1. Speaking of the caliber of fire-arms, for instance .38, does it mean the diameter of the cartridge or the bullet? I have a .38 special Colt but .38 Short S & W cartridges will not fit same, although I understand .38 short Colt will, and it has been my understanding there was no difference between .38 S & W Short or .38 Colt Police cartridges, the exception being that the Colt cartridge was blunt on the end and the S & W pointed.

2. Is there any difference between the .38 Colt Special and the .38 S & W Special in the grains of powder and lead used?

3. There are some revolvers chambered for .32-20, .38-40, .44-40, etc. I would like to know what the second numerals denote. Could ordinary .32, .38 or .44 cartridges be used in same or are these arms chambered differently in the circumference of the cylinders and barrels.

4. I saw recently a Colt Special—I believe it is now called the Colt Official Police model instead of the Army Special as formerly—and the top of both sides of the groove running from the rear sight towards the front was matted or etched. Is there any particular reason for this and are all such arms now being made in the same way? I was told it helped in keeping out the glare of the sun when sighting on target. I have not seen any S & W arms made so, but I noticed the S & W was blued to a darker finish or blue-black while the Colt blueing was much lighter. This I was told was much better for a target arm, the darker finish being superior for target shooting thereby doing away with 'matting' the tops and placing a duller finish on the front sight.

5. Do you recommend checked wood or rubber stocks for all around service? It is noted that of late wood stocks have been more prevalent than rubber although I found rubber stocks less liable to wear or catch on clothing as the wood."

—J. W. MELLIN, Long Island City, N. Y.

Reply, by Mr. Donegan Wiggins:—The .38 refers to the diameter of the bullet in one-hundredths parts of an inch, but this never seems actually to correspond to the exact diameter; for instance, the .38 Special is .354, the .38-55 is actually about .380, and the .38 W. C. F. (.38-40) is .401, in actual measurement of one thousandth of an inch; the .38 Short Colt has what we call a heel bullet, while the .38 S & W has an inside lubricated bullet, making it of greater diameter as far as the brass shell is concerned.

2. I believe the .38 Special, both Colt Special and the S & W, are exactly the same in loading, and differ in shape of bullet only.

3. The second set of numerals refer to the original load of black powder for these cartridges, and as the cylinder is chambered for these shells with bottlenecks, the ordinary .32, .38 and .44 cartridges adapted to Colt and S & W revolvers originally will not fit in them properly, although they can be fired with some small success in the .32 and the .44 calibers.

4. I think the matting on the Colt "Official Police" model is standard issue now, but as my .38 Army Special is a rather old one, I can't be sure. Personally, I'd like the smooth finished surface best, as my experience is that the minute corrugations of checking wear bright from use much sooner than

does a flat black surface. Ever notice this in your experience? Except for the places where the hand is in contact with the metal, and for lessening the danger of slipping as on backstrap and trigger, and cocking spur, I prefer a plain blued surface.

5. I believe the wood is less apt to split or wear smooth, and far prefer it to rubber. I like ivory best of all, but oh, the cost!

Medal of Honor

A MUCH prized decoration that high ranking officers have little opportunity of winning.

Request:—"Can you tell me approximately how many D. S. C.'s were awarded to the troops, and how many Medals of Honor, during the late War?"
—T. L. PORTER, Bingham Canyon, Utah.

Reply, by Lieut. Glen R. Townsend:—Approximately eighty Medals of Honor and something over 5,200 Distinguished Service Crosses were given for services in the World War. Of the eighty Medals of Honor about 25 per cent. were posthumous awards, indicating something of the nature of the services which are held to justify the award of this decoration. About three-fifths of the total number were awarded to enlisted men and most of the remainder to junior officers. As the Medal of Honor is awarded only for valor in the presence of the enemy, the higher ranking officers have little opportunity to win it.

Also please note that the figures given above refer only to the Army Medal of Honor. The Navy also has a Medal of Honor and the conditions under which it is awarded are practically the same as for the Army. Only seven of the Naval Medals of Honor were awarded for services in the World War, all of them to enlisted men of the Navy. Nearly three-fourths of the total number of Distinguished Service Crosses were awarded to enlisted men and 80 per cent. of the total number were won by the Infantry. In addition to the number of crosses mentioned above there were about 100 awards of the Oak Leaf cluster which is given in lieu of another cross for an additional act warranting an award of the cross.

Snake and Salamander

DIAMOND-BACK "musk" and walking "eels."

Request:—"1. Can the Florida diamond-back rattler throw 'musk' with its tail or rectum? While living in Florida a friend (who was a native of Florida) and I killed a large diamond-back rattler, which we stretched out on the ground to measure the length. I held the end of the tape to the dead snake's head. Just as my friend placed the tape to the snake's tail it twitched violently and my friend jumped back in evident alarm, rubbing his eyes excitedly and claiming that the rattler had 'thrown musk.' He substantiated his statement by showing a large yellow spot on the arm of a white shirt he was wearing. He stated that if the 'musk' entered a cut it was as poisonous as the snake's fangs, and that if it entered one's eyes it caused blindness.

2. While walking across a field in the Florida Everglades, I came across what appeared to be a large black eel. The field was wet and mucky, but as there was no actual water covering it, I assumed the eel was dead. Poking it with a stick, I was surprised to see it viciously attack the stick, striking at it much in the manner of a snake. After killing it, I found that it had all the appearance of an eel, including fully developed gills, *but* immediately behind the gills were *two small legs* similar to a frog's front legs, and though it had gills it was evidently *breathing air,* as there was no water in the immediate vicinity. What was the name of it, and what are its habits?"—FRANK V. BELL, Cleveland, Ohio.

Reply, by Mr. Clifford H. Pope:—1. A snake does not purposely throw musk with its tail or rectum but many snakes have the habit of soiling one with their feces if handled. If at the time, through fright or pain, they happen to be thrashing about the substance would of course be thrown but quite accidentally. It certainly is not poisonous, though it might easily be irritating to the mucous membrane. A snake's digestive fluids are of course strong since they have to dissolve bone, teeth, etc.

2. The eel-like creature that you saw was one of two salamanders:

(*a*) Mud-eel or *Siren lacertina* from Florida.

This creature has two small front legs but no longitudinal stripes. There are four toes on each foot and three pairs of gill slits. It is common in the swamps of the southeastern and south central States.

(*b*) *Pseudobranchus striatus* (no good popular name).

This creature has the two front legs but the body is striped and each foot has three toes. It has but one gill slit on a side and inhabits the swamps from South Carolina through Florida, but is not common.

Polo

MOST of the ponies are culled from Western herds; and each player, to consider himself properly outfitted, must have what amounts to a small remuda.

Request:—"I understand that polo is swiftly becoming one of our most popular sports and I would like to know if you would give me the following information in regard to polo ponies?

How are polo ponies bred and trained?

Where do most of the ponies which find their way into the game in the United States come from; that is, from what parts of the country? Are many imported, and if so, why?

Must the game be in the animal's blood or can most any horse be trained to the game? Do you know of any examples where this was tried?

Can you tell me where the game is played in this country and when it was first introduced?

Can you tell me any breeders of polo ponies in the United States? What is the average playing like of a polo pony, and can you tell me the average cost for an A-1 animal?

From what stock do our domestic polo ponies come?

How are the animals cared for, and can you tell me how large a string a polo player usually has?"

—GEORGE E. KELLY, Pittsburgh, Pa.

Reply, by Mr. Thomas H. Dameron:—Polo has already become one of our most popular games as far as the wealthy classes and Army officers are concerned.

Your letter can best be answered generally by refering you to Forbes' "As To Polo" which is yet the authority on polo. Also to General Wm. H. Carter's article on horses in general published in National Geographic Magazine, Vol. 44, No. 5, Nov., 1923, which has a section devoted to polo ponies. His article is also published in book form by the same company for $3.00. Either of these can be referred to in any public library.

Few ponies are imported. Many breeders claim to breed polo ponies, but practically all of our ponies still come from the average Western herds or from the thoroughbreds, picked up by scouts who suspect polo qualities and either train them or turn them over to trainers. The spirit of the game must be instilled in the animal. Any horse can be trained to follow the ball around, etc., but he must know and enjoy the thrill of the game to be a real pony.

Many ponies break down under the strain of the game but those which stand the gaff usually play to a ripe old age many of the Army ponies are 20 years or older and still considered A-1.

The cost of a pony is governed only by how badly one wants him. Since it is a rich man's game they generally talk in thousands. I have seen good ponies sell for $400 to $500 and one no better for $2800. A player generally figures his string at a minimum of four and few play much with less than six.

Polo was introduced into this country by James Gordon Bennett in 1876. The game is played all over the States at nearly every Army Post, Meadowbrook, L. I., Bryn Mawr, Pa., Miami, Fla., Broadmoor, Colo., and other places too numerous to mention.

Gutta

FROM the romantic Malay Archipelago comes this most conventional of practical commodities.

Request:—"Will you kindly explain just what gutta inferior means?"—F. J. STOCKLI, Orlando, Fla.

Reply, by Mr. Charles Bell Emerson:—The term "gutta inferior" as used in British Malayan statistics covers all guttas other than gutta-percha, and includes jelutong.

Gutta hangkang is the product of a tree, *Palaquium leiocarpum*, found in large numbers on low-lying areas in Borneo. The gutta is whitish or slightly reddish and is used to adulterate the better grade guttas. It has an odor similar to jelutong. The market value of hangkang is higher than that of jelutong because it does not contain so much water.

Gutta jangkar is an inferior gutta selling at about $30. Straits per picul (a picul is a commercial weight varying in different countries and for different commodities. In China, Japan, Sumatra, and elsewhere it is 133⅓ lbs. (or 68.48 kgs.). In the Philippines it is usually 140 lbs. (or 1-16th of a long ton), and there is a Malay picul of 142.7 lbs., when No. 1 gutta is at $400. Straits a picul.

Gutta is obtained from a tree which is quite common in the swamps and lowlands of Sarawak. To obtain the gutta the tree is felled as near the ground as possible. The bark is then ringed at intervals of 18 inches, and under each ring a small cup (made of bark) is placed. Into this cup the latex drips. When the latex has finished exuding it is collected and put into a trough full of water, under which a fire is lighted and kept going until all the lumps of gutta soften. A quantity of bark of the "samac" tree is steeped in the hot water, turning it a dark red; when the gutta has been thoroughly softened and reddened it is taken out and molded into slabs and blocks of the desired shape and size and allowed to harden, then it is ready for market. As taken to the market by the natives this gutta is full of bark chippings and dead leaves; its cleansing is left to the Chinese purchasers, etc.

These products are sent to Singapore for reboiling. As would be expected, the quantity exported from there is somewhat less, due to the extraction of dirt, resin, etc., and also to the loss of moisture. It may also be presumed that a considerable amount of produce which comes into the Straits Settlements as "gutta inferior" is re-exported as gutta-percha.

Gold

LIKELY spots for placer mining in North America.

Request:—"I am anxious to get some data on placer mining either in the States or elsewhere. I am now in a position to gamble a few thousand dollars and three years' time, and as I have had a yearning since childhood to look for minerals, I am trying to find out a possible location where my chances would be best.

I had in mind Trinity County, California, and the central part of Idaho.

I would like some data as to climatic conditions, etc., in those two places and any other country. (I bar Alaska as too cold.)

—F. ALLAN EVANS, Kingston, Pa.

Reply, by Mr. Victor Shaw:—I regret that you bar Alaska (or portions of it) because right today I consider one region—the Cassiar—about the most favorable in North America for placer prospecting.

Isn't any colder there in winter than in many States like Montana and Colorado, or even in the hill region of your own State. I've lived in them all and speak from actual experience. Stock is frequently wintered through on range grass in the Cassiar, pack-stock, I mean.

However, there is still some chance of picking up a little gold in sections of the country you name, Trinity Co., California, and Central Idaho combed and re-combed by persistent prospecting since the days of '49-'50 when all the world thought the State underlaid by solid gold formation. However, a lot of it was overlooked but mostly in low-grade ground which can be handled at a profit only by hydraulic, or dredging methods. But the small prospector for gold placer deposits can now and then pick up a little here and there in odd corners. In Trinity County, your most favorable section I think would be around Weaverville where surface prospectors sell quite a bit of gold each year to stores and banks. Also there is a chance around Minerville, Lewiston and Hayfork. Trinity County is well down the list on gold placer production, but ranks fifth for sluicing and small surface placers which is what you're interested in.

In Idaho State there is far less placer gold handled now than at any time since 1910—the largest production having been 'way back in 1912 to 1914 before the World War. Most of the large Idaho ore output now is in silver-lead This is a general statement only, and relative, since the total gold placer produced is now around 8000 to 10,000 fine oz. and placer gold is found scattered pretty well all over the State. However, although much is found all along the Snake River and its branches, much of the gold is very fine and hard to save. Your best chance is probably in the central region as your query mentions.

The Salmon River region seems as favorable as any—the country around Lucile perhaps, in the Simpson District, Idaho County. Also in the same county are the Camp Howard District, the Clearwater, Elk City, Newsome and Warren Districts, all having placer deposits and ground which is worth prospecting.

However, there are spots along the lower Snake River that offer a chance for rocker work: 5 or 6 miles from American Falls, Power Co.; and in the Snake River District of Twin Falls County; also the Snake River District, Owyhee County, near Melba and Wilson.

Also there has been some exceptionally rich placer gold found in the Mt. Pisgah District of Bonneville County.

Why don't you take a crack at Trinity County first? Then, if you hit nothing worth staying with, make a stab at the various sections mentioned in Idaho? I enclose leaflets on placer work which are pretty general in character, and perhaps well known to you already. If you're an old hand, you'll find a lot of value in Peele's Engineer's Handbook, sold by McGraw-Hill Book Co.; 370 Seventh Ave., N. Y. C., for $10.00. Covers all sorts of data on placering, beside everything necessary on lode mining.

Our Experts—They have been chosen by us not only for their knowledge and experience but with an eye to their integrity and reliability. We have emphatically assured each of them that his advice or information is not to be affected in any way by whether a commodity is or is not advertised in this magazine.

They will in all cases answer to the best of their ability, using their own discretion in all matters pertaining to their sections, subject only to our general rules for "Ask Adventure," but neither they nor the magazine assume any responsibility beyond the moral one of trying to do the best that is possible.

1. **Service**—It is free to anybody, provided self-addressed envelop and *full* postage, *not attached*, are enclosed. Correspondents writing to or from foreign countries will please enclose International Reply Coupons, purchasable at any post-office, and exchangeable for stamps of any country in the International Postal Union. Be sure that the issuing office stamps the coupon in the left-hand circle.

2. **Where to Send**—Send each question direct to the expert in charge of the particular section whose field covers it. He will reply by mail. Do NOT send questions to this magazine.

3. **Extent of Service**—No reply will be made to requests for partners, for financial backing, or for chances to join expeditions. "Ask Adventure" covers business and work opportunities, but only if they are outdoor activities, and only in the way of general data and advice. It is in no sense an employment bureau.

4. **Be Definite**—Explain your case sufficiently to guide the expert you question.

The complete list of "Ask Adventure" *experts appears in the first issue of every month.*

THE TRAIL AHEAD

A Sumptuous Treat in Exotic Adventure

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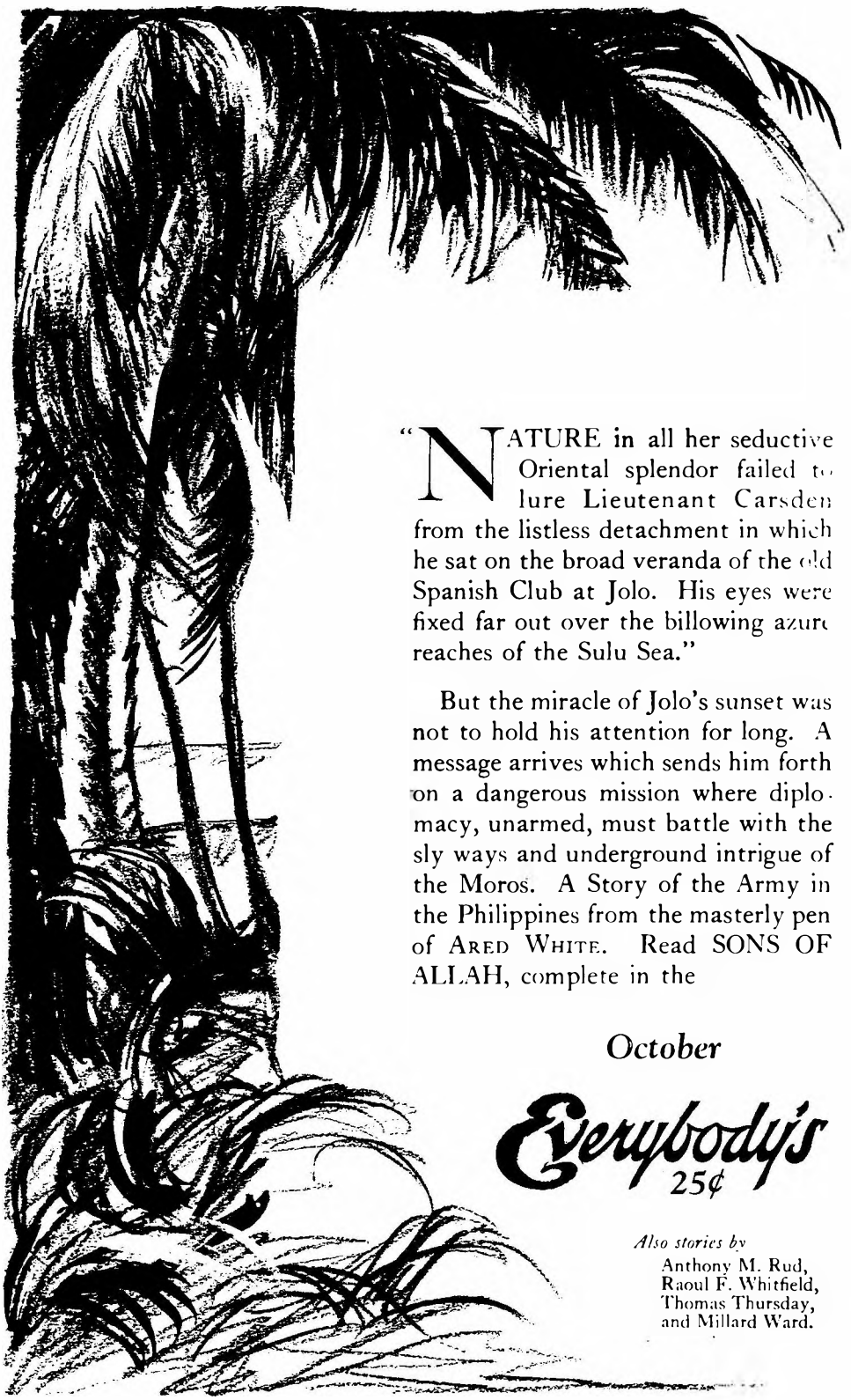
The second instalment of D'ARTAGNAN, a brilliant sequel to "THE THREE MUSKETEERS," by ALEXANDRE DUMAS and H. BEDFORD-JONES; IN EVERY PORT, a sparkling and witty tale of the sea, by F. R. BUCKLEY; HELL'S ANGEL, a story of American Flyers in the Philippines, by RAOUL F. WHITFIELD; THE MOB, a gripping tale of the gangs of a great city, by HENRY LACOSSITT; A BASS DRUM FOR LOUIE, a droll story of a musician who went to war, by FRANK J. SCHINDLER; A LAZY MAN'S POISON, a tale of the gray wolf haunts, by RAYMOND S. SPEARS; and WHO WAS THIS MAN? an article in which EDGAR YOUNG presents some astonishing evidence in support of an almost incredible episode.



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