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Adventure

A POPULAR PUBLICATION

JUNE

TOWN-TAMER
by WALT COBURN

◆

COMMANDER ELLSBERG

JUNE

ADVENTURE

15 Cents

FACT THAT OUTTHRILLS FICTION!

The *Egypt* went down in twenty minutes. Out of the fog had slid a French freighter to ram her amidships, and then backing up to vanish in the mists again.

Down with the men and women aboard the *Egypt* went five million dollars in bullion—down 330 feet, 100 feet deeper than divers had ever gone.

Even the exact position of the tragedy in the fog was vague, and more than forty miles from shore.

For three years divers sought the wreck, and found it, and after they had found it they and their ship were blown to bits by a vast undersea explosion.

And still other divers came, to grope in the murk and terrific pressures, and devise weird metal arms and hands to tear the iron bulk apart and gather the gold.

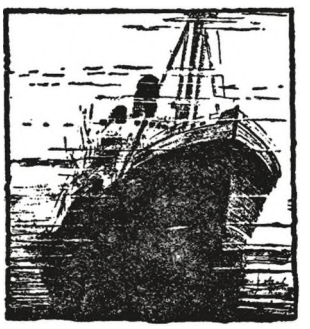
They had to find a way to send a pair of human eyes and a human brain into the depths where divers could not go.*

The *Laurentic* ran north of Ireland in the night. Her going was a great secret of the World War for she carried twenty-five million dollars in gold, and the gold was bound for New York to buy food and steel for a desperate British army.

And in the bitter January night something hit her. An explosion burst her plates apart, the sky lit with a flame, and she plunged under.

Now began the world's most dangerous job of salvaging. The gold had to be recovered, no matter how many lives it cost, and it must be done before the German spy system learned the facts.

No fleet could guard the diving tug in its lone work miles from land, for a fleet would bring suspicion.



Each hour was filled with the peril of a prowling German submarine.

For two desperate weeks, divers worked in the freezing water, until one broke into the strong room and stood on the greatest pile of gold any diver has ever seen in the history of the world.

And then a gale whipped out of the north, and smashed them from their prize.

When they returned and the diver went below again, the gold was gone.

The danger and the difficulty and the mystery had just begun.**

Commander Ellsberg, hero of the S-51, tells the greatest stories of death and danger and courage in modern diving history in "Men Under the Sea."

Each story is complete. Each tells the fierce, lone-handed fights against the pressure, the darkness, the strange and deadly accidents in the deeps.

*Adventure for May, on sale April 10th.

**Adventure for June, on sale May 10th.

JULY ISSUE ON SALE JUNE 9TH

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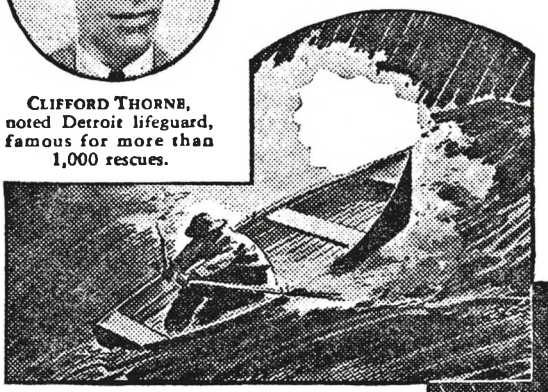
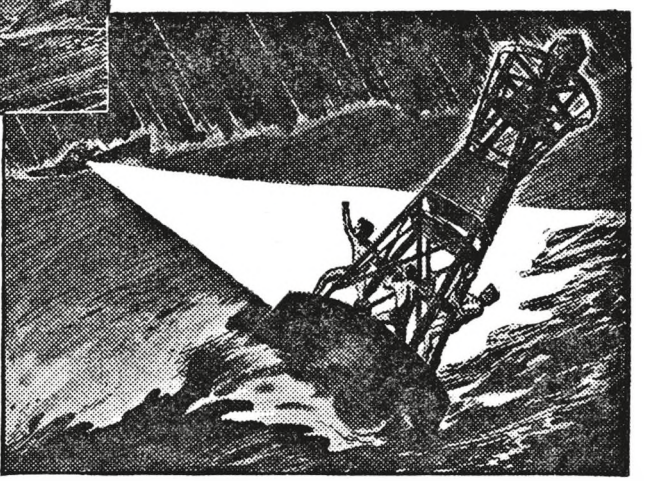
CLINGING FOR THEIR LIVES TO A ROCKING BUOY

CLIFFORD THORNE, noted Detroit lifeguard, famous for more than 1,000 rescues.

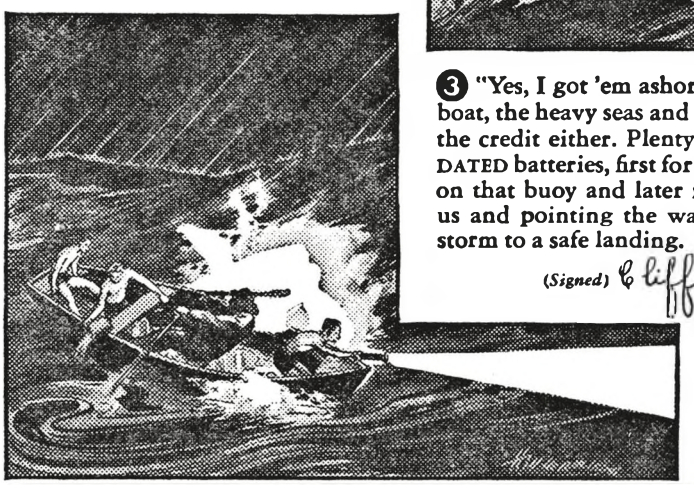
...CLIFFORD THORNE ADDS THREE MORE TO RECORD OF 1000 RESCUES



❶ "I stayed out on Lake St. Claire until well after dark fishing," writes Clifford Thorne of 716 Van Dyke Ave., Detroit, Mich. "As I started rowing home a terrific squall hit. Rowing was almost impossible and the rain was so heavy it blotted out lights half a mile away. And then, over the howl of the wind I thought I heard cries for help.

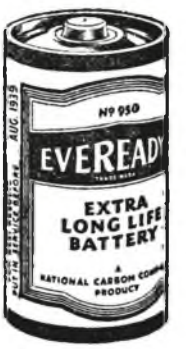


❷ "But I couldn't tell where the sound was coming from. I thought of the powerful, focusing flashlight that lay on the back seat, reached cautiously for it and played it around me... *and there they were!* Three youngsters clinging in terror to a rocking sea buoy. They had tried the usual stunt of swimming out to the buoy and back, but the storm spoiled the plan.



❸ "Yes, I got 'em ashore safely, in spite of an overloaded boat, the heavy seas and the heavy rain, and I can't take all the credit either. Plenty of it belongs to 'Eveready' *fresh* DATED batteries, first for finding the lads on that buoy and later for standing by us and pointing the way through that storm to a safe landing.

(*Signed*) *C. Clifford Thorne*"



FRESH BATTERIES LAST LONGER... *Look for the* DATE-LINE

NATIONAL CARBON COMPANY, INC., 30 EAST 42nd STREET, NEW YORK, N. Y.

Unit of Union Carbide and Carbon Corporation

LOST TRAILS

NOTE—We offer this department to those of our readers who wish to get in touch again with friends or acquaintances separated by years or the fates. For the benefit of the friend you seek, give your own name and full address if possible. All inquiries along this line, unless otherwise designated, will be considered as intended for publication in full with inquirer's name. Please notify *Adventure* immediately should you establish contact with the person you are seeking. Space permitting, every inquiry addressed to "Lost Trails" will be run in three consecutive issues.

J. M. Kobold last seen in Sioux City, Iowa, 1924 or 1925. Information wanted by his daughter, Dorothy Kobold at 1200 West 25th Street, Minneapolis, Minn.

Roy Miller who served on U. S. S. Martha Washington during World War. Word wanted by shipmate Arthur L. Cummings, Lake-Michigan, R. 3, Clare Co.

Louis Meyers, last heard of aboard merchant ship. Write Herbert H. Heater, 879 Baseline, San Bernardino, Cal.

Fred Hull, formerly of Winterset, Iowa, last heard from at Albuquerque, New Mexico, also was ship's carpenter in Pacific waters. Information appreciated by his son, Fred Hull, P. O. Box 17, Covington, Ky.

Peter Barran last heard of at the Seaman's Home, New York, about eight years ago. Word wanted by his sister, Mrs. Mary A. Ryan, 347 Lookout Ave., Dayton, Ohio.

Word wanted of Robert Taylor, formerly of Seattle, Washington, and now somewhere on the West Coast—5 feet, 9 inches, blonde hair and smokes a pipe. Write Alec Hoyer, 990 Geary St. No. 106, San Francisco, Calif.

Wanted: Word from Arnold Wood. Last heard from U. S. M. C. Write "Irish", Box 1925, Juneau, Alaska.

H. K. Van Alen, P. O. Box 96, Champion, Michigan, would like word of John Edward Sylvester Schaeffer More who left his home in San Diego, Calif., about 13 years ago, saying he was going to the oil fields in Texas.

S. Senster of Cucumber, West Virginia, would like to know the whereabouts of Elmyra Edwards, last heard from at Winston-Salem, N. C.

Word wanted of Earl S. Stephenson, Canadian who served in North China, in 1927, 1928, in 15th U. S. Inf. Write J. W. McLaughlin, c|o H. Palmer, Route 1, Box 4, Pocatello, Idaho.

Captain Arthur Carl who served in the Machine Gun Corps, British Expeditionary Force in France during the World War, last heard of in Florida 1924, please communicate with Colonel G. Gauntlett, c|o Grindlay & Co., 54 Parliament Street, London, England.

Ninety degree section of Mexican Peso bearing initials AT would like to contact other 270 degrees. Address E. Stanton Brown, 4331 Woodland Avenue, Western Springs, Illinois, U. S. A.

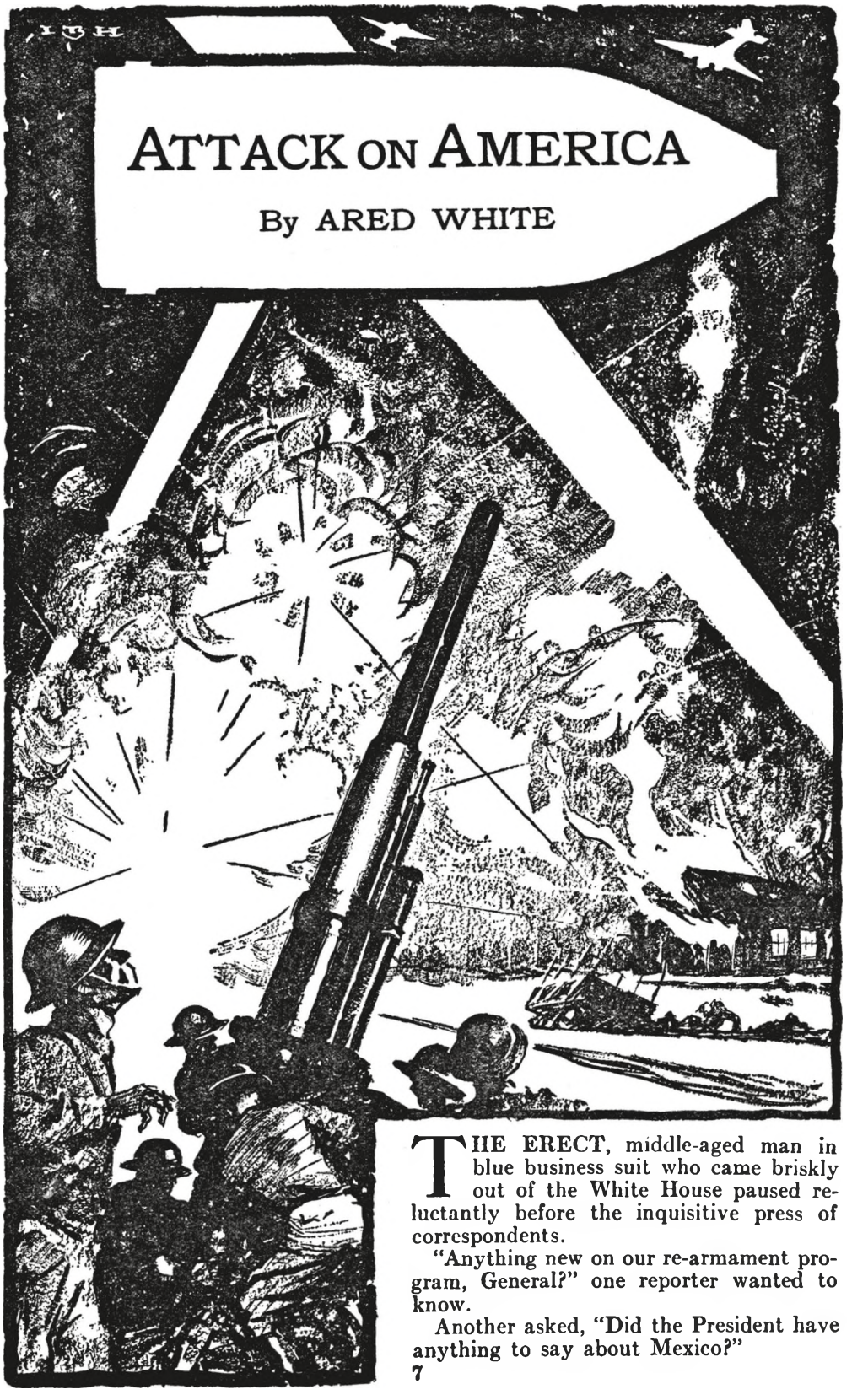
Chester E. Baumgardner, 1020 E. Olive St., Bloomington, Ill., is anxious to get in touch with any former members of Co. "E," 51st Infantry during the World War.

Otterson. Word wanted of any of my mother's relatives who went to America from Ireland. John M. O'Callaghan, P. O. Box 50, Mossman, Queensland, Australia.

The following were all yeomen in Flag Office of Vice Admiral of the Pacific Fleet from 1919-1922:—Emery Dobson, "Spick" LaChance, Carl Dudding, Tom Girty, Roger Sherman, John Frew, Frank Bertin. Word wanted by former shipmate, Harold P. Gilmour, 22 Worcester Street, Boston, Mass.

Herbert Roig, 37, originally from Texas, last heard of in 1928 living at Marquette Apts., 965 Geary St., San Francisco, Calif. Was working for the San Francisco *Examiner* circulation department in 1928. Please write Stanley Jones, 1146 Webster St., San Francisco, Calif.

Dudleigh R. Wickham, 61 Holmes Court, Albany, New York, wants word of "Clifford Ogden" or "Clifford Cochrane," formerly of Oakland, Calif., undertaker, who served with him in the 63rd Infantry, also helped build the railroad from Seward to Fairbanks, Alaska. Also Bob Baker of San Francisco, who left Seward with him on the *Alameda*, who still has the Indian pestle Wickham found when they were shipwrecked near Vancouver, B. C. Understands Baker shipped to China.



THE ERECT, middle-aged man in blue business suit who came briskly out of the White House paused reluctantly before the inquisitive press of correspondents.

"Anything new on our re-armament program, General?" one reporter wanted to know.

Another asked, "Did the President have anything to say about Mexico?"

General Hague, chief of staff of the army, had managed to dissipate with a calm smile that gravity in which he had emerged from conference with the President. There was nothing in his manner to suggest that he had dealt frankly with the possibility of a disastrous invasion of the most powerful and, paradoxically, most defenseless nation under the sun.

"There is nothing to give out, gentlemen," he said quietly, and strode to his military sedan that was waiting in the driveway.

The general's car sped off to the long, concrete Munitions Building on Constitution Avenue that houses the War Department. General Hague hurried to his offices on the second floor and instructed his aide-de-camp to summon Colonel Flagwill. In a few minutes Flagwill, acting assistant chief of staff G-2, in charge of military intelligence, reported in from another wing.

"Sit down, Flagwill," the general invited. "The President had just decided to go to the bottom of this Mexican situation. Very secretly, of course, which puts it straight up to us to get the picture from behind the military scene."

Flagwill's lean face remained impassive except for a quick gleam of fire in his piercing black eyes.

"That's good news, sir!" he exclaimed. "My section has just completed our final estimate of the situation based on all present available information. Would you care to hear my report now?"

"Go ahead," Hague invited.

"Our best estimate is—there are 200,000 European regulars mobilized in Mexico. That covers organized infantry divisions, artillery, cavalry, tanks, air corps and technical groups transported from Mediterranean ports during the past six months, together with some reservist infantry assembled from South American points. All have been formally inducted into the Mexican regular army and equipped with a new distinctive Mexican cotton uniform. To all outward appearances they support the arguments of the new Mexican dictatorship that, as a part of the Mexican military forces, these troops are not the concern of the United States."

General Hague's straight mouth parted in a cynical smile.

"There is the big rub, Flagwill. Mexico has so rationalized her European army that the American public falls for the fiction completely. It almost has our State Department fooled, even when our ambassador knows the real commander in Mexico is Van Hassek, one of the smartest tacticians of the old Imperial Army."

"The whole subterfuge is obvious, sir," Flagwill averred. "We know that Van Hassek has received heavy complements of fighting planes, much field artillery, tanks and anti-aircraft guns. Just how much of this modern stuff the Lord only knows. But if we needed further reasonable proof of what Van Hassek's troops are getting ready to do, we find it in the glib network of explanations and in their relentless screen of secrecy. Not to mention, sir, their native labor battalions now feverishly building new motor roads to our most important border points. My whole section agrees that the United States faces attack from Van Hassek's army."

GENERAL HAGUE nodded his head somberly.

"I informed the President to the same effect today. But the public simply refuses to take Mexico seriously as a possible enemy. In fact, the whole country is unwilling to believe we're vulnerable to attack."

Flagwill flared, "But can't they see that Mexico is merely a pawn in the vast intrigue? Doesn't the whole world shape-up tell people we're hell bent for the worst war in history? Does any sane person think the coalition powers dare leave the United States sitting on the sidelines as the Kaiser did twenty years ago to step in at the last minute and upset the apple cart?"

"It may be very plain to the trained staffs, Flagwill," Hague said patiently. "But our people just can't visualize the possibility of invasion. So we've got to develop concrete facts for the President's use, which means we've got to do some high class secret prying behind the scenes in Mexico. The President is very gravely concerned and wants the

facts as quickly as possible. But what can he do unless Congress is convinced and facts are available for the public?"

"In the meantime, General, are we to re-enforce our border garrisons for defense in event attack comes sooner than expected?"

The chief of staff groaned and said, "The President doesn't dare order troop concentrations now, Flagwill. Congress would probably refuse him an appropriation for transportation. He'd be accused of saber-rattling. Remember, the elections are this fall and the opposition would set up a terrific howl that the President was trying to re-elect himself by use of war bogeys to scare the people and becloud the issues."

Flagwill mopped his brow.

"Just what's our move, please?" he asked slowly.

"Collect facts. Real, concrete facts, which means we've got to get into the Van Hassek confidence somehow. Here's where we're to have a lift from our State Department. Our ambassador to France has something very secret hatched up with the French secret service—a chance to slip one of our officers into the Mexican army at Mexico City."

Flagwill scowled an appraisal of his chief's sketchy plan and asked, "Can you give me further details?"

"No. The man we select will get full information from our embassy at Paris. It's very important that we pick the right man for this, a man with plenty of brains and backbone. I rather had young Benning in mind."

"Good man," Flagwill promptly agreed. "But right now I've got Captain Benning down in San Antonio. Investigating another spy mess at Eighth corps area headquarters."

"Better bring him back to Washington at once," General Hague decided. "Instruct corps area to ship him by fast plane. Benning must sail from New York for France without delay. That's all, Flagwill."

CAPTAIN ALLAN BENNING, in civilian clothes, sat waiting in a battered car just outside Fort Sam Houston. For two weeks he had been following one of those slender threads of investigation that were intended to connect local espionage activities with the Van Hassek army in Mexico. If he succeeded, that would be another important indication of how the military wind blew in Mexico.

Important secrets had been stolen from southern military headquarters at the fort. Not least of these was the secret tables of organization of the proposed new American fighting division. Gone too, with the file copy of army mobilization plans.

Benning's suspicion had centered promptly on a Staff Sergeant Gaujos. Not by reason of any action on the part of the sergeant but because of an eloquent intangible, the inconsistency of Gaujos' background, personality and intelligence with his present occupation.

Gaujos was a man of forty, a Frenchman by birth, had served as a combat pilot with the French air corps during the World War. Three years ago he had taken out papers as an American citizen and enlisted in the army. Before enlistment he had worked as a commercial pilot, specializing in difficult trailblazing flights over south and central America.

At headquarters Gaujos' superiors swore by him. He was highly competent as an administrative clerk, with supervision over half a dozen typists. To the casual observer Gaujos appeared a saturnine, stolid man who had given up the struggle for higher success and settled happily into his present little groove. His face was long, lean and angular, with small, black eyes in which there was no friendliness. His sharp intelligence and willingness to work over exacting military details had put him across with his officers.

But back of the man's stolidity, Benning detected an alert, restless mind held under disciplined control. He had learned by cautious investigation that Gaujos dined with various unidentified civilians at San Antonio hotels, and that his days off were spent in chartered commercial planes scouting the country.

With Benning, it had been a matter of baiting a trap. He had fabricated a secret report that American reserves were

being sent to the border and had it placed, the night before, where Gaujos would find it in the course of his duty today. Now Benning was waiting for Gaujos to leave the fort when the headquarters crew knocked off work for the day.

Gaujos took a bus into San Antonio and had dinner at a hotel. At dusk he engaged a taxicab and headed south out of the city.

So far as Gaujos was concerned, Benning was ready now to take his man into custody for a grilling had the case been one of landing another army spy. But the country was filled with foreign agents, G-2 estimates running as high as 20,000 of the breed, active and dormant despite sporadic spy roundups of recent months. The important thing with Gaujos was to trace his activities to Mexico.

It was darkening when Gaujos left his taxicab and proceeded down the road on foot from a point south of the old country poor farm.

Benning parked his own car by the roadside and held the trail from a distance. Gaujos turned suddenly off the road into a field. Benning recognized it as a field that did service on occasion as an emergency landing place for student fliers from Randolph Field. A fringe of willows lay along the road, and through these Gaujos plunged with the deciveness of a man who knows where he is going.

But Benning learned a few moments later that Gaujos was not off his guard. As the captain eased into the willows, a stab of flame blinded his eyes, the bark of a pistol clapped his ears. He dove to the ground, his right hand whipping his own service pistol into play, and sent a bullet driving at the spot whence had come the attack. Then he lay tensely waiting.

The grim silence that followed was broken shortly by the kicking over of a propeller out in the field, followed by the easy purr of a high powered engine tuning for a take-off.

As Benning leaped to his feet his eyes made out, in the vague light, a figure zig-zagging at high speed into the field. Aiming carefully, he sent one bullet after another at the fugitive until a click told him that his weapon was empty.

The runner made the plane, vaulted inside. Benning, now helpless to act, saw the shadowy plane waddle down the stubble and roar into the sky. In a twinkling it was swallowed up in the void of a Texas twilight.

BENNING swore under his breath at his ill luck and drove to his hotel in San Antonio. There was a burn at his neck which told him of a close call with death. He examined it critically, decided it was not serious enough to require an antitetanus treatment, and called the corps area G-2 officer, Lt. Colonel Bart, on the telephone.

"Hard luck, sir," he reported. "It was a hot trail. No doubt Gaujos was a more important agent than we thought and it's likely he has a team in San Antonio."

Bart replied crisply, "Meet me immediately at Kelly Field, Benning. Drive as fast as your flivver will take you."

When, fifteen minutes later, Benning sped up to the gate at the flying field, Lt. Colonel Bart was waiting in a military sedan into which he ushered the captain at once.

"I'll have your car checked in," Bart announced. "I've a fast plane waiting for you, Benning. You're to return immediately to Washington—orders of the chief of G-2."

Benning felt the rise of his pulse as they drove down along the rows of hangars to where a sleek new observation plane waited with spinning motors. Orders of Colonel Flagwill. That summons, he knew, meant a vastly more important job than this Texas spy case.

A captain in flying togs was standing under the fuselage of the observation plane.

Bart said to him, "Wallin, this is your passenger for Washington. You're to deliver him there in the shortest possible time. That's all, sir!"

In the sky there was the first rose glow of approaching sunrise when Benning made out, through the glass bottom of the plane, the wide silver ribbon of

the Potomac. In the distance, Washington's monument stood sentinel over the sleeping capital; the large round domes of Congress loomed up out of the granite and marble huddle of government buildings.

As the plane swung down for a landing at Bolling Field he glimpsed the gray hulk that houses the State Department.

There was a whimsical fascination this morning for Benning in the city that lay half awake under his circling plane. An odd phantasy shaped itself in his mind as he visioned another day when a handful of British regulars had marched down on the American capital. The smoke that stirred lazily from early morning chimneys shaped itself in the form of a capital once in flames. He saw President Monroe fleeing on horseback from the vengeance of the invader, and an unorganized militia running away before the threat.

His eyes paused on the domes of Congress and a thin smile played across his mouth. Down there had been sounded acute warnings coming out of the world upsets. Warnings that too often had been howled down in opposition and ridicule. Congress still hugged the delusion that recent increased defense appropriations had brought our army up to snuff.

He remembered that some lawmakers had pointed bluntly to the intrigue in Mexico, to the failure of our best diplomacy to solve this ominous riddle. They charged that our State Department had merely blustered and bluffed to no purpose, in its decision that an army of mercenaries was not a violation of the Monroe doctrine after all, so long as these mercenaries were actually enrolled in the Mexican federal service to maintain law and order.

But the majority sentiment in Congress supported that view, proclaimed that we must live in peace with our neighbors at any cost. What if our State Department had met with evasion from every European nation that had contributed troops to the Mexican concentration? Why should we stir up Mexican animosity by discrediting their disavowals of wrongful intent towards the United States? Didn't Mexico have the right to maintain such armed forces as were needed to maintain her government and put down brigandage?

As for European powers and minor Balkan states who had sent regiments, brigades and divisions, weren't they within their rights as allies of the new Mexican government? Especially since they sent their troops on a purely volunteer basis to enroll in the army of Mexico?

Opponents of action roared that talk of an invasion was an insult to our Army and Navy. Didn't we have one of the most powerful fleets in the world? Even if our army was a seventeenth place affair, wasn't it ready for prompt expansion to 600,000 men in event of war? Had we any more right to challenge Mexico's new army than Mexico would have to question our recent heavy appropriations for a re-armament program?

The plane swung back across the Potomac and glided to a landing. Benning thanked the pilot for a safe journey north and sped by military sedan across the river into Washington. At the War Department he went to the second floor and reported to the G-2 section.

Colonel Flagwill had come down early for Benning's arrival. His placid, unemotional face broke in a slight smile at sight of the young officer. He led the captain into a private office and closed the door.

Bluntly Flagwill said, "Someone must go into Mexico and get the facts, Benning. I needn't remind you of the danger."

"Thanks for thinking of me, Colonel," Benning said, and meant it. "When do you want me to leave?"

Flagwill took from his pocket a bulky sealed letter and handed it to Benning.

"You're sailing for Europe at eleven on the *America*. Your information is in this letter. When you've read it, burn it. You'd better take a commercial plane to New York. Your boat reservations have been attended to. When you land at Southampton, cross the channel to Le Havre and go to Paris by express. Our ambassador will be expecting you. Any questions?"

"I think not, sir," Benning said.

"That's all," Flagwill said, rising. "Do a good job of it and get the Mexican picture back here as soon as possible, consistent with thoroughness. I'll have an officer at the airport with your tickets and expense money. Good luck, Captain."

CHAPTER II

THE MAN FROM LUXEMBOURG

THE embassy staff had calculated to the minute when Benning was due to arrive from the Gare du Nord. No sooner had he dropped the bronze knocker than the embassy front door opened. A bespectacled male secretary looked him over in sharp appraisal and said, "You are the gentleman we're expecting?"

"Captain Benning," the captain answered.

"Please come in," the secretary said. "Mr. Shields is waiting for you."

The ambassador was at the door of his reception room to receive his visitor. Mr. Shields was a portly, smartly groomed man in late middle life. His round, florid face had an ingratiating smile as he invited Benning to a seat and offered a cigarette.

"I'm glad you're here on the dot, Benning," he said. "There's quite a bit to be done in Paris, and you must be in Bordeaux tomorrow to catch your boat for Vera Cruz."

The ambassador regarded his visitor with a certain wistfulness.

"You know, Benning," he said, "I envy you this opportunity for distinguished service. I think I know what's under the surface of things in Europe, but I can't prove anything."

"I'd supposed, sir," Benning commented, "that our government has at least the main facts."

"Facts?" Shields echoed derisively. "There's only one accepted fact in international relations today—that the maps are all listed for overhaul. Outwardly everyone hopes for peace. Under the surface the big question is, when will the lid blow off? You can get the answer, Benning."

Benning's eyes narrowed. "I'm not sure I understand."

Mr. Shields laughed mirthlessly.

"I'll speak frankly. Why, after all the threats and maneuvers of the past, did the coalition powers suddenly cool off and back down? Ostensibly to work out some peace formula. But now everyone believes the real motive was to circumvent the United States. Weren't our sympathies shaping up, weren't we heading straight into the mess? Didn't the world learn a lesson twenty years ago—just how fatal our sympathies can pan out?"

Benning answered, "But the United States has announced it wants to keep its own isolation behind a barrier of strong national defense."

"Europe isn't simple enough to swallow our neutrality talk, Benning. Was any country ever more flush with neutrality claims than we were during the first three years of the World War? Yet in we jumped with both feet at the critical stage. For what? You're a soldier, Benning. You tell me what we were doing in that war."

"It seems to me, sir," Benning said, "we were saving democracy and fighting to end all wars."

"And laying the foundation for more war," Shields rejoined bitterly. "As for saving democracy, it's in a worse fix than ever before. This time, Benning, the United States is going to have its hand forced, if I read the signs. Everyone thinks the same thing over here. The Mexican scene looks like unmistakable verification."

The ambassador smiled wryly.

"I didn't mean to get all steamed up on that subject. Our provincialism at home does get on my nerves at times. Getting down to work, do you remember the case of a Lieutenant Bromlitz of our army who escaped some two years ago from the United States?"

"Very distinctly, sir," Benning answered at once. "Happened in my own regiment at Fort Jay. Bromlitz was accused of stealing canteen funds. When the adjutant arrested him, Bromlitz knocked the adjutant down and shot and killed the corporal of the guard. Then he vanished."

"Right now," Mr. Shields said, "Bromlitz is at the fortress of Vincennes, held incommunicado by the French. They nipped him a few days ago when he arrived from Luxembourg. There he was in the services of the royal house as an army intelligence agent for the past year. He'd made connection with Van Hassek agents and was selected for Mexican service."

Benning made a swift deduction and said dryly, "I assume, sir, that I am to go to Mexico as an escaped murderer."

"A very lucky break, Benning. We have the whole inside of it. Bromlitz is known to be an American with a record that strips him of any possible American loyalties. As a former American officer, Van Hassek no doubt thinks the fellow a valuable acquisition. Gave him the rank of major, which you now inherit."

"Isn't it a bit extraordinary, sir, that the French learned all this?" Benning wanted to know.

"Not when you consider the facts. Bromlitz has a flair for romance. He fell very much in love with a girl in Luxembourg, told her his plans, promised to send for her as soon as he could afford it."

"And she spilled the beans."

The ambassador smiled and said, "Why not? The French keep their ears to the ground and they've been paging Bromlitz since he first showed up in Luxembourg. They put their cleverest woman agent on him, a Mademoiselle Lucette Ducos."

Benning thoughtfully searched the possible holes in this Bromlitz masquerade.

"Just why all this French generosity in the matter, Mr. Shields? And how far is this Bromlitz secret a secret?"

"The French interest in helping us is obvious. The French theory is that the attack on America will proceed a big blow-up in Europe. They want to get all possible information out of Mexico. I've promised to relay information after it has cleared our own State Department.

"They're turning Bromlitz's passports and secret orders over to us. You'll need only to transfer your own photo to Bromlitz's visa. The French have a special process for doing this. On the way to Mexico you should practice his signature. I thought, too, you might want to look at the fellow and catch any mannerisms."

Captain Benning thought briefly and got to his feet.

"Very good, sir," he said. "If that's the game, I'm ready to go to Vincennes."

The ambassador handed Benning a packet of papers that included Bromlitz's *carte d' identite* and several orders in German and Italian. A secretary came into the room to make a photo of Benning for transfer to the passports. Benning then left the embassy and took a taxicab to Vincennes.

Scars of underground defenses against air raids littered the parks and outskirts of Paris. In the faces of people on the street could be read the strain that held through these days.

What was the future? How long could reason stem the tides of red passion and greedy vengeance that threatened Europe with a new upheaval of volcanic fury? Not only the man in the street but the statesmen were at their wit's ends. Diplomacy had broken down. There was the sense of mysterious forces secretly gathering for new violence; of black intrigues that might manifest themselves at any hour in a plague of armed conflict. Civilization seemed to cling precariously to the brink, gasping against a thrust that would send it hurtling into seething depths.

Benning passed out of Paris through the Porte de Bercy and sped to the grim old walls of the ancient citadel. A sentry challenged at the gate, examined Benning's credentials and sent him to the commandant, who dispatched a *sous-officier* to guide the American to Bromlitz's cell.

Bromlitz, stretched out face downward on a cot, raised his face as the steel door opened on the little hole in which he was confined. His alert, beady black eyes searched the face of his visitor, and he sat up as recognition came to his face.

"Hello, Benning," he said, his face unaccountably brightening. "So you come after me, eh? Well, I'm glad, if

I must be hanged, that it's to be an American job."

"Just a visit, Bromlitz," Benning answered. "I'm not to take you home, but you'll understand I'm glad you've been run down at last. Corporal Hill, whom you killed, was in my company."

They engaged in a strained conversation. Benning studied Bromlitz for his own purposes. He asked many questions about Bromlitz's stay in Luxembourg, which the prisoner answered freely. Benning was sharply puzzled by the evident good humor that his visit had brought to the fellow. But Bromlitz's parting words cleared up that enigma.

"I'd like to ask you a special favor, Benning," Bromlitz asked as Benning rose to go.

The prisoner was suddenly solemn; there was a pleading note in his voice.

"I owe you no favors, Bromlitz," Benning said brusquely.

"A very little favor to a man who must die," the other implored. "Let me tell you, Benning, and you mustn't say no. Your coming here has relieved my mind. I was—suspicious that I must have been betrayed to the French, but now I know it was the American secret service that caught up with me. A small difference, you say? But a big one to me. The one fine thing in my life has been a girl, Benning—soon I would have married her. Please, will you take a message to her at Luxembourg? Tell her I was killed by a train, drowned—tell her anything but the truth. She's got to believe I'm dead. She might wait for me through years, and she's too fine for that. Please let her think I'm honorably dead and can't ever return. You'll do that for me, please, Benning!"

CHAPTER III

VAN HASSEK

A TRAM CAR took Benning from the Colonia station in Mexico City to Plaza Mayor, whence he crossed the broad Mexican thoroughfare to the great stone hulk of the Palacio Nacional. He accosted a gendarme and asked directions to General Van Hassek's headquarters.

The policeman shook a puzzled head and answered, "I've heard of no such general in Mexico, *señor.*"

"Perhaps," Benning suggested, "you can direct me to General Ruiz."

The Mexican's face lighted up and he spoke almost in awe, "*Si, señor,* if your credentials are important enough you may find General Ruiz in the president's suite at the palace."

Benning smiled inwardly as he turned to the Porto Mariano and entered the palace. Many times since arriving at Vera Cruz he had asked about Van Hessek to find the name unknown. It meant that Van Hassek, real master of the Mexican forces, was entrenched behind a stout incognito, moving his pawns in the name of young Ruiz, the new dictator, who had been placed in power by a swift, furious and mysterious *coup d'etat* of European planning.

An elevator shot Benning to the fourth floor. He presented his credentials to a staff officer with easy assurance. So far, his *carte d'identite* had passed him without question. The staff officer directed him down a tiled corridor that rang with the clatter of military typewriters and all the hum and buzz of a general headquarters.

He was escorted into a large reception room at the far end of the palace. A captain in Mexican uniform scowled up at Benning from a sheaf of papers and painstakingly examined his entire file of orders. The staff officer got to his feet grudgingly.

"I'll see if the general wishes you to report to him personally," he said in German. He was back in a few moments to say, "General Van Hassek will see you at once, Major."

Benning found himself in an immense chamber whose rich furnishings ran a riot of vivid colors. His eyes centered in some perplexity upon the solitary figure in the room, a man sprawled in a deep crimson leather chair placed at one side of an immense blackwood desk.

Was this Van Hassek? The recumbent man's figure was lost in shapeless folds of fat. His wide, squarish head was as bald as a billiard ball; thick jowls cascaded from jaw and chin. He appeared wholly inanimate, a listless gaze

"America will be willing to pay for peace at a rich price!"

fixed in some strange detachment on the frescoed ceiling. In the soft light there was a moribund tint of green in the man's face.

"Sir, Major Bromlitz, reporting from Luxembourg for duty with General Van Hassek," Benning said briskly.

"Sit down, Bromlitz," the other said without lowering his eyes. "I'm Van Hassek."

VAN HASSEK'S uniform was the simple khaki of this new Mexican army. At the collar was a crescent, insignia of a lieutenant general. The only other ornaments on his severely plain uniform were a glittering order of merit at his left breast and, under it, the Iron Cross.

Benning's eye swept the room. The chamber was regal in its appointments. Desk and chairs were of carved woods or upholstery faced with priceless tapestry.

Immense crystal chandeliers hung from the ceiling; the draperies were of yellow satin and green broadcloth. There were all the colors of the rainbow in the room, yet the color effects had been blended, arranged and harmonized by some master at interior decoration.

Some moments passed in which the only sound was the heavy ticking of an immense clock and the vague hum of traffic in the street below.

"Perhaps you can tell me, Bromlitz," Van Hassek mused without change of voice or posture. "Yes, perhaps you can tell me."

A faint smile passed his thick lips as he went on, "I've just come up from the Salon de Espera on a lower floor of the palace, where I've installed a hospital. Perhaps I should refer to it as my laboratory. In any event no one ever leaves it alive, but they are only spies and traitors who must die by one means or another. For some months I've been watching them at the moment they leave the world, yet I'm more mystified now than ever. So you tell me, Bromlitz, if you can, is death the end of us?"

"Your pardon, Excellency," Benning answered. "I'm not a chaplain."

The other chuckled, with a vitality in his mirth that was not that of an ailing man.

"The chaplains can tell us everything for which there's no proof," he scoffed. "It really isn't a matter of great importance, yet the puzzle intrigues me. Some men are conscious to the end, some are defiant with their last breath. I'm almost forced to conclude that there may be some distinction between the flesh of a man and the spark of life that vitalizes him."

"At least, General," Benning said, following the whimsicality, "your last observation is neither new nor original. Personally my mind has not gone beyond military matters."

"The profession of arms is so vast and intricate, Bromlitz, I've given up all hopes of mastering it in detail," Van Hassek rejoined. "Besides I find amusement in other lines of thought. So many, many people must die of violence within the next year or two that I've been trying to satisfy myself whether that will be the end of them."

"You mean that many will die in war, I take it, sir," Benning suggested.

"Millions," Van Hassek answered, stifling a yawn.

PUDGY arms thrust into the air over his head, his heels stretched forward and he squirmed erect in his huge chair. As he emerged from his musings his gaze fixed upon Benning in a leisurely appraisal. There was but one eye in this scrutiny, a large bulbous gray eye. The other hung far to one side, focussed grotesquely askew.

"You were, I'm told, an American army officer," Van Hassek said now, speaking briskly in German. "I'm told there are serious charges against you in the United States."

Benning said, "I hope you'll not judge me by that, General Van Hassek. Despite my past troubles I'm a soldier, sir. I think there is no other profession worthy of a man. When bad luck put a price on my head in one country, haven't I the right to find service in another?"

"*Ja*, a soldier is always a soldier, Bromlitz," Van Hassek answered with an approving nod. "I enjoyed my three years in China as much as my station in Vienna; and Mexico is even more to my liking, because there are big events shaping up. Tell me in your own way, Bromlitz, what you think of the American army's fighting capacity."

Benning pondered briefly and decided upon the full and unequivocal truth which, after all, could only confirm what Van Hassek must already know.

"If you mean a sudden war, they aren't ready, sir. The United States' land forces are scattered in small garrisons; they're not properly equipped and they have very little training in the teamplay of large combat elements."

"What do you know of their strength?"

"There are four army infantry divi-

sions and eighteen National Guard infantry divisions, and four cavalry divisions. They're at peace strength and it would take months to put them on a war footing, fully equipped. In total manpower, count on 300,000 men within the country's limits."

"*Ja*, very good. What about their fighting equipment?"

"Bad, when you consider the whole picture. Their artillery is largely World War stuff. They're short on ammunition, anti-aircraft, instruments of precision, modern rifles. Their anti-tank weapons aren't out of the factories yet. It would take them a year to make the weapons they'd need, if they couldn't buy them in foreign markets the way they did for the World War. But they have a high class officer personnel, thoroughly trained and—"

"*Ja*, I know of that," Van Hassek interrupted with a dash of impatience. "Now tell me another thing, Bromlitz, would the mass of Americans stick together in case of invasion?"

Benning pondered briefly and answered, "I'm sure you can count on it that they will, sir."

"But what if they were over-run suddenly? Suppose they found themselves pounded from three points, their cities hammered from the air? How long would they stand up under terrific military punishment when they had their chance offered them to—to buy their way back to peace?"

Benning's eyes were glued on Van Hassek. He found his interest in the man's ominous words distracted by Van Hassek's change of aspect. In his first moments with the general, Benning had thought that here was a worn out old militarist to cope with, one set in his views, soggy with senility, doddering under the weight of hard years.

But now that one straight eye of Van Hassek's burned with vitality. His heavy body had pulled itself into shape and strength. The timbre of his voice had become that of a man of action and determination.

His first questions had been asked casually, as if to test this new staff officer's knowledge. Now he was waiting in tense eagerness for his answer.

"Excellency, is it probable that anyone would be bold enough to attack the United States on her own soil?" Benning asked. "I mean when all her resources in wealth and manpower are taken into consideration?"

Van Hassek snapped out, "That's precisely why she must be attacked on her own soil, because of her latent strength."

Benning pretended perplexity and countered, "I'm not sure I understand just what your excellency means."

"I mean it was America's stupid intervention that wrecked the world in the great war. What's more, it has been perfectly clear that she was more or less working up sympathy for the allies during the past two years."

"But didn't her strength turn the balance in the last war, Excellency?"

"Strength, bah!" Van Hassek scoffed. "Not for more than a year after the United States jumped into the war did her soldiers fire a shot in battle! Then only after the French supplied her with cannon, the British with rifles, helmets and gas masks, and both sides conducted a military kindergarten to instruct her divisions in the art of war. *Ja*, that was her latent strength! This next time she will have to depend upon her *initial* strength. Before she can gather herself she will be willing to pay for peace at a rich price!"

Van Hassek got up abruptly and with an amazing agility. He went to his desk and touched a call button. The captain from the anteroom responded promptly.

"Captain Schroff," Van Hassek instructed, "I'm very well satisfied with Bromlitz. You may have him report to Colonel Bravot."

BENNING found himself assigned to a stuffy little room that was piled high with American newspapers and magazines. Half a dozen other officers were engaged in reading these publications. Two of them were Germans, two Italians, one Spaniard, one Austrian; all former residents of the United States.

Each day this group was required to make a summary of American press opinion as affecting Mexican relations. Outwardly a peaceful enough job, but

one that Benning knew to be a vital part of Van Hassek's war machinery.

During the next few days Benning kept pretty much to himself, though cautiously making friends with the Austrian, Captain Fincke, who sat at his elbow. A bit at a time he meant to gather the information he had come for. If long risks had to be played in order to get important secrets, that would have to wait until he had the lay of things at headquarters.

Mexico City, Benning observed in his off-duty strolls, was serene and untroubled. On the streets, at the cafés and in the newspapers was to be found no hostility towards the United States, nor resentment against the foreign legions who policed the city and held a large garrison on the outskirts.

Mexican troops themselves had undergone a transition. They had shoes on their feet and discipline in their ranks and were used largely as labor troops. Except for patrols and a daily guard mounting there was no martial display in the city.

Even informed Mexicans seemed to think that General Ruiz, the new dictator, commanded this modern fighting force of European mercenaries. Ruiz appeared often in public, riding an Arab stallion about the streets, attended always by a smart troop of Van Hassek's horse.

Ruiz, holding the military rank of colonel-general, was an imposing figure, erect, lean, dashing. His uniform was always vivid and he was forever attended by flashily uniformed aides and orderlies. Benning thought Ruiz must have been picked for appearance as well as his susceptibility to control, in order to put on a show that would catch and hold the Mexican imagination.

The contrast between this dashing figurehead, who was little past thirty, and the flabby, wrinkled Van Hassek sharply abetted the hoax of dictator-commander. It would be far beyond ordinary native imagination to believe Ruiz the puppet of that unsightly old militarist.

By the end of the week Benning had gained something of Fincke's confidence, together with a knowledge of the workings of Van Hassek's headquarters at the palace. He had adopted the habit of going for a walk each evening with the Austrian, usually to the Alameda. Invariably Fincke set a fast pace down the long rows of pepper trees.

"One must keep in physical trim for the fighting," Fincke argued as he put extra steam into his stride. "Once war breaks on us there will be long days without a wink of sleep."

Benning had learned that the Austrian was an artilleryman, on temporary detail at headquarters because of knowledge of the United States.

"But at headquarters, Fincke," Benning probed, "life is not too active. Isn't it your experience that once headquarters gets its claws on an officer he's sunk?"

The Austrian responded with a grunt of contempt.

"I'm an artilleryman, not a staff officer," he snapped. "My battery of seventy-sevens is at Jolisco for target practice and I'm in Mexico City only until the show opens!"

Benning laughed and said, "But with your fluency in English, your chief isn't likely to part company with you when our troops head into the United States."

"I've Colonel Bravot's word for it!" Fincke said hotly. "Yes, and I'll remind him of it as soon as he returns from Washington."

BENNING prolonged the promenade with Fincke, stopping from time to time at the bar of the Gonzales near the park for a drink. Once Fincke's artillerist enthusiasm was aroused the Austrian needed little urging to talk.

At first he boasted of his own guns, then of Van Hassek's superiority in artillery. For each regiment of infantry there was a full battalion of seventy-sevens or the new 105 millimeter cannon. In addition there was the marvelous new ten-inch gun with a maximum effective range of thirty miles.

An adaptation of the Big Bertha of World War days, but this one traveled at from thirty to thirty-five miles an hour. Fincke dilated enthusiastically upon its prowess. So powerful a weapon

had to be transported in five sections, drawn by huge fast tractors. The barrel, forty-five feet long. Less than two hours required to assemble it at a given point ready for action.

Then there were batteries of twenty-one centimeter howitzers, motorized in two loads and capable of putting down shells ten miles distant.

In addition, Van Hassek's motorized infantry divisions, 14,000 men, were provided with the last word in anti-tank, anti-aircraft and auxiliary weapons, including an immense quota of light and heavy machine guns for each regiment. Each division had seventy-two anti-tank guns of thirty-seven millimeter and the newest forty-seven millimeter types.

As for anti-aircraft, the Van Hassek artillery would be able to rout the stoutest air attacks on troop columns, supply establishments and depots. In addition to their standard eighty-eight millimeter anti-aircraft weapon for heavy, long range work, their forty millimeter for medium range, was their light twenty millimeter gun. Add to this a 105 millimeter special anti-aircraft cannon.

As for tanks, there were three regiments in Mexico now, with more reported on the sea. Each regiment boasted 750 tanks, mostly eight ton light tanks but with a goodly supply of the new sixteen ton heavy models. Both types were capable of thirty miles per hour.

"What a wonderful show, Bromlitz!" Fincke exclaimed. "Particularly when we pound their artillery to pieces with our superior ranges. *Himmelcreuz!* They will be helpless in counter-battery. Myself, I have seen the Americans at gun practice. *Ja,* good technicians those Americans, but what can they do with their ancient guns? As for their tanks, they do not have enough to count, and their anti-tank and anti-aircraft are not enough to matter. Most of their artillery is old stuff; their handful of new guns aren't out of arsenals yet—and as for their coast guns, they are little more than catapults which any fleet could hammer to pieces from the seas."

"Not too fast, Fincke," Benning cautioned.

"Bah! A million men can crush the Americans before they can get themselves ready!"

Fincke stopped in his tracks and his blue eyes looked gravely at Benning through their thick lenses. The Austrian lowered his voice.

"That is not mere surmise, Bromlitz. This I will tell you in the deepest confidence. One day in General Van Hassek's office I glimpsed his little map of the United States, and on it are red arrows pointing in from the south, the east and the west. I had only a glimpse before he returned the map to his desk, but I caught figures enough to convince me of a million men."

Benning managed an indifferent smile and decided to close this dangerous subject.

"With a million men, Fincke, a great deal might be done," he said and added with a glance at his wrist watch, "but it's getting late. What do you say to some dinner?"

THE TWO went to a Mexican cabaret on Avenue Hidalgo, a favorite spot of officers of the new regime. The tables were filled with officers and senoritas.

Benning ordered dinner and picked at his meal. Apparently he was mildly entertained by the show about him. Actually he was only vaguely conscious of his surroundings. His mind was busy with Fincke's disclosures, with a piecing together of the things Van Hassek had told him.

As for the number, strength, organization and equipment of Van Hassek's army, he was not far from completion of that information. His daily grind at the Palacio Nacional had given him the set-up of Van Hassek's general staff. Headquarters was spread out over the whole immense fourth floor, trained officers working at their specialties in the war-making game. Other sections in scattered buildings had to do with the technical and supply services, the whole forming the brain center of a great mischief in the making.

Nor was there any doubt in Benning's mind of their objective. History, he recalled, was not initiating any new trouble for the United States. With the

launching of the world war the Central powers had brewed mischief in Mexico to keep the United States busy with its own knitting.

That ancient trouble finally had compelled the United States to mobilize its regular army and National Guard on the Mexican border and send Pershing into the interior with a punitive expedition, but the Mexican bubble, blown by German reservists, had burst shortly.

Now Benning saw that the trouble was organized in earnest. Two hundred thousand trained European soldiers, launching their surprise attack, would compel us to hurl in our whole peacetime establishment. But inevitably, unless Van Hassek was supported by heavy reenforcements, he would be doomed to ruin.

But what of the million men Fincke had boasted of? What combination of powers would strike? If from Europe, what force would dare invite the vengeance of our Navy? If from the Orient, what conceivable audacity would dare expose its long lines of communication to destruction behind its invaders?

Benning made his decision. There was the air corps yet to check, and some verification of Fincke's disclosures. That should not be difficult. But only Van Hassek would know the broader plan of attack on the United States, and Benning knew now that he must find some way to tap Van Hassek's brain, at any cost. A glance at Van Hassek's operation map might answer all questions. In some way he meant to get his eyes on that map.

His thoughts were interrupted by the action of Fincke in springing abruptly to his feet. A dark, erect man in Mexican uniform paused at their table to acknowledge the Austrian's greetings.

"Colonel, I am overjoyed to see you back in Mexico!" the Austrian exclaimed. He turned to Benning, who got to his feet. "I wish to present our new officer, Major Bromlitz, who has reported to us from Europe in your absence. Major, our chief of service, Colonel Bravot."

The Frenchman searched Benning with a quizzical glint, as if trying to associate him with some vague memory. In a moment his black eyes cleared and he passed on with a stiff bow.

Benning's memory had clicked instantly on seeing the colonel. Bravot, his chief of service, was unmistakably Sergeant Gaujos, the masquerader in American uniform on whose trail he had been camping at San Antonio.

CHAPTER IV

AN UNWELCOME ALLY

BENNING had little more than settled down at his allotment of American newspapers the next morning than Van Hassek's major domo, Captain Schroff, came in with a summons.

"Excellency directs that you report to him immediately," Schroff muttered.

Benning promptly went down the tiled corridor to the Van Hassek suite. He had spent the night on pins and needles, knowing that once Bravot's memory clicked the jig was up with him. What did this summons mean? He put his faith in his masquerade.

Since leaving Bordeaux he had effected those slight changes in appearance that are the most effective masquerade. The Atlantic sun and wind had given his face a deep tan, and he had cultivated a thin mustache cut at a rakish angle. At San Antonio his hair had been rather full; now it was cropped close at the sides and the length of his head increased by a bristling pompadour. His new Mexican uniform, cut wide at the shoulders, gave his torso a different appearance from that of the civilian clothes he had worn in Texas.

There was a catlike animation in Van Hassek's one straight eye that puzzled Benning. The peculiar smile on the general's thick lips was equally baffling.

"Sit down, Bromlitz. I want to talk to you," Van Hassek invited. "Tell me, are you very much in love?"

Benning blinked at the amazing query, then smiled back with a shake of his head.

"In love with the profession of arms, Excellency," he answered. "A soldier hasn't much time for anything else."

Van Hassek's smile widened and he

Benning gathered himself anew in the interlude.

licked his thick lips. "But you did promise some very extravagant things to a very pretty little lady, isn't that true, Bromlitz?"

"There are many attractive women in the world, Excellency," Benning answered. "Will the general please be more explicit?"

"There was a young lady in Luxembourg, eh?"

Benning's mind instantly picked up Van Hassek's purport and he confessed, "Yes, Excellency."

"Her name?"

"Mademoiselle Lucette Ducos."

"And you promised you would bring

her to Mexico City with your first month's pay, Bromlitz?"

"Usually, in such cases," Benning evaded, "one attempts to make parting as painless as possible."

Van Hassek chuckled. "But sometimes such promises come home to roost, Bromlitz." He pushed his call button and Schroff came in. Van Hassek grunted instructions.

Schroff left the room to return in a moment with a young woman. Ignoring Van Hassek, she rushed up to Benning, threw her arms around his neck and kissed him ardently on the mouth.

"*Chere!*" she exclaimed. "Oh, but Heinie, I couldn't wait for you to send for me! My uncle gave me a ticket to Vera Cruz and here I am!"

BENNING coldly received the caress. He saw that she was French, undoubtedly the French operative, Lucette Ducos, who had been Bromlitz's undoing. She was small, trim and had a doll-like face, but with an intelligence in her large blue eyes that set her apart from the doll variety. Her dress was of an effective simplicity that hinted of the Rue de la Paix.

A glance gave Benning his appraisal. A girl to turn any man's head, and he understood at once Bromlitz's mad infatuation for her. He felt a stir of revolt at the thought of an ally from the French secret service, but promptly remembered that he had a role to play.

"You shouldn't have come here this way, Lucette," he told her.

"I couldn't stand it any longer without you!" Her eyes filled with an anguish that seemed almost real. "Now I don't think you're even glad to see me, or you even want me here with you!"

"It isn't that," Benning answered. "I've a man's job to do here and it's no place for a woman."

Van Hassek came from behind his desk to intervene. He took the French girl's elbows in his chubby hands and his voice was ingratiating.

"*Mademoiselle,* now that your identity has been established to our satisfaction, you're welcome in Mexico. Your handsome Heinie will get used to the idea, and since I'll not require his service this afternoon, you two can go off to the Alameda and sit under the trees. Then you two find yourselves a nice place to live." He paused to shake an admonishing finger. "If your Heinie doesn't treat you as he should, my little cabbage, just you come back and report the facts to me!"

Lucette threw her arms gratefully about Van Hassek's flabby red neck and kissed him on his cheek. Benning gathered himself anew in the interlude. Then she turned to Benning, linked her arm in his and gleefully took him out of the room. They passed in silence down the corridor to the elevator. In the street Benning called a taxicab and drove to the Alameda, where he picked out a seat under a shady cypress.

"What is it you want here?" he demanded bluntly.

"Information," she replied crisply. "Naturally, my government sent me."

"I should have guessed they had something like this in mind," he complained. "But why do you wish yourself off on me?"

"There are excellent reasons," she answered, regarding him with a level smile. "For one thing we are both after the same information and ought to be able to help each other."

Benning retorted, "In a game as risky as this one, everyone should play on his own. I may be under suspicion already, for all I know."

"I'll risk that," she said unconcernedly, and asked with blunt directness, "How much have you learned, *monsieur?*"

"Not too much. You might let me know just what information your government sent you to get."

"Of course. I'm to learn the date and plan of Van Hassek's attack on the United States. That, and anything I can find out about the plans of coalition armies for launching their attacks on France."

Benning gave a cynical laugh and said, "You might put those questions to Van Hassek. He's the only one who knows."

She studied a nearby quadrangle of tropical flowers. A cryptic smile turned the corners of her mouth.

"It is altogether possible, *monsieur*," she mused, "that Van Hassek will tell me one of these days. But I'd prefer to find out in some other way."

Benning had decided that inevitably he must accept the French girl as an associate, since he was already in the palm of her hand if by malice or stupidity she betrayed his masquerade.

"I'll be glad to give you anything I learn," he told her. "But of course we must work separately."

"As you please," she agreed, and said with unabashed frankness, "but at least we'll have to live together."

Benning demanded, "Why do you propose that?"

"For two reasons. First, Van Hassek thinks I'm your mistress and I want him to continue thinking that—for the time being, at least."

"Your second reason?"

"That," she said, looking at him again with her level smile, "is the important one to you. Bromlitz escaped from Vincennes three days after you sailed for Vera Cruz."

Benning sat glaring while his mind swept to an estimate of that calamity. Inevitably Bromlitz would make his way sooner or later to Mexico. And once he arrived, no conceivable masquerade of Benning's would convince. Here was a complication to spoil everything for him.

"Don't blame my government," Mlle. Ducos spoke up at once. "It was the fault of a stupid secretary from your embassy who was sent to the fort to interview Bromlitz. An hour after he left, a guard found your secretary bound in Bromlitz's cell. Bromlitz had escaped in the secretary's clothes."

"You've no doubt Bromlitz will make his way to Mexico?"

Mlle. Ducos smiled unconcernedly. "Not the least. But now that we understand each other, *monsieur*, let's find a place to live. Tonight I'd like to have you take me to the Avenido Hidalgo to dine and dance."

ON REPORTING at the palace next morning, Benning was steeled by a new determination. He meant to play whatever risks were necessary promptly to close his mission in Mexico. With Colonel Bravot on the job, Bromlitz at large and the French operative on his hands, he knew he skated now on very thin ice.

During the noon hour he walked boldly into the general staff section and examined Van Hassek's station map showing the present location of units.

He paused in front of the map only long enough to fix its details in his memory. Later he would be able to reproduce details on an ordinary map of Mexico.

He saw that Van Hassek had his artillery grouped about Zimipan in Hidalgo; his tanks, mechanized and horse cavalry in Guanajuato, adjoining. Some divisions of infantry, motorized, were training in Jilotepec, northwest of the city, with other divisions in northern Hidalgo and stretching north as far as San Luis Potosi.

One full division was detached to the northwest in Sonora, with its headquarters at Guaymas on the Gulf of California. This, he figured, was a covering force against native interference with road extension work leading from the north end of the gulf towards Tia Juana and Tecate, the latter a military molehill on the California border east of Tia Juana.

An estimate of strength based on Van Hassek's tables of organization which were readily available to him, confirmed a total of 200,000 combat troops. Engineers, labor and line of communication troops were largely Mexican, thus leaving the whole European force free to strike.

There remained the air service. While Benning from time to time had noted squadrons of various types flying over the city, he found no location for them on the station maps.

Where were their bases? What was their strength? What force did Van Hassek have in bombardment, pursuit, attack, observation?

Once he had secured that information, he meant to play a bold stroke at the Van Hassek desk. One look at Van Hassek's operations map and he was ready to escape to Washington.

That evening he went to the airport.

There were no Van Hassek planes located here, but the field was used by German commercial planes flying the routes to Central and South America. He also located a large Waco, the property of a Senor Fernando, son of a rich planter.

Fernando was immensely flattered by the interest in his Waco of a Van Hassek major who spoke a pilot's language. He showed his visitor through the ship, dilating on its instrument board and operation, and expounded his own plans for a trans-Atlantic flight.

Benning checked over details of the craft. In his two years of training at Randolph and Kelly Fields, as a junior lieutenant, he had flown only the old army biplanes of that day. His pulse warmed to this rangy job. In event his trail got too hot, he told himself, it would be no difficult feat to seize Fernando's ship and drive through the night to San Antonio.

WITH Mlle. Ducos he had struck a bargain. She was to keep strictly away from headquarters. He promised her any pertinent information he picked up and gave her the task of checking on the air service. Also she was to keep on the alert for any cancellation of military leaves to Mexico City, which would be a significant development.

They set up together in an inexpensive suite on Jesus Maria. Benning found it difficult to put down his resentment of the woman's presence. He harbored the feeling that the Freneh had tricked him by sending this girl to him in Mexico. But with Bromlitz stupidly at large, he saw that she might prove valuable if the man from Luxembourg showed up prematurely in Mexico City.

When they were alone in their apartment, Mlle. Ducos' attitude was one of a purely professional associate. But when they were together in public during evenings that followed, she kept up the ruse of a romantic attachment. Both sensed that Van Hassek's counter-espionage might keep them under close observation, along with all other foreigners whom Van Hassek had admitted to his service.

They had gone to the Avenido Hidalgo for dinner one evening when the French girl's covert flirtation with a bald-headed Italian officer in a colonel's uniform brought from Benning a sharp rebuke.

"Doesn't it strike you a bit inconsistent, *mademoiselle,*" he charged, "for you to pose as my fiancée and at the same time flirt outrageously behind my back while we're dancing together?"

"You must leave some things to my discretion, *monsieur,*" she replied.

"How do you know the man you're flirting with isn't checking on us?"

She smiled up at him and said, "Because he thinks he's very much infatuated with me himself, *monsieur.* How am I to get information if I merely sit about and watch the skies?"

"We agreed that you were to limit yourself to finding out about the air service."

She looked up at him and smiled as they danced, then put her lips close to his ear and spoke in a low voice.

"Would it interest you, *monsieur,* to know that I have learned most of what we wish to know? The air bases are located in Tamaulipas, and he has a total of more than a thousand planes, with more coming by ship in the near future. Colonel Boggio, if you will look at his insignia, is an officer of the air service."

Benning searched her face and demanded, "Boggio told you that?"

"Boggio has told me a great deal in the past few days," she answered. "I have—"

The orchestra brought their dance to an end. Mlle. Ducos ended her sentence in a harmless platitude. They went back to their table.

"Now please, *monsieur,* may I bring Colonel Boggio over and introduce him?" she pleaded. "I promised him a dance this evening and we can't afford to leave him dangling."

Van Hassek's air colonel was thin, beakish and cadaverous, with a shining bald head and glistening little black eyes. In his youth he might have been handsome, but there was nothing romantic left in his appearance. He attempted a polite restraint towards the French girl in Benning's presence, but Benning saw the Italian was running a tempera-

ture over her. Boggio went to the dance floor with Mlle. Ducos at once.

Tamaulipas. The word echoed in Benning's ears. It confirmed a suspicion he had felt but had been unable to verify. If Boggio had told the truth, nothing could be of more ominous significance than Van Hassek's air bases hidden within easy striking range of San Antonio, Houston, Galveston and New Orleans.

In his initial attack, Van Hassek would be able to hammer those cities mercilessly and without danger of serious interference. Only by an expeditionary force large enough to penetrate to the heart of Mexico could Van Hassek's disastrous night raids be halted. And Benning knew that the United States would need costly months of effort in order to organize such an expedition out of its scattered peace-time army.

HIS THOUGHTS were interrupted by the return of Mlle. Ducos and Boggio. He masked his feelings with a polite smile as he got to his feet, but did not ask the Italian to sit down. The French girl promptly pleaded fatigue and headache, and asked to be taken home. Boggio offered only faint objection, which Benning understood later when she told him she was to meet Boggio in the morning.

"How do you know this isn't a trick?" Benning confronted her when they were alone. "Why should a trusted officer give such secrets to you or anyone else?"

She flared back, "Don't you credit me with knowing what I'm about, *monsieur?* Doesn't Boggio think we are on the same side with him? Don't you think I know men? Particularly such men as Boggio—and Van Hassek?"

"I also credit Boggio with ordinary discretion," he retorted. "How did he come to tell you of Van Hassek's air bases?"

Mlle. Ducos sat down and a cold smile replaced the resentment in her eyes.

"For several days past, Colonel Boggio and I have been going about the city while he showed me the sights. It was very simple, when we saw planes in the sky, for me to set him talking about them, and about himself. Yes, much more he has told me. In front of Fernando on the Laguna de la Madre, Van Hassek has a secret field for his bombers and pursuit ships. Shall I tell you of their planes? They have five squadrons of the new German bombers, the JU 90's that travel 200 miles an hour and have a range of 2000 miles with a ton of heavy bombs. They have Heinkels and Messerschmidts, and Aradas and Bredas, and squadrons of Savoi-Marchettas. More than a thousand planes in all, with more coming to them by sea."

"Do you understand the full significance of what you just told me?" he asked, his eyes searching her face.

She shrugged her shoulders and said with a touch of annoyance, "Anyone who is too stupid to know what information is worth would be too dumb to collect it! The really important thing we still have to learn is when Van Hassek will attack the United States, and what purpose is behind it. That's what my government wants to know!"

"That," Benning rejoined tartly, "is information I'm afraid Van Hassek means to keep to himself."

"We'll have our chance at it tomorrow night, *monsieur,*" she said, vitality glowing in her eyes. "There should be information in Van Hassek's private possession, if one knew just where to look for it."

"Just what are you driving at?" he demanded.

"I meant to tell you that Van Hassek sent an aide to see me today, to invite me to be his guest at a little party he's giving for some friends tomorrow night at the palace. You may thank me for your invitation—I think you weren't wanted. But I couldn't afford to let Van Hassek think I'm running too much at large. You'll go, of course? At eight."

Benning hesitated while he searched the possible ramifications of such an adventure. His mind fixed upon Captain Fincke's disclosure of the operations map in Van Hassek's desk. Finally he nodded.

Mlle. Ducos smiled and said, "If necessary, I intend to encourage Van Hassek, *monsieur,* in which event you and

I may have to part company. This ought to make you very happy."

CHAPTER V

RED ARROWS

IN HIS regal suite in the Palacio Nacional the next night, Van Hassek had replaced his khaki field uniform with peacock military habiliments. His tunic was of cobalt blue and he was epauletted and aiguilletted in heavy gold, his chest smothered in colorful decorations. His trousers were scarlet with two thin silver stripes down each leg. A jeweled saber hung at his side. Moreover, he had been corsetted into human semblance, and some of the wrinkles had been steamed out of his face.

Four military aides danced attendance. Guests were high officers of the Van Hassek staff, Germans, Italians, Austrians, a Frenchman, one Englishman and several Mexicans. A bevy of attractive senoritas had been invited. They had the run of Van Hassek's suite with their champagne, dancing, and flirtations.

Benning found discomfort in the presence of Colonel Bravot, alias Sergeant Gaujos. But Bravot was to remain only a few minutes, his departure made the occasion of a puzzling ceremony. A staff colonel assembled all the guests in the main living room. Champagne was passed around. The colonel stepped forward with Bravot.

"A toast, my friends," he exclaimed, "to a gallant officer who has been chosen for an important mission—to Europe! Colonel Bravot will leave Mexico at once, in our service. Here's wishing him success and safe return!"

Bravot bowed to Van Hassek, then to the guests, and turned to face the east wall of the room, clapping his heels and standing at attention. His right hand went to his forehead in salute. Benning saw that the salute was directed to a large silk flag, jet black with crossed silver sabers embroidered across its surface.

As Bravot held the salute through half a minute, the other officers joined him in his homage to the strange symbol on Van Hassek's wall. Presently Bravot's hand fell back to his side and he turned sharply on his heel to march from the room.

Van Hassek, from the moment of the French girl's arrival, had centered his attentions upon Mlle. Ducos. Benning promptly suspected that she was the real motive for Van Hassek's party, a show to turn her head.

But Benning's interest had centered upon a scowling Bavarian lieutenant who sat in Van Hassek's adjoining military room, shut off by thick draperies. The Bavarian's erect posture, belted sidearms and unchanging expression suggested that he was present on a purely duty status. It was obvious that the object of his vigil was Van Hassek's blackwood desk.

Benning had noted, in his covert surveys of the desk room, that there was a key in the wide flat drawer immediately under the desk top, a drawer that ordinarily controls the other drawers of a desk. But he knew that so long as the Bavarian remained on guard Van Hassek's desk was secure against prowlers, and he surmised that the Bavarian would remain at his post until the guests were gone.

Briefly Benning puzzled over the enigma of the strange black flag of the crossed sabers and the ceremony of Bravot's departure. The fact that Bravot's destination had been so plainly announced suggested a subterfuge, otherwise it would not have been made so public.

As he wandered from room to room in his drab field uniform, Benning was ignored by the others. His acquaintance, Fincke, was not at the party. The Austrian had been unaccountably missing from duty since yesterday. Mlle. Ducos broke suddenly away from Van Hassek, crossed the ballroom and caught Benning's arm solicitously.

"Just a little play, *monsieur*," she said, sotto voce. "It'll never do to let Van Hassek think I'm ignoring you altogether."

"Help yourself," Benning said absently. "I'm enjoying myself."

Out of the drunken din of Van Hassek's gay party a grim plan was taking

shape in Benning's mind. A desperate coup, yet one that grew upon him with a fascination he could not resist.

With patient caution he waited his time. The hour was close to midnight when he chose his opportunity to strike. He stalked into the military room in the manner of a man who has been drinking too much. The Bavarian sat at his job, stiff as a ramrod.

"A command for you, Lieutenant!" Benning blurted at him in German. "You will report at once to Excellency's junior aide-de-camp in the bar. See to it that you lose no time!"

The Bavarian looked up with a questioning scowl, then sprang to his feet under the habit of obedience to a superior officer. He hesitated for a moment, and stalked through the heavy portieres and headed toward the bar.

As the portieres rippled behind the guardian of Van Hassek's desk, Benning turned the key in the top drawer. His steady hand extracted the one document that he found there, a folded linen map.

Benning's face went taut as his hand thrust it open and he saw the legend of arrows superimposed on a map of the United States and upper Mexico. A glance told him that the arrows pointed to vulnerable points of possible invasion. Behind each arrow that pointed across the Mexican border were figures of five digits.

He sensed rather than heard the returning Bavarian. Instantly he thrust the map into the breast of his loose khaki tunic, closed the open drawer of Van Hassek's desk. He strode through the curtains into the reception room at the identical moment that the Bavarian reentered.

Although as an essential of his business, he had learned control of his emotions, Benning was unable to put down the racking suspense of the next few moments. Would the Bavarian discover at once that Van Hassek's desk had been tampered with? Benning's brief survey of the map had given him the vital information for which he had been playing. If no alarm came now, he could slip away in the night, haul out the Fernando plane from its hangar and fly through to the border.

He held the salute a full half minute.

THE Bavarian came driving through the portieres, black tragedy in his distended eyes. His cheeks were flushed and heavy veins welled at neck and forehead. The Bavarian strode to a colonel of the staff and whispered avidly. The colonel hurried over to Van Hassek.

Mlle. Ducos picked up in Benning's face some hint of his suspense. She left Van Hassek, now pawing drunk, and crossed the room.

"Something has gone wrong, *monsieur,*" she whispered anxiously. "You have been up to mischief in Van Hassek's room."

"In my tunic," Benning answered at once, "I have Van Hassek's operations map—the most dangerous secret in Mexico. You must drop me at once. It looks like I was coming to tight quarters."

"Let me have the map, *monsieur,*" she whispered.

"I took a desperate gamble," Benning rejoined coolly. "If I've lost, it's my funeral, not yours."

With a quick decisiveness the French girl threw her arms about Benning's neck and kissed him to screen the deft movement in which she stripped the map from under his tunic. She stood close to him while she concealed the document in her dress. Then she stepped back, spat at him and angrily slapped his face.

"Very well!" she raged in a voice that reached through the room. "If that's the way you feel about me, you can go to the devil!"

Van Hassek slowly drew himself erect and his face went livid as he received the alarm from his staff colonel. One moment Van Hassek was drunk, the next moment coolly sober.

"No one will leave my quarters, Colonel," Van Hassek calmly instructed. "With the help of my aides you will search everyone present, including our own officers, until you find the spy and recover my map. At once!"

Outer doors were promptly locked, windows put under guard. All were required to assemble in the ballroom, thence to be taken one at a time to Van Hassek's bedroom for examination.

BENNING was taken first. The colonel sharply demanded explanation. Why had he sent the Bavarian officer away from his post of duty? Benning confessed bad judgment, for which he offered apology. His only thought had been that the Bavarian was a neglected guest who should be given a drink. He insisted that he be searched immediately.

The guests had been jolted into sobriety. They resembled figures in wax now as they stood huddled in the ballroom, fear and anxiety stamped on their faces. One by one they were taken for search. Van Hassek stood to one side, smoking a cigar, his face grimly contained as if he waited in supreme confidence for the unmasking of a spy.

Mlle. Ducos stood near him. Her face was untroubled, almost serene. Benning, himself freed of immediate suspicion, marvelled at her matchless self control. Outwardly she was the least upset of Van Hassek's guests, though Benning thought the telltale map must be burning her bosom like a hot coal.

Benning felt the sting of guilt. Why hadn't he prevented her somehow from snatching the map from his tunic? Inevitably, he reasoned, discovery of the map on her person would involve him. Therefore, the French girl had only brought herself into needless jeopardy by her swift intervention.

Her self-possession held his eyes with a grim fascination. No one could have been less concerned as, one by one, the search of guests narrowed down toward her. Benning could picture her going to the firing squad with as much unconcern.

His thoughts were interrupted by a sudden noisy commotion, the half hysterical cries of a Mexican girl who was being thrust into the ballroom from Van Hassek's bedroom. The staff colonel marched across to Van Hassek and handed him the stolen operations map.

"Excellency, I found it pinned under the lace flounces of the wench's gown," the colonel reported.

Van Hassek took the map with a casual hand, opened it for identification, and slowly smiled. He tucked the document into the gold sash at his waist, and with a toss of his hand indicated that the prisoner be taken away in close arrest. The Mexican girl, loudly protesting innocence, was bundled out of the room. Van Hassek turned to his remaining guests with a cool bow.

"Good night, my friends," he said gravely. "I regret it if your pleasure has been spoiled tonight, but on some other evening I'll expect to make amends. Now I must busy myself with the details of what has happened. Good night."

MLLE. DUCOS did not speak as Benning took her home in a cab. When they were alone Benning saw her undergo an unexpected transformation. Her eyes filled with tears and she sobbed softly to herself. Presently she recovered her self-possession and dried her eyes.

"I suppose I shouldn't have such scruples about that girl when so many lives are at stake," she said. "But I had no alternative. I only hope she convinces Van Hassek of her innocence, or he decides she is too attractive to die. The greatest pity of it all is that I had to part with that map."

"No matter," Benning said.

He busied himself with maps and pencil. From time to time as he worked he closed his eyes to examine the sensitive film of his memory. A Van Hassek arrow thrust its point across the border at Laredo. Behind its shaft was the figure 50,000. At Brownsville was the figure 10,000, at Eagle Pass another 10,000. On the California frontier were two arrows joined together behind a curved line, their points aimed at Tecate and Tia Juana, in the region of San Diego. The figure here was 60,000.

Four arrows thrust from the Pacific, behind them no legends. One pointed to Seattle, a second at the mouth of the Columbia river, a third just north of San Francisco, a fourth at San Diego. On the Atlantic side, groups of red arrows pointed at critical points from Boston to New Orleans. Here, again, there were no figures.

Benning sat staring at his handiwork. The import of those arrows chilled his blood. They vitalized Van Hassek's whole plan of operations, unmasked the titantic intrigue that lay entrenched behind this force in Mexico. Van Hassek meant to strike into Texas with a thrust that would occupy all available American troops. His thrust into California was palpably directed against our vital naval bases at San Diego and San Francisco.

Then whence would come his reenforcements? From the Orient? From the Mediterranean? Did those arrows pointing from the sea mean that the coalition powers meant to attack in earnest, exploit to the bitter end America's inability to defend two coasts? Defend two coasts with a one-coast navy and a seventeenth-place army!

Benning handed his reproduction of Van Hassek's key map to Mlle. Ducos. He saw the blood drain from her face as she studied it. She looked up at him with startled, staring eyes.

"Mon dieu!" she gasped. "This means the very worst is to happen! Such attack upon you will set the whole world in flames!"

Benning got up and put on his cap.

"I am leaving Mexico at once," he said calmly. "You are welcome to come along with me if you don't mind taking some chances with a pilot who's somewhat out of practice."

She answered gravely, "My instructions require me to remain in Mexico, *monsieur*. But it's important for you to reach your government as quickly as possible! I learned from Boggio today that he can't see me tomorrow. All leaves of absence are being suspended, which means you'll not have long to wait for the attack. Au revoir, *monsieur*, and bon voyage."

CHAPTER VI

PANIC

THE sun was moving over the jagged Washington skyline on the second morning thereafter when Benning was put down at Bolling Field by a fast observation plane from Kelly Field. After his landing at Randolph Field from Mexico City the day before, he had passed the alarm to Eighth Corps Area headquarters and sent a code report of details by wire to Colonel Flagwill.

A military car was waiting for him at the airport. It sped him to the War Department, where Flagwill was waiting in the G-2 office.

The colonel showed the effects of strain and sleeplessness but was gravely contained.

"A fine bombshell you've exploded in the War Department, Benning," Flagwill said solemnly. "At the outset, let me ask you if there's the slightest chance you might be mistaken in any of the findings you sent forward to us yesterday."

"No mistake, sir," Benning answered.

"General Hague took your report at once to the President," Flagwill said. "As a result the President had an ultimatum sent to Ruiz yesterday by the State Department. Our ambassador at Mexico City was instructed to say that

Mexico must explain fully its European army within forty-eight hours, and give our military attaches at the embassy full authority to visit all troop concentrations to see at first hand what is going on."

"If my opinion is worth anything, colonel, Ruiz will merely stall around in a play for time. He's controlled wholly by Van Hassek."

"We're getting ready to mobilize the Army and National Guard, Benning." Flagwill rubbed a tormented hand across his brow. "Gad, what a headache if it comes to that! With the international situation what it is, we don't dare commit too much of our peace-time army to Texas. Some queer rumors are seeping through from the Orient, and Europe is all hot and bothered."

"We'll be lucky if we get anything mobilized before Van Hassek hits us," Benning predicted. "I mean if we wait much longer."

"Wait? Wait? What else can we do but wait? The people just simply refuse to believe we're vulnerable. Late yesterday a big senator dressed down the President for sending an ultimatum to Ruiz. Said this is no time to rock the boat—intimated the President was playing politics. The press gave that senator almost as much space as it gave the ultimatum. Everybody knows the world is sitting on a powder keg—they've known it ever since that flare-up of war that followed the Munich pact. But they refuse to believe we're part of that world! They seem to think we're safe in our isolation despite the fact that we're the richest nation in the whole infernal shake-up!"

"It's my belief, sir, it may not be long before Van Hassek sells us some new ideas."

"I hope Van Hassek is all there is to the threat, Benning!" Flagwill said with a groan. "If we're to face later attacks from the sea, heaven help the United States for the first year of the mess. Get busy and type up your report in detail. General Hague has called a general staff conference for eight o'clock. Hague has been at his desk constantly since your report came in yesterday—no one around here has had any sleep. I'll be back."

Benning dictated to a confidential clerk his report covering his movements and observations from the day of his arrival in Paris. He gave in detail his conversations with Van Hassek, his experiences at headquarters, his talks with Fincke, the adventure of Mlle. Ducos, the scene in Van Hassek's quarters, including the ceremony of Bravot's departure; the seizure of Van Hassek's operations map, finally of his own escape from Mexico in the Fernando plane.

This done, he reproduced from memory Van Hassek's operations map with its numerous sinister red arrows indicating points of possible invasion of the United States by a major land force supported by warships and aircraft.

COLONEL FLAGWILL came in from staff conference, his face tense.

"No word from Ruiz except a bare acknowledgment," Flagwill said grimly. "Our ambassador reported that Ruiz wanted several days in which to study the American proposal, which is equivalent to ignoring our demand for prompt compliance. The President is very much worried about the situation."

"It may be, sir, that the ultimatum will bring the boil to a prompt head," Benning suggested.

"What's fretting the President is his next move. G-2 has canvassed public opinion throughout our nine corps areas and finds the public isn't very much excited over the Mexican situation. The President's ultimatum stirred up more curiosity than alarm. Too many newspapers treat the matter apathetically, or question the way the President went after Ruiz.

"What if your report should turn out to be inaccurate—or the whole thing a tremendous hoax—or a Van Hassek pipedream out of which comes nothing due to a switch at the last minute in international plans, Benning?"

"They can always change their minds," Benning agreed. "Also I'll admit Van Hassek's operations map may be a hope rather than a concrete plan. But there's no laughing off his army, nor discounting his plans to attack the United States."

"Oh, I agree fully," Flagwill said. "We've alerted the Second Division at

Fort Sam Houston, the Eleventh Infantry at Laredo, and our detachments at other border points. That's the extent of it. Now if Ruiz thumbs his nose at us, I'm not sure that Congress will back up a mobilization, or that the President will act on his own as a measure to repel invasion. If he did, and no invasion developed, he'd be laughed out of office."

A stenographer brought in Benning's report and Flagwill seized it avidly. His brows met as he came to the scene in Van Hassek's quarters at the Palacio Nacional.

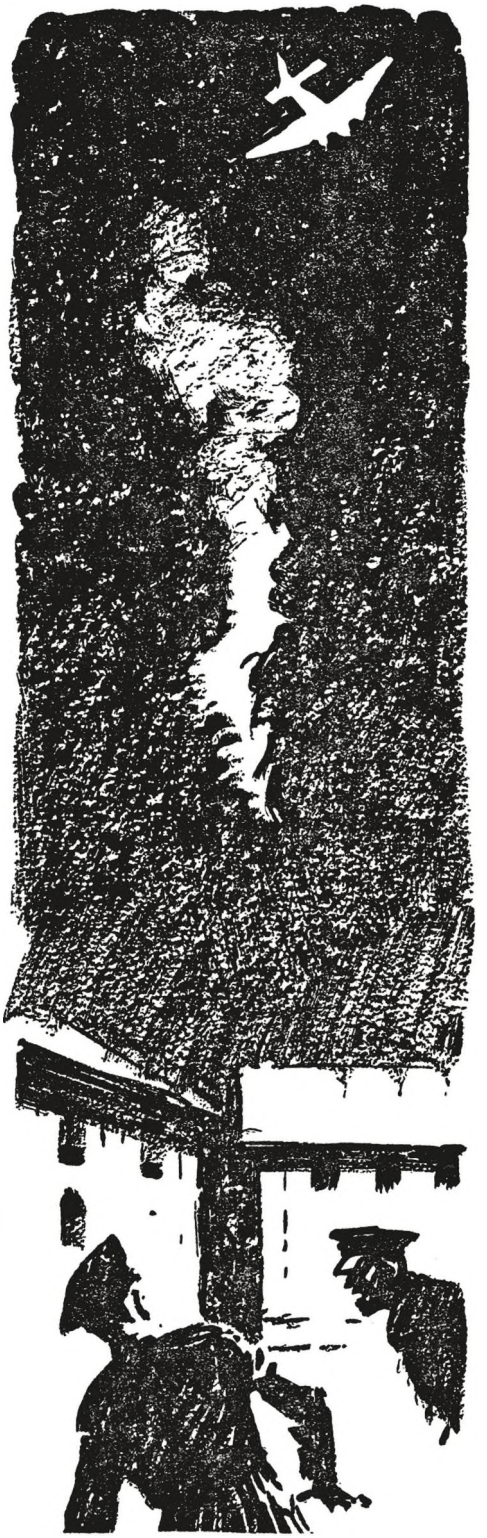
"You say, Benning, you saw this black flag with crossed sabers with your own eyes—and all the officers saluted it?" he asked sharply.

"Yes, sir."

"You didn't tell me that before. Man, that's vital information! That same flag has been showing up in Europe. It's also been reported in Tokio and China. Reports have leaked out that the militarists are rallying behind that flag, hell-bent on taking matters in their own hands if necessary. Of course, that's a subterfuge for coalition governments to maneuver behind while they keep up a pretence of peace negotiations. But the presence of that flag in Van Hassek's headquarters is highly significant. I'll take your report at once to General Hague—you'd better grab yourself a bite to eat!"

OUT in the streets, Washington struck Benning as strangely quiet and unconcerned in face of the turbid international situations, the rumblings of trouble, the President's unanswered Mexican ultimatum. Sensational headlines of the evening before had been replaced by more conservative headings. Mexico had lost its zest as news, pending some new development. The stock market, after a sharp drop the day before, had recovered its losses and was driving ahead under a fresh buying urge, telling that the wise ones of the financial world discounted the Mexican threat.

He took a taxicab to the Army and Navy Club, where somber retired officers mumbled over world threats with their coffee. After a shower, and a shave



that wiped out his wispy artillery mustache, Benning returned to the War Department.

Flagwill's section had done some fast work with the Van Hassek map. A skilled draftsman had done it over into what Benning considered a remarkable likeness of the original.

"We're going to the President with this map and your full report," Flagwill announced. "That ought to justify his insistence on a showdown with Ruiz. In the meantime, we're getting set to mobilize."

Benning spent morning and afternoon checking over the G-2 reports on complications and developments the world over. Notes of ambassadors, consuls, attaches in foreign capitals, and summaries of press clippings all reflected the unrest and tension that gripped the world.

Europe continued a maelstrom of rumors. Germany, Italy, Spain and their allied Balkan states were shut off by rigid censorship. On the plea of internal necessity they had closed their frontiers to foreigners, denied aliens all use of mails and wire communications. Similar action had been taken by Japan. Unverified reports came from China of heavy troop concentrations north of Shanghai, together with concentration of transport fleets. Russia had drawn off to herself behind an unbreakable curtain of censorship. Diplomacy admittedly had broken down the world over; fretted capitals waited in the grip of fear for the next moves in a world gone mad.

Only in the United States was there tranquillity left, a lack of fear and tension. G-2 reports gave the same story from over the country. There was lively interest but little tension. War was something on remote horizons, isolated by broad seas. America wanted nothing to do with it, wished to be left alone with her peaceful intentions—therefore no harm could come. The war scare was promoted by militarists in their quest of heavier appropriations for armaments, just as though recent billions pledged to them were insufficient. As for those mercenary troops in the Mexican army, our own army could gobble them up in a jiffy if they were senseless enough to start anything.

During the day Benning saw little of Flagwill. Endless staff conferences were being held, the whole War and Navy Departments a beehive of strained activity. A new plan was hot in the making, a tortured plan, out of which the best must be drawn.

It was a plan to meet the one emergency for which the United States was wholly unprepared, the emergency of sudden invasion.

CHAPTER VII

ATTACK

AT Fort Sam Houston, on the outskirts of San Antonio, Lt. Colonel Bart, corps area G-2 chief, received disturbing information late in the day. Shortly after sunset a formation, identified as bombers, had passed over the Rio Grande at a point west of Brownsville, headed north.

Bart had telephoned the villages of Kingsville, Gregory, Skidmore, Beeville and Kennedy to the north of the border, in Texas, without picking up any further report of the flight, from which he concluded that the bombers must have taken out across the Gulf of Mexico.

He had notified Galveston and New Orleans, but as the evening passed no reports came from those cities. Neither Kelly Field nor Randolph Field had any planes out. A query to Washington brought the response that no American bombers were known to be in the lower Texas region or along the Gulf of Mexico.

Colonel Maguire, corps area chief of staff, was inclined to the belief that Mexican bombers had been making a test flight and had turned back across the Gulf of Mexico on finding themselves north of the Rio Grande. But he directed that all regular forces in Texas and throughout the corps area keep on the alert through the night, particularly along the Rio Grande.

The reported bomber expedition had followed a series of reports during the afternoon that had put General Brill and the whole corps area staff on the

jagged edge. A Mexican had brought into Laredo the report that heavy motorized divisions were spending the day in screened bivouacs in Coahuila and Nueva Leon. General Brill had given his confidential sanction for reconnaissance by an army observer flying a fast commercial plane. By ten o'clock at night the plane had not returned, no message from it had been picked up at Laredo.

Colonel Bart had spread his net to the north and east to Georgia and the Carolinas. Shortly after ten the field phone rang from the Eleventh Infantry at Laredo. Colonel Denn of that outpost regiment had an unconfirmed report that an unidentified plane had been shot down by Mexican anti-aircraft in the vicinity of Monclova.

"There's blood on the moon for us, general!" Bart immediately reported to General Brill. "Discounting every other report, yet this news of a plane shot down in Coahuila must be the real quill. Not only is our plane missing, but no one outside of this headquarters knew the plane was out."

The general nodded gravely. He was a well-balanced commander who weighed all facts before acting on them. Grotesque as the audacity might seem, he was convinced that attack was not far in the distance. With his staff he was preparing such makeshifts of defense as his meager forces permitted, once the issue was precipitated.

Half an hour later came news from Colonel Denn that was not to be ignored.

"Four flights have passed over Laredo within the past fifteen minutes," Denn said. "If my ears know an American plane these were not American. They were headed about due north, and travelling high and fast."

General Brill calmly made his own estimate of the situation. Parked in the grounds of Ft. Sam Houston were the 1600 shining new trucks of the Second Division, together with the division's material and supplies. The Second, alerted and with all leaves suspended, was in barracks and camp ready for emergency. At Kelly and Randolph Fields, nearby, were the planes and supplies used in training a small new army of pilots for an expanded air service.

"Have the Second Division get their trucks out of here as soon as possible," he directed his chief of staff. "They'll also disperse their artillery. There'll not be much time if we're in for trouble tonight. Have what anti-aircraft we've got set up. Notify the mayor of San Antonio and suggest that he have all lights cut off. Notify the flying fields of our information. Notify Eagle Pass and Fort Bliss."

He paused to receive another report from Bart.

"Sir, Third Army Headquarters just called in from Atlanta. They've a report from Charleston of bombers flying high over that city at ten seventeen o'clock, heading north by east."

"Get General Hague at Washington on the wire for me immediately!" the corps area commander directed.

IN A few crisp sentences, his voice unaffected by excitement, General Brill retailed his report to the chief of staff of the Army.

"I don't want to be an alarmist, Hague," Brill said, "but my personal opinion is we're all in for hell before much longer. Frankly, I've felt it in my bones all day. I hardly need tell you I must

have more troops down here and supplies. We're too thin on the border to make a show of standing if anything does pop loose on us."

"Sorry, General." General Hague answered. His voice trembled slightly. "I've done my best for you, but our hands are tied until Congress loosens up, or the President feels justified in acting on his own. Of course, if anything actually breaks, the roof will be the limit."

General Brill said bitterly, "That'll not keep me out of the hole down here, General! I have less than three days of fire stocked up for my artillery, not much more than that for the infantry."

"I directed ordnance to send you seven hundred tons today, Brill. That'll supply your Second Division for two or three days, and in the meantime the situation ought to clarify, one way or another. I'll report what you told me immediately to the President. Keep me posted of any developments. We'll arrange a special wire for you at once."

Outside there was orderly commotion. Troops were pouring out of barracks and bivouac camps already; the first drivers were moving their trucks out of the fort. Two hours would be required to clear the Second Division, much more time than it would take bombers to fly from the Rio Grande to San Antonio.

Another report from Colonel Denn. The colonel's voice now crackled with intensity. One of his intelligence scouts, disguised as a Mexican peon, had the word from friendly Mexicans that a heavy motor column was moving from the vicinity of Palo Blanco. Another column was reported moving by night through Tamaulipas towards Brownsville, and a third was said to have passed Mesquite, in Coahuila, headed in the direction of Eagle Pass.

"What can I expect in the way of reenforcements, sir?" Colonel Denn pleaded when General Brill was put on the line.

"Nothing for the present, Denn," General Brill answered crisply. "If hostile forces cross the Rio Grande, fire on them. If they come over in force, do the best you can to delay them. When you're forced back, if you are, take advantage of every opportunity for delaying action. I'll give you further instructions when and if anything happens. Keep me informed."

"Very good, sir," Denn answered. "The Eleventh will do its best."

An hour later trucks were whirring out of the fort, filled with men; rubber-tired artillery was shifting its light and medium cannon out of the zone of possible danger.

The alarm had spread into San Antonio. A local station was broadcasting the report of planes on the way up from the Rio Grande. People were cautioned not to display lights, to avoid bunching up in crowds in the event an air attack developed. At the same time, the broadcaster reassured them that the flight of aircraft might not have hostile purposes.

An aide, whom General Brill had sent out into the garrison to observe, burst into headquarters, breathless, his face stripped of color.

"Sir, airplanes!" he panted. "Flying high—but you can hear them coming!"

General Brill left his staff at their allotted jobs and went outside with his aide. The garrison was dark, headquarters worked behind drawn shades. The general cursed as he saw that the bright lights of San Antonio had not yet been extinguished.

The roar of motors filled the air as trucks and artillery continued to roll out of the garrison. But above that he caught the sharp whine of higher-powered engines far overhead.

The 69th anti-aircraft artillery had gotten its guns in position but was withholding its searchlights pending development. Suddenly a small plane zoomed down over the garrison and dropped a flare that turned day into night.

Brill stood calmly observing. He knew that flare was the first violence of an invasion of the United States. He knew that in a few minutes the bombers would circle over their target of Fort Sam Houston and let drive. He knew, too, that there was nothing he could do to prevent what was to follow. Whatever plans he was to follow must depend now on developments.

A hissing shriek caught his ears. Involuntarily he raised himself on his toes and placed his finger tips at his ears. A savage flash of yellow flame leaped from

the earth into the heavens. The ground under him shook with volcanic intensity from the savage wrath of a heavy bomb.

LONG fingers of light leaped into the sky from the 69th's searchlights. Another bomb detonated, this time in the field from which the trucks were whirring. Brill caught, in the momentary flash of light, the grim tragedy of shattered men and material. Above the din he heard the cries of wounded men. Another bomb crashed and another. His anti-aircraft regiment began crackling, but its guns were almost lost in the din of titanic thunder that crashed from the sky.

Incendiary bombs rained down, bringing an irresistible heat that ate its way into all combustible parts of barracks. General Brill sat down at his desk, stricken by his utter helplessness, but maintaining his self control.

His staff, their bloodless faces drawn and lined, worked coolly, outwardly oblivious to the danger. Information kept coming in, reports that had to be sifted until the whole picture of attack and disaster had been assembled and appraised as the basis for whatever later action was to be taken.

The wooden hangars at Kelly Field were in flames. Randolph Field was being hammered. San Antonio was in a mad panic which had gotten out of all police control. People were flooding the streets, rushing about in frenzy in their efforts to escape the city. Roads were choked with passenger vehicles; there was no controlling the traffic.

A heavy bomb struck San Fernando Cathedral near the City Hall. Another fell on West Woodlawn Avenue and killed a score of people. A bomb had dropped in Brackenridge Park and killed thirty people who had taken refuge there.

But Van Hassek's bombers were confining their major fury to Fort Sam Houston and the flying fields, which told General Brill that the attack presaged a crossing of the Rio Grande by mobile troops during the night or at daybreak.

From New Orleans and Galveston came reports of raids that were still in progress. Hundreds were killed in the streets. No other details.

Shortly after midnight the violence suddenly ceased, and the bombers and their accompanying attack ships sailed off to the south. Colonel Denn called in again from Laredo. The head of a motorized column had halted at Nuevo Laredo just south of the Rio Grande. His intelligence patrols had verified this with their own eyes.

"All right, gentlemen," Brill told his staff. "Get the Second Division together as quickly as possible and start them moving south towards the Neuces River! Tell General Mole of the Second, I'll meet him at Kirk in three hours with his orders for the defense of San Antonio. Get General Hague on the long distance again while I report. We're going to do our best, and I needn't tell you what we're up against!"

(to be continued)

"Do I git a trial, or do I shoot it out?"

TOWN TAMER

A novelette

By WALT COBURN

A STRING of freight wagons loaded with buffalo hides, bogged to the hubs in red clay mud, blocked the main street of Buffalo Run. The sides of each wagon were marked by a large Diamond F brand. They belonged to big Tim Fogarty, who owned many such freight outfits and controlled the stage line that hauled the mail, passengers and Wells Fargo express from Buffalo Run to Fort Benton, Montana's metropolis at the head of navigation on the Missouri River.

Tim Fogarty, six feet six inches of hard muscle and big bone, had taken the long whip from the bullwhacker and now plowed through the red muck that came to his knees. He came down the

long string of oxen, his broadcloth and fine linen and beaver hat and new congress gaiter boots ruined for all time, chewing his half smoked cheroot, the cracking of his bull whip punctuating his bellowing cursing. His high beaver hat toppled off and he trampled it underfoot without noticing. His fiery red hair tossed around his roughly hewn face. His bloodshot green eyes blazed as the yoked oxen strained forward with slow, sluggish unity. The bogged wheels turned stubbornly. The string of laden wagons moved. Tim Fogarty's bullwhip cracked like a pistol.

A wild cheer went up from the motley throng that crowded the wide plank sidewalks on either side of the muddy street. The saloons and the trading store were empty; customers and proprietors alike were outside watching big Tim Fogarty win the five thousand dollar bet he had just made in the El Dorado with Jack Quesnell and Pete Kaster. Big Tim Fogarty was moving his freight outfit without unloading so much as one buffalo hide.

Jack Quesnell owned the El Dorado saloon, gambling house and honkytonk. His sallow face did not change expression as he watched, but in the depths of his opaque black eyes might have been a faint light of something like envy or hatred or a mixture of both. And the drooping ends of his black mustache concealed the barest smile of contempt for the uncouth giant who had risen from the ranks of tobacco chewing bullwhackers to become a power in Montana Territory.

Pete Kaster, mining man, cattle man and one-time placer miner, shouted his admiration, forgetting for the moment that Big Tim Fogarty's feat was costing him five thousand dollars. Pete Kaster was short, barrel-chested, bowlegged. He wore the rough clothes of a cowman and his graying black hair and beard needed trimming. He had just come to town from his ranch and had been too busy drinking with Tim Fogarty to go to his hotel room and clean up.

Pete Kaster was louder than any man with his whooping and yelling as Big Tim Fogarty trailed beside his string of oxen, his bullwhip cracking, red mud splattering his fancy town clothes. He waved his battered hat and loudly proclaimed to the crowd of cowboys, trappers, buffalo hunters, Indians and 'breeds, that Big Tim Fogarty was the best damned bullwhacker in the West, even if he didn't have no love for the big red-maned Mick.

Big Tim Fogarty swung his heavy bulk up on the bull-bar that extended out several feet to one side of the wagon box of the lead wagon. He sat there on the bullwhacker's seat, roaring his profane shout of victory at Jack Quesnell and Pete Kaster.

"This little ride I'm takin' will cost the pair of you five thousand dollars!" Big Tim's bellow could be heard for miles across the rolling prairie.

He quit the bull-bar, tossed the braided ten-foot lash to the bullwhacker. So deft and skilled had been Big Tim's manipulation of the bullwhip that its new buckskin popper remained white as snow.

Mud-smeared, hatless, Big Tim Fogarty led the way into the El Dorado to celebrate his victory with whiskey.

BRICE BRADFORD sat his horse, watching with amusement and no little wonder. He had ridden a long ways. He was seeing the little cow town of Buffalo Run for the first time. Seeing it after a heavy rain when the clouds had cleared and the sky was sapphire blue and the ground steaming.

The town was crowded with all manner of men. It was wild, rough, booming. There was no semblance of law and order in that uncouth mob that pushed and crowded the weaker and drunker off the edge of the plank walk into the red mud. The few women in the crowd were being escorted back into the El Dorado by the boisterous crowd. The hitchracks along the street were lined by saddled horses or teams hitched to buckboards or wagons. Mostly the buildings were saloons. There was an assay office, a trading store, a hotel that was the only two-storied building in town.

The Diamond F warehouse was a long one-storied building with wide platforms piled high with malodorous green and

dried buffalo hides. It boasted two flags in front of its office. One flag was the emblem of the United States. The other was a somewhat faded and weather-streaked green flag with a white Diamond F painted on it. Tim Fogarty put his brand on everything he owned. For two reasons, he roaringly proclaimed when he was drunk. He was proud of his climb from poverty to wealth and he wanted every man, woman and child, white, 'breed and Injun, to know it. Secondly, it kept thieves from claiming unbranded stuff.

Men on the sidewalk near Brice Bradford had been shouting the name of the red-haired bullwhacker in the mud-ruined fancy clothes. The name meant nothing to Brice. Nor did his steel gray eyes, carefully searching the faces of men, find one that was familiar. And anyone taking the trouble to watch this tall young cowpuncher on the black-maned dun horse might have been shrewd enough to observe that the stranger's right hand never strayed far from the six-shooter he wore in a holster tied on his thigh.

He had taken off his fringed chaps and they hung from his saddle horn in front of his long legs. He was clean-shaven and his California cowpuncher pants were new, with an Indian tanned white buckskin seat sewn into the heavy wool. Brice Bradford had strong, clean cut features, marred by a freshly healed scar across one tanned cheek. His hair and heavy, straight eyebrows were black.

He was turning his horse to head for the big feed barn and corrals at the end of the street when he heard a woman's voice cry out behind him, on the sidewalk. There was anger rather than fear in her sharp cry. He turned his horse.

A girl in a new red and white gingham dress and sunbonnet was struggling to free herself from the manhandling of a flashily dressed man Brice spotted for a tin-horn gambler. He was trying to drag the protesting girl into the El Dorado.

Brice Bradford spurred his horse to the edge of the sidewalk. He quit the saddle with a quick, easy swing. His left hand caught the man by the collar of his fancy coat, jerking him, shaking him roughly. His right hand caught the man's mouth with a hard, open-handed slap.

The man jerked free. His right hand slid in under his coat, came out with an unbroken movement, holding a snub-barreled gun—the type of weapon carried by gamblers and known as a belly-gun.

Brice's six-shooter was in his hand, spewing a streak of flame. The short barreled belly-gun roared. The heavy slug creased the cowboy's ribs. The tin-horn's knees buckled and he crumpled in a heap.

BRICE grabbed the girl and swung her into his saddle. He vaulted up behind her and the big dun horse went down the street, lunging through the heavy, sticky mud at a lope.

"Whichaway, ma'am?" he asked her, holding the bridle reins in one hand, his gun in the other.

"Past the barn, then turn right. Our cabin is on the creek. You killed him, didn't you?"

"I didn't shoot to miss, ma'am." Brice Bradford's voice was tense, a little unsteady. The girl's thick copper colored hair was in his face. She turned her head a little and he saw a pair of gray eyes flecked with brown, dark with fear now. She was pale under the tan of her cheeks.

"You shot Quesnell's partner, Charlie Decker. They'll hang you. They hung a man last week for stealing a horse from Big Tim Fogarty. They'll kangaroo you."

"Kangaroo me?"

"Kangaroo court. That's what my daddy calls the Vigilante trials. You did that on my account. That won't be in your favor, either. I'll be the cause of your death."

Her voice was almost a whisper. Her eyes, wide with fear, stared into his. Brice Bradford forced a grin.

"I ain't dead yet, lady. That the cabin, yonder under the big cottonwoods?"

The big dun horse had carried its double burden past the edge of town. They were headed across a strip of land

covered with tall buffalo grass, following a trail that led to a log cabin, corral and small barn.

A tall man in a white shirt and pants tucked into the tops of his boots came out of the cabin. His iron gray hair came to his shoulders. He stood on widespread legs, swaying a little unsteadily as he tried to draw his lanky frame erect.

"Well, well, daughter, and what have we here? Some gallant young blade who is blessed with the manners of a gentleman and lets not the dainty feet of the fairest of all fair damsels be soiled by the vile mud of Buffalo Run. Sir, Judge Plato Morgan welcomes—"

"Please, dad! We're— He's in trouble. He just shot Charlie Decker!"

"In that case, sir, my hospitality, humble as it is, increases a hundredfold. I am proud indeed to grasp your hand. Dismount, sir. My gun and my legal advice are at your service. I shall win my first case in the so-called court of justice in this frontier hamlet of Buffalo Run. Virginia, you remind me more of your beautiful mother each day. Fetching home in this manner a young man who has the forthright courage to shoot down as vile a dog as ever cheated at cards. That was quite typical of Cornelia when she was alive."

Brice Bradford slid to the ground and lifted down the girl in the red-checked gingham dress. Her smile was brave, pitiful. Obviously her father was a little drunk.

"You'll have to go before they find you here," she told him, taking hold of his hand. "Go quickly. God bless you, always. I'll never forget you in my prayers."

Brice felt uncomfortable, having the prettiest girl he had ever seen talking to him like that, her two hands hanging onto one of his. Her sunbonnet hung by its strings from her throat and the top of her copper colored head came below the level of his shoulder, so that she had to tilt her face upward like a small child to look at him.

He was grinning faintly, trying to hide the tingling of excitement that still had his nerves pulled taut. He had just killed a man, just missed sudden death by inches. And by the same token he had undone all his careful planning to lose himself and his identity in Montana. He was in a tight and there was no chance to run away, even if he wanted to try. Buffalo Run was a prairie town. For miles in every direction the country was flat prairie, rolling hills, distant high benchlands, and the nearest rough country were the distant blue Highwood Mountains and the badlands along the Missouri River, a long, hard day's ride on a fresh horse."

"My horse is too leg weary," Brice told the girl, "to travel fast or carry me far. This country is too open to help a man on the dodge. I shot that man in self defense. There must have been plenty watchin' who would bear witness to the fact that he pulled his gun before I had mine in my hand. I'll ride back and face whatever there is to fight. I'm proud to have you pray for me. My mother used to pray like that when she was alive. I'll drop by when I git things straightened out in town." Brice swung into his saddle. He gave Judge Plato Morgan a brief salute.

"Good day, sir," he said, his hat lifted, and reined his horse. He headed straight back to town, his horse traveling at a lope.

HE SAW a bunch of men on horseback gathered in front of the hitchrack at the El Dorado. He slowed his horse to a walk as he rode down the middle of the muddy street, his hand near his gun.

The crowd milling around on the wide plank walk in front of the El Dorado now became motionless. The men on horseback sat their saddles their hands on their guns.

Three men stood on the edge of the sidewalk, apart from the crowd. Head and shoulders taller than his two companions stood the mud-spattered Big Tim Fogarty. The black clad gambler Quesnell was on his left, and on his right the stocky figure of Pete Kaster, one time placer prospector. The three were eyeing Brice with cold-eyed curiosity. Quesnell had given flat-toned orders to the crowd to be quiet. The three were standing on the blood-stained planks where a few minutes ago the tin-horn

gambler Decker had gone down with a smoking gun in his hand.

Brice Bradford halted his horse at the edge of the sidewalk where the three men stood. A hush had fallen over the crowd. It was a tense, dangerous silence that Brice broke.

"I had to shoot a man a little while ago. I came back to stand a fair trial for it. Which of you is the sheriff?"

"What made you come back?" asked Quesnell. His voice was brittle.

"I shot the man in self defense. Why should a man turn coyote for that?"

Brice's two hands were flat on his saddle horn. There was nothing that hinted of bravado about his manner. His eyes met the gambler's cold black scrutiny with level, steady gaze.

"Certainly," said Quesnell smiling ironically, "Plato Morgan didn't tell you that you'd get a square trial at Buffalo Run."

"Mebby not. I didn't stop at his cabin long enough to talk to him about it. It seems to me like we're wastin' time. Do I git a trial or do I shoot it out with somebody that's takin' up the fight for the man that got shot?"

The gambler, he reckoned, was the man who would be most likely to make a gun play. Brice never took his eyes off Quesnell. He was ready to jerk his gun and play his game out to a swift, deadly finish. He tried not to let these men see that he was quivering inside with something that must be fear. That black-eyed man was studying him, measuring him with cold appraisal.

"You stand trial," said Quesnell flatly. "Get off your horse."

"This horse has packed me a long ways. I've got money to pay for his feed."

"Your horse," said Big Tim Fogarty, "will git all the hay he kin eat. One of my men will take him. A man in the tight you're in, thinkin' first about his horse, is all right, eh, Pete?"

"The man's here to stand trial," Quesnell cut in flatly, "not to make a horse trade. Get down, mister. And you can keep your gun."

Brice Bradford dismounted, stepping onto the sidewalk to keep from muddying his boots. He stood within arm's reach of the three, his bridle reins in his hand.

Tim Fogarty motioned to one of his barn men to take the horse. Brice gave the man a ten dollar gold coin.

"Take good care of him, feller." Brice rubbed the horse's nose.

"You betcha," said the barn man, pocketing the money quickly.

Tim Fogarty made a lane through the crowd. Brice followed behind the red-haired giant, Quesnell just behind him, Pete Kaster bringing up the rear.

Big Tim Fogarty led the way through the bar room, past the dance floor and gambling tables, down a narrow hallway with doors on either side. He opened the door of the last card room and strode in, muddy, swaggering, chewing a half smoked black cheroot.

The room was perhaps fifteen feet square, furnished with a large round green covered card table and half a dozen heavy chairs. A bartender wearing a soiled white apron followed them with whiskey bottle and glasses which he set on the table, then departed without a word.

Pete Kaster closed and bolted the door. Quesnell motioned Brice to a chair. They all sat down.

"Drink?" Big Tim Fogarty offered Brice a glass and the bottle.

"I never use it. I'm obliged, just the same."

Brice could hear the clumping and scraping of booted feet out in the hallway. He reckoned that the room was guarded. The one window was painted with layers of blackish green to make it opaque. The room was lighted by a swinging lamp over the table.

"The meeting," said Quesnell, sitting directly opposite Brice, "will come to order."

Fogarty and Kaster downed their drinks. They sat on either side of Brice. Quesnell had no whiskey glass in front of him.

"You are accused," said Quesnell, "of the murder of Charlie Decker. Witnesses have been questioned. You struck Decker, manhandling him. Then, when he drew his gun, you shot him. The killing might or might not have been premeditated. At any rate there was

no real provocation for such gunplay. As a committee of three representing the Vigilantes of Buffalo Run, we—"

Out in the hallway could be heard loud sounds of scuffling, and the raised voice of Judge Plato Morgan.

"I demand entrance!" Plato Morgan's voice sounded loudly. "My client is in there! Stand back, you ruffians! Lay hands on my person and by Jupiter I'll have you flogged—"

"Let the old rascal in," chuckled Big Tim Fogarty. "I'll git him to give us that poetry about Ostler Joe or the one about Casey at the Bat. Git him likkered right and he's better'n your stage show, Quesnell."

Before the gambler could offer protest, Pete Kaster had pulled back the bolt and opened the door.

JUDGE Plato Morgan had on a black frock coat, a black Confederate Army campaign hat, and a hastily tied black string tie. He carried his gold headed ebony cane like a saber.

"Hah!" He strode in, his gait steadier than it had been at the cabin. Pete Kaster closed and bolted the door.

"Drink, Judge?" suggested Big Tim Fogarty.

"Thank you, sir. I never indulge when I am working. As legal consul for the accused, I demand a short recess while I discuss a few vital points of the case with my client. After which a fair judge shall be appointed, a jury of twelve good men and true shall be chosen from the proper quota of talesmen. I am here to demand justice for this young man. His was an honorable deed, gentlemen. This man who stands accused of murder has done no more than carry out an enactment of chivalrous justice. In the days of my youth it would have been accomplished on a field of honor at daybreak, with pistols or swords. I should have been proud, young sir, to have acted for you as your second.

"But this is Buffalo Run, gentlemen. Circumstances prevented a more formal procedure. Charlie Decker insulted a lady of finest quality. This gentleman did no more than any gentleman of courage and breeding would have done. He came to the defense of the lady. Decker attempted to kill him. This young gentleman killed that blackleg rascal in self defense and in the defense of the honor of a lady who has the misfortune to be the daughter of a man who has but recently incurred your hearty displeasure.

"Hah! By Jupiter! No man of you in this room, no single man of you is fit, I say, to be his judge! As nefarious a triumvirate as one could find if he hand-picked the scrapings of hell!"

Judge Plato Morgan's ebony cane pointed at each of them in turn. His blue eyes, deep-set under shaggy brows, blazed. His voice rolled sonorously from his throat.

"Have a drink, Judge," said the mud-smeared Tim Fogarty, "then give us 'The Face on the Bar Room Floor'."

"Hah! You mock a man who stands before you in the name of Justice! You, a foul tongued bullwhacker! Your illiterate partner, who jumps the mining claims of honest prospectors. And the partner of the deceased, a man who fills his coffers with the ill-gotten gains derived from this den of iniquity he calls his El Dorado. Who among you is fit to condemn this forthright young gentleman, who within this hour has rid the earth of as unmitigated a villain as ever tainted the clean air with foul breath? I move that my client be set free without further hypocritical nonsense! I ask for nothing from you three men! I emphatically demand this verdict! I stand here in the great and misused cause of Justice! I shall stand here until I totter and fall! Death only can still my tongue!"

Judge Plato Morgan paused, out of breath.

"In that case," Jack Quesnell's flat toned voice fell across the last echoes of Plato Morgan's speech, "I think it easier for all concerned to dismiss the case. The accused man killed Charlie Decker in self-defense."

"Hah! By God—"

"Just one minute. The man who shot Decker will not be allowed to leave Buffalo Run until his case is dismissed by a vote from the entire Vigilante body, at their next meeting."

Jack Quesnell's cold black eyes were fixed on Brice now. He might have been inwardly smiling at some grisly sort of joke.

"If you and Judge Plato Morgan will give us your word of honor that you'll not try to leave Buffalo Run, it won't be necessary to lock you up."

"I'll stay," said Brice quickly. "I give you my word I won't try to rabbit on you."

"The gentleman's word," said Judge Plato Morgan, "is as good as any man's oath. He'll be my guest until he is free to leave Buffalo Run."

"What's your name?" asked the gambler bluntly.

"Brice Bradford."

"Brice Bradford?" Quesnell's tone was suddenly sharp. "Where did you come from?"

"I gave you my name." Brice was suddenly on guard. "My past history is my own business."

"Right as hell!" chuckled Big Tim Fogarty. He filled a glass and shoved it into Judge Plato Morgan's hand.

"As fine a speech, Judge, as ever I heard, even if you did call us a lot of double-barreled words I didn't savvy. It's a pleasure to be cussed out so fancy-like. Makes a man feel plumb important. And if you'll give us that 'un about Lasca, we'll call 'er a day."

Judge Plato Morgan twirled the glass of whiskey and smiled. It was good whiskey.

"To Brice Bradford," he bowed stiffly, "A gentleman!" He swallowed his drink almost thirstily. Before he could set down the empty glass, Tim Fogarty had it filled again.

JUDGE Plato Morgan was reciting poems at the long, well patronized bar when Brice left to take a look at his horse.

He found his horse in a stall, the manger filled with fresh wild hay cut on the prairie.

The barn held fifty head of horses. That many more were outside in the feed corral. Brice, the barn-man trailing him, eager to do more to earn his ten dollar fee, went down the line of stalls. He made a pretence at looking over the horses with some idea of a horse dicker in mind. In reality he was reading the brand on each horse. He paused at a double stall that held a bay and a sorrel horse.

Both saddle horses wore the identical brand. A Square and Compass brand on the left thigh.

Brice's jaw muscles tightened as he read the brand. His hand instinctively dropped to the butt of his gun and he looked around almost furtively.

"Who owns these horses?" he asked, making his tone casual.

"Two strangers. Never sighted either of 'em till they rode in last night. Their horses is ga'anted up and laig weary. They dickered with Big Tim fer two of the best he's got fer sale. Saddled up and pulled out at sunrise. One of 'em was a big feller with an iron gray spade beard and his upper lip bare. The other 'un I reckon might be his son. Feller about your age. Thirty, mebby. The young feller done the talkin'. A pleasant enough feller, but the quiet kind that it's best to let plumb alone. The big feller with the beard looked like a deacon. Only he packed a six-shooter and saddle gun and his eyes was colder'n ice hunks. They asked how far it was to the Canadian line. Said they'd be back in a week er two to git their horses. How'd you read that brand, mister? An Open A with a Quarter Circle run through it, I'd name 'er."

"That'll do," nodded Brice, turning away. He wondered how many men in Montana knew that Square and Compass brand that belonged down in Utah —the world's finest horses, bred to mount that grim and secret band of men known as the Avenging Angels. Those picked horses wore the Square and Compass brand. Enemies of Avenging Angels said that the brand should be a death head and cross bones.

Brice Bradford went back to the El Dorado. Unless he slipped away under the cover of darkness, he was a free prisoner here at Buffalo Run. Two armed men had trailed him to the barn. They now loitered along behind him, taking little pains to conceal the fact that they were guarding him to prevent any rash attempt on his part to escape.

Brice smiled grimly at the thought of being trapped here at Buffalo Run, held prisoner until those two men from Utah returned from a fruitless hunt for him across the Canadian border. The Avenging Angels were thorough in their methods. They were as deadly as any Vigilante gun-toters here in Montana Territory.

Men stared at him curiously as he walked into the El Dorado. He saw Judge Plato Morgan reciting some bar room ballad, Big Tim Fogarty, Pete Kaster and a group of half drunken men forming an appreciative audience. Brice was not certain whether Big Tim Fogarty really enjoyed hearing the recitations or whether he was baiting the white-maned old judge. But at any rate he knew that the girl Virginia would not want her father made the butt of a lot of bar room ridicule.

Brice determined to wait until the judge finished this ballad he was reciting, then get him to go home. That meant a wait of some minutes. And the only place for a man in a saloon to do his waiting was at the bar.

Men moved back to give him a place. Brice saw that they were not making any friendly overtures. They were not taking the risk of inviting the displeasure of Jack Quesnell.

Brice sighted the two men who had followed him to the barn and back. He motioned to the pair, grinning a little.

"As long as you two gents are goin' to be trailin' me like a pair of bloodhounds, you might as well enjoy the job. Have a drink."

"Why not?" One of them grinned at the other. "The boss didn't say nothin' about votin' ourselves dry, did he?"

"As long as he's willin' to pay for the drinks," said the other man, "I got no objections."

"The drinks," said the bartender, shoving Brice's money back to him, "are on Big Tim Fogarty. What'll it be?"

"Crick water, if you've got such a thing," said Brice. "I work better on that than hard likker."

"Most men do," the bartender set out a beer glass filled with water. "Decker should have stuck to it."

"Amen to that," spoke the flat-toned voice of Quesnell. Brice turned to find the gambler at his elbow.

Brice's hand had dropped to his gun. Quesnell smiled thinly and shook his head.

"I'm not playing Decker's hand out, Bradford. You got your verdict back in the card room. That verdict holds. Perhaps I've given you a bodyguard for your protection as well as to keep you from trying to rabbit on us. Decker had no friends, but several men in town booked a financial losin' when you killed him. They might be feeling sore."

"He was your pardner, wasn't he?"

"In business only. And that bullet of yours gave me his interest in the El Dorado and other holdings. Nobody is mourning the passing of Charlie Decker. If the crowd seems to be cold shouldering you, it is because they're waiting to see which way I'll take it."

The bartender shoved a glass and small bottle of mineral water across the bar. Quesnell filled his glass. The men who lined the long bar were watching. The bigger part of Judge Plato Morgan's audience had diverted their attention to the gambler owner of the El Dorado.

"Welcome to Buffalo Run, Bradford," said Jack Quesnell, his flat-toned voice carrying clearly down the bar. He lifted his glass of mineral water and drank.

The crowd relaxed. Quesnell was accepting the stranger who had killed Decker.

But Brice Bradford was not quite sure of the gambler's sincerity. There was something about Quesnell's eyes and the faint twist of his mouth that belied this friendly gesture. He wasn't trusting Jack Quesnell.

JUDGE Plato Morgan came up, glass in hand. Brice blocked the tipsy judge's flowery speech with a bluntness that had a sobering effect.

"If we're eatin' supper at your house, sir, we'd better be rattlin' our hocks."

"Quite so, young man." He tossed off his drink and wiped his mustache with a white silk handkerchief he took from the tail pocket of his frock coat. He was reluctant to leave and Brice thought he knew why. He shoved a gold coin

across the bar and told the bartender to give him a quart of whiskey.

"Make it two bottles," said Big Tim Fogarty. "And this Bradford feller's money is counterfeit. I'm treatin' the judge. Fetch him back after supper, young feller. He ain't give us 'The Letter That Never Came'."

Outside, the judge pointed to a two-wheeled cart and a team of sleepy looking fat bays.

"Our conveyance, sir. No chariot, to be sure, no span of prancing steeds. But Tom and Jerry will take us there. There is the matter of replenishing the larder. I have a list of things my daughter gave me, unless I've mislaid it. Hah! Here are the items. And in my pocket, without so much as a farthing squandered across the bar or gaming table, is the wherewithal to satisfy the greed of the crotchety rascal who calls himself an honest tradesman. He's a Damyankee, sir."

They went into the trading store. A tall, thin-lipped man behind the counter greeted the judge coldly.

"No cash, no grub," he snapped.

Brice took the list from the judge's hand. He jingled half a dozen gold coins in his hand.

"Fill this grub list and be quick a-doin' it." Brice turned to the judge, handing him the two bottles of whiskey.

"If you'll put those in the cart, Judge, I'll fetch out the grub."

When the judge had gone, Brice followed the lanky storekeeper to the rear of the place.

"How much does my friend Judge Plato Morgan owe you?"

"One hundred and twenty-seven dollars," was the quick reply.

Brice counted out the money. He found a large wicker clothes basket and filled it with things not on the list. Most of the things were luxuries, rather than staple foodstuffs. A hundred dollars worth. He counted out more gold coins.

"There's more where this gold comes from, mister." He fixed the uneasy storekeeper with a cold stare. "Hear that? And after this, you blue-nosed sandhill crane, you treat Judge Plato Morgan and his daughter with proper respect or I'll shove that bald head of yours so deep in the mud out yonder that it'll take a yoke of Big Tim Fogarty's oxen to drag you out."

Brice loaded the basket and a large box into the large compartment under the cart seat. So they drove down the muddy street and to the log cabin. Brice's two bodyguards followed on horseback at a distance.

Virginia Morgan made an everlasting picture in Brice Bradford's memory as she stood in the cabin doorway. It was sunset and a meadowlark was singing. At sight of Brice and her father the girl's face brightened and she ran to meet them as they pulled up.

"The judge," called Brice, "won his first case. They had me tried, convicted, hung and buried when he showed up."

He had to steady Plato Morgan as the judge descended from the high-wheeled cart with as much dignity as his state of sobriety allowed.

CHAPTER II

DEATH BY BALLOT

IN THE back card room at the El Dorado, at about the same hour that Brice Bradford and the Morgans were finishing the most elaborate dinner that had ever been served under that cabin's sod roof, Jack Quesnell, Big Tim Fogarty and Pete Kaster were holding a meeting behind a bolted, guarded door.

"He's our man," said Quesnell. "Brice Bradford is made to order for the job."

"What makes you think he'll string along with us?" growled Big Tim Fogarty. "How do you know he won't rear up and fall over backwards when we try to put a hackamore on 'im?"

"We're not going to put any hackamore on him, Fogarty. He'll be voted into office by the Vigilantes. Just as we'll elect that old rum-soaked Plato Morgan to the office of judge. Buffalo Run will have a sheriff and a judge. Law and Order will prevail."

"We've bin gittin' along so far," protested Pete Kaster, "without much trouble. What's the sense in electin' a sheriff and a judge?"

"We've gotten along so far," said

Quesnell flatly, "by wiping out any man that looked like he might give us trouble. If you think we're not skating on thin ice, just study the letter that would have gone to the Wells Fargo Express headquarters at Fort Benton if Decker hadn't shot that man I spotted for a detective yesterday. I got the letter out of Decker's pocket. It's got his blood on it. Decker, unless I'm badly mistaken, was holding that letter with some idea of double-crossing us. Here it is. In case you two gents can't make out the handwriting, I'll read it aloud. Listen to it carefully."

Jack Quesnell took a blood-stained envelope from his pocket, pulled out a sheet of paper that was similarly stained, smiled thinly, and read aloud:

To the Wells Fargo Agent, Fort Benton, Montana, Confidential. My investigation here has proven beyond all doubt that the frequent holding up of the stage and robbing of the mail and Wells Fargo Express shipments of gold, etc., has been the work of one man. This man is one Charlie Decker. Decker is simply a tool in the hands of more dangerous men who have hired him to do the actual road-agent work. The stage driver is in the employ of Big Tim Fogarty and is paid to keep his mouth shut at all times and under all circumstances. The shotgun messengers you have hired were either intimidated or bought off by Fogarty, Jack Quesnell and Pete Kaster. One or two shotgun messengers who could not be so scared off or bribed were murdered and more satisfactory men put on to replace them.

The three men I mention here, Quesnell, Fogarty and Kaster, are the organizers of the Vigilantes here at Buffalo Run. Even Decker is a member of that secret organization that is supposed to uphold law and order. Few, if any of the Vigilantes are aware of the fact that they are being hoodwinked by the three leaders. When any man begins to suspect any part of the truth, that man is murdered. I will be fortunate if I am allowed to leave Buffalo Run alive. Decker suspects me. He has tried to get me drunk in order to loosen my tongue. He had made me a secret proposition to double-cross Quesnell and Fogarty and Kaster. I am leading him on cautiously in hopes of obtaining definite proof of the charges we cannot make without substantial backing. This letter is to keep you informed as to my activities here at Buffalo Run. It may be my own death warrant I am writing. In case I am killed, no matter how, this brands Quesnell, Fogarty and Kaster as my murderers. Even though Decker or some other hired killer will do the actual job.

I will mail this at the first opportunity or send it by some messenger I can trust. Though it is hard to find a man—

"The letter," smiled Quesnell, "was never finished. Decker walked into his room and shot him. Decker didn't hand over this letter for some reason. He had some plan of selling us down the river. Brice Bradford did us one hell of a neat favor."

Quesnell folded the letter and put it in his inside coat pocket. Big Tim Fogarty and Pete Kaster gulped down stiff drinks. Their faces showed that they were badly disturbed.

"So, my partners in crime," said Quesnell, his eyes watching his two companions closely, "we need to change tactics. What that long-nosed detective learned before I paid Decker five hundred dollars cash to rub him out, other men must suspect. Those men will talk. We'll be strung up by our own Vigilantes unless we act right now. And our surest, safest bet is do an about face.

"A dozen or twenty men saw Brice Bradford kill Decker. Most of them had cause to distrust or hate Decker. They saw this stranger Brice Bradford play the big hero. Nominate him for sheriff and they'll yell three cheers till they're hoarse as a flock of crows. Sheriff Brice Bradford is a cinch bet."

"SUPPOSIN' he's honest?" Big Tim Fogarty's red brows knit in a thoughtful scowl. "He don't look easy to handle, Quesnell."

"I've got an ace in the hole, my friend. I'm keeping it buried till I need to play it. I don't back losers."

"Brice Bradford," growled Pete Kaster, "is as safe as a black powder keg next to a red hot stove. If we got to have a sheriff here at Buffalo Run, let's put in a man we kin handle."

"And be in no better fix than we are now. We've got to put in a man that can't be bought or scared off. Buffalo Run is going to have an honest sheriff. When the time comes, I'll handle Brice Bradford. I'm calling a meeting of the Vigilantes tonight at midnight."

"All right, Quesnell," agreed Big Tim reluctantly. "Pete, it'll be up to the lily-fingered gamblin' man to handle the new sheriff. But looky here, what's the idee in shovin' Plato Morgan into the office fer judge? Ain't he cussed the three of us out like we never let no man talk to us before? Fer all his drunken po'try spoutin', that ol' coot has more fire an' brimstone in him than a camp meetin' preacher. If ever we git up before him, he'll have us swingin' from a cottonwood limb!"

"Exactly," smiled Quesnell. "If we nominate Plato Morgan for judge, who can say that we're not fair minded, law abiding citizens? Plato Morgan is going to take his job seriously. But don't lose track of the fact that he's the biggest drunkard in Buffalo Run. He's gambled away every dollar he had when he landed here a month ago. He's a bar room bum. He and his daughter are practically living on my charity right now. She was on her way to keep an appointment with me regarding a job when Decker made that clumsy play that sent him to hell and sent her home on Brice Bradford's horse. I'll handle Judge Plato Morgan and the little lady, gentlemen. I may even turn honest and marry the girl."

Big Tim Fogarty's hairy hand clenched, showing a gold ring mounted with the biggest diamond in Montana Territory. His bloodshot green eyes glared at the suave, handsome gambler.

"Stick to your honkytonk wenches, Quesnell. Bother her and I'll twist your head off your neck."

"Since when, my bullwhacker friend, did you become a champion of womanhood? You, with a squaw on every reservation between Fort Apache, Arizona and the Flathead and Sarcee squaw camps in Montana and Canada. More squaws than a Mormon bishop has wives. The last man that wanted to wrestle, Fogarty, had his guts ripped open before he got his strangle hold." Quesnell's upper lip lifted like an animal's, showing his white teeth.

"Quit it, you two," growled Pete Kaster. "No janglin'. Pass the word, Quesnell, that there's a special meetin' of the Vigilantes. This ain't no time to be wranglin' over ary female. Tuck in your shirt tails. Let's git down to business."

"United, we stand," said Quesnell flatly. "Divided, we fall. Hang together or we may hang separately. Kaster's right. The Vigilantes will meet at midnight at Fogarty's warehouse."

The gambler's hand came from beneath his coat where he carried a pearl-handled dagger. He was faster with that weapon than most men were with a gun. He could, with a flip of his hand, hit a card at fifteen paces. Quesnell quit his chair with a smooth, catlike grace and left the room.

"DAMN that greaser dude with his pig sticker." Big Tim Fogarty filled his glass and gulped down the raw whiskey. He had a white man's loathing for a knife.

"He's got eyes like a snake's," nodded Pete Kaster as he reached for the bottle. "Say, he kep' that letter. Why didn't he burn it?"

Pete Kaster's right hand touched the butt of his six-shooter. The blocky, bow-legged placer mining cowman was one of the fastest gunmen in the Northwest.

"We got to watch Quesnell fer tricks," he said. "He's got more brains than a corral full of fellers like me'n you, Fogarty. And he'll deal us both a hand from the bottom of a marked deck, if we don't keep our eyes open. Me'n you better fergit our personal grudges and watch Jack Quesnell."

"I'm watchin' you both," said Big Tim bluntly. "No man ever looked after Big Tim Fogarty but hisself. Which reminds me—you ain't paid me your half of the five thousand dollars you lost when them oxes of mine moved that load outa the mud. That failin' memory of yourn, Kaster, ain't a joke with me any more. Quesnell may be a knife man but he pays his gamblin' losin's."

"I just come from the round-up. A man don't pack ary bankroll in his workin' clothes. I'll git it from Quesnell's safe."

"There's a couple of drinks left in the bottle," said Big Tim. He was as close as a miser in some ways, even as he

was prodigal in others. "No use in leavin' it fer the house."

They drank together. They spent nearly half an hour discussing the hazardous business of electing Brice Bradford Sheriff of Buffalo Run and putting Plato Morgan into office. Then they went out into the saloon. Both men were hard drinkers, but neither of them ever got drunk enough to be thick-witted.

Pete Kaster got some money from his private box in the huge safe that Jack Quesnell had in his private office. He paid his bet to Big Tim Fogarty. A few minutes later both men were gambling.

The El Dorado games were high stake games. Quesnell bragged that they were all on the level and no man had ever caught a dealer cheating.

Money was loose in this town. Free trappers sold their furs to Big Tim Fogarty, who was openly bucking the American Fur Company and Hudson's Bay across the Canadian Line. Placer miners came here by stage coach and many of them were caught in the spider web of the El Dorado because the stage coach stopped here overnight by financial agreement between Quesnell and Big Tim, who owned the stage line.

Buffalo Run was a boom town of the frontier. Potatoes a dollar a pound, flour selling for fifty dollars per sack. The high stake games used gold pieces for counters and the sky was the limit. The percentage girls got a dollar chip for every dance and twice around the dance floor was the limit. Drinks sold for a dollar apiece. The girls were served a harmless, non-intoxicating drink that looked like whiskey but was in reality cold tea.

Vaudeville talent that did their skits on the stage below the half dozen curtained boxes above the dance floor got a hundred dollars for each performance. The better known vaudeville teams drew more, besides a percentage of all drinks served them in the boxes, where they entertained customers who were in a spending mood. The El Dorado was all that its name implied. It was a bigger bonanza than any of Pete Kaster's ill-gotten placer claims in the Rockies.

BRICE BRADFORD, Plato Morgan and Virginia played high-five after the supper table had been cleared and Brice helped Virginia with the dishes. The meal had sobered the judge somewhat and Brice had dampened his suggestions that they stroll over to town to see the lights.

"The mud's too sticky, Judge," Brice had told him, "and there's no sense in takin' the cart. The team's bedded down for the night."

Virginia's eyes had warmed him with their thanks.

Despite the fact that an understanding had formed itself without the help of words, Virginia Morgan treated Brice with a sort of aloofness that puzzled him. He had told her frankly, in such a way that she could not possibly take offence, that he had paid their bill at the store. It was, he said, only a small part of what he owed the judge for defending him at the hearing at the El Dorado. A man's life, he explained, was worth more than a few dollars that he wasn't even missing from his money belt.

So it couldn't be that, he told himself. It was something else that made her almost shrink away from him when he came near her. Several times during the evening he had found her watching him with troubled eyes.

Somewhere outside the cabin Brice's two bodyguards kept watch to see that he made no attempt to leave.

It was after midnight when they heard the sound of horses outside. The voices of men. Brice shoved back his chair, his right hand gripping his gun. He saw Virginia Morgan looking at him, fear, terror, almost loathing in her eyes. And he suddenly knew why she had not wanted him to come near her. It was because she had seen him kill a man.

Brice Bradford reckoned that the Vigilantes were coming to get him, that Quesnell had lied.

"Git into the bedroom," Brice told the girl and her father, biting off his words. "I'm not goin' to let that pack hang me!"

Plato Morgan took his daughter's arm, almost dragging her out of the front room. Brice closed the door on them;

lowering the lamp wick until the light in the room was dim, he crouched behind a heavy pine board cupboard. There was a loud rapping at the door, then the bellowing voice of Big Tim Fogarty.

"Open up, Judge! Git your best speech oiled up and ready to spout! If there's a Bible in the house, fetch it out. You and young Brice Bradford will have to lay your right hands on it when the Vigilante Committee swears you both into office! We're comin' peaceful, young Bradford, so hold your shootin'!"

The door opened and Big Tim Fogarty strode into the room. Behind him came Pete Kaster and Quesnell. Other men were outside. Chuckling heavily, Big Tim walked over to the lamp and turned up the light. Brice saw that none of them had guns in their hands. He shoved his six-shooter into its holster and came from behind the cupboard.

"I figured," he said, eyeing them with suspicion, "that it was a necktie party. I ain't so certain yet but what that's the reason for your comin' here."

"There has been a meeting of the Vigilantes," said Jack Quesnell, acting now as spokesman. "You are not only exonerated for the killing of Charlie Decker, but the citizens feel that in you they have found a man who is suited in every way to hold the office of sheriff here at Buffalo Run. They want a man who has courage and fine principles. Judge Plato Morgan sang your praises in no uncertain terms in the El Dorado. The men of the Vigilantes want you for sheriff. They will back you in your work at bringing law and order to Buffalo Run. They have also elected Plato Morgan Justice of the Peace. Where is the judge?"

"By Jupiter! Plato Morgan opened the bedroom door. He stood framed in the doorway, tall, erect, sober. He had managed to slip on his black frock coat. The old Southerner made a handsome picture as he stood facing them.

"I trust this is not some shabby jest, gentlemen!" Plato Morgan's voice was none too steady. But it was emotion rather than whiskey that put timbre in his melodious voice.

"Don't misjudge us," said the gambler. He sighted Virginia and bowed.

"Let me be the first to congratulate you, Miss Virginia, on this occasion of your father's good fortune and yours. I hope that this is but the beginning of better luck for you both. Buffalo Run has made a wise choice."

VIRGINIA MORGAN stood beside her father, clinging tightly to his hand. Her face was a little pale and her eyes searched those of the gambler with a level, disconcerting questioning. But Jack Quesnell, gambler, was well trained to stand the scrutiny of men or women. He smiled faintly. The girl's eyes were the first to swerve. She looked at the mud-spattered Big Tim Fogarty, then at the stocky, embarrassed Pete Kaster, who was visibly ill at ease in the presence of this girl who was not of his kind.

"This is very hard to understand," she said slowly. "My father is strongly opposed to you three men. Why have you done this?"

"A matter of self preservation," said Quesnell quickly, as if he had anticipated such a question. "Perhaps we have been far-sighted enough to realize that Buffalo Run won't tolerate our methods any longer. It is better that men like myself and Tim Fogarty and Pete Kaster align ourselves with the law, rather than oppose it. We are, you might put it, throwing ourselves upon the mercy of the court. We bow to the inevitable. Your father has done a good job of campaigning, Miss Morgan."

"Hah!" Judge Plato Morgan drew himself more erect. "You hear that, daughter? Even Jack Quesnell, Big Tim Fogarty and Pete Kaster admit defeat. My time spent in the El Dorado was not wasted wholly in poker or the pleasures of the bottle. My words have not fallen upon deafened ears. Gentlemen, I accept your offer. I shall be proud to serve Buffalo Run!"

From outside the open doorway came a loud cheer. Then Quesnell silenced the crowd, and before the judge could start one of his speeches, the gambler turned to Brice Bradford.

"The Vigilantes have elected you sheriff of Buffalo Run. We're waiting for your answer."

Brice wondered what their game was. Whatever else it might be, it was not for small stakes. For the moment he forgot all that lay behind him. He forgot the two men who had trailed him from Utah's badlands, where there existed a settlement of men and women and their children who had been exiled from the Mormon Church. Renegade Mormons who had sent two of their Avenging Angels to overtake him and fetch him back there for a grim trial that could have but one ending.

"I'll take the job," Brice Bradford said quietly. And he heard the sharp intake of Virginia Morgan's breath.

"This calls fer a drink!" bellowed Big Tim Fogarty. He pulled a bottle from his hip pocket. "Judge, let's have some glasses."

"Daughter, bring glasses for the gentlemen. Though I must decline to drink anything stronger than water, sirs. Much as I love the taste of good whiskey, gentlemen, I must forego its pleasure. I owe that much to the citizens of Buffalo Run who have put their trust in Plato Morgan, of Virginia!"

Big Tim Fogarty and Pete Kaster exchanged quick, meaning glances. Brice had not missed that exchange of a silent message.

He grinned faintly. Virginia's face was a little flushed and her eyes misted with unshed tears as she tightened her clasp on her father's hand. Brice had a notion that she was inwardly saying a little prayer.

"You ain't takin' the pledge on us, Judge?" Big Tim's voice betrayed his disappointment.

"Something of the sort," said Plato Morgan. "But don't let that dampen your spirits, gentlemen. Daughter, the glasses. I'm sorry, Quesnell, that I'm not stocked with your water from White Sulphur Springs. But the well water is pure, I assure you, though I confess I haven't been as well acquainted with its splendid qualities as I hope to be from this night forth. Whiskey for Tim Forgarty and Pete Kaster, then. Well water for Jack Quesnell, Sheriff Brice Bradford and the Morgans! Hah!"

Plato Morgan brought out a Bible that had belonged to his wife. He kissed his daughter and put on his black hat, tucking the Bible under his arm. They were going to the Vigilante meeting place at Big Tim Fogarty's warehouse for the formality of being sworn into office.

Virginia startled Brice by holding out her hand to him.

"I should be congratulating you, shouldn't I? But I can't. I'm terribly afraid. Afraid for my father. He's so much like a child. And I'm afraid for you. Those men are not his friends or yours."

"I'll ride herd on the judge. Don't worry. I'll fetch him back to you safe. And whatever their game is, we'll beat it or die a-tryin'."

"I never saw a man killed until today," she said, her voice barely audible.

"I never killed a man until today," he told her.

Brice Bradford let go her hand that had been cold as ice. He joined the others outside. As he closed the door he caught a glimpse of the girl's back. He heard her sob as she went into the bedroom.

THE Vigilante meeting at Big Tim Fogarty's warehouse was conducted by Jack Quesnell with proper solemnity. There were twenty-five men present and their identity was supposedly concealed by makeshift black masks. They were, for the most part, men who worked in some capacity or another for Quesnell, Big Tim Fogarty or Pete Kaster.

They had already cast their votes. There was only the formality of swearing Brice Bradford and Plato Morgan into office. Quesnell, who had gleaned a knowledge of such things somewhere along his mysterious back trail, conducted this with suave, cold efficiency, as he would have banked a poker game.

The business had been hardly completed when there was a loud pounding at the barred door. Someone outside was shouting for Big Tim Fogarty.

"It's Jerry Toole, Tim's stage driver," said the man on guard at the door. "He's bellerin' somethin' I can't make out. Sounds like he's tryin' to say he's afoot."

"I didn't expect him to be a-horseback," said Big Tim, his black mask

awry, "It's about time he fetched that stage of his in. He's five-six hours overdue, the drunken bum. He'll be havin' some damn song and dance story about bein' bogged down or the crick was too deep from the rain to git acrost. Let 'im in!"

A mud-smeared man staggered in, cursing thickly.

"Spit out that cud of chawin' and talk sense," growled Big Tim. "What ails yuh? Got the snakes again?"

"Snakes be damned! I was set afoot fifteen miles back on the road, and I've come by hand along a road so boggy it pulled me down to me knees iv'ry step. The scut made me unhook me four horses and turn 'em loose. He killed the Wells Fargo shotgun man and shot the lock off the strong-box. He was hilpin' hisself as bold as ye please to what was in it, dumpin' the money into a gunnysack, and when I stopped to git me wind and look back over me shoulder he played Annie Rooney with his Winchester till the bullets sung around me head like hornets. After that I kept on movin', pickin' up me weary feet and layin' 'em down wance more in the gumbo. Iv'ry step av the way to Buffalo Run I hoofed it. Fifteen miles from the lower crossin' on Cottonwood Crick, with the full moon makin' faces at me iv'ry step I took."

Big Tim Fogarty looked at Quesnell. "The stage was held up. Now what do you make of that?"

"I'd say," said the gambler, his voice brittle, "that the new sheriff has his first job cut out for him. I was expecting twenty thousand dollars in currency in that Wells Fargo strong-box. It was money the bank at Fort Benton was sending me in exchange for gold dust and nuggets. Bradford, you can pick your posse from these Vigilantes and take the trail before it gets cold—"

"I don't need a posse," said Brice. "How many men held you up?" he asked the stage driver.

"Who's this mon?" snapped the stage driver.

"He's the new sheriff, Jerry," said Big Tim. "How many of 'em stuck you up?"

"I seen only wan mon. But there might have bin more. It was night. Moonlight, to be shure, but the brush and trees is thick at the lower crossin' on Cottonwood. A rigimint av cavalry could be hidin' in the brush and me not see 'em. It was done quick and neat. Me team is pullin' up out av the crick and is on the uphill slope when a voice hollers out from the dark to throw on me brakes.

"The shotgun mon is on the box wid me, as always. A new mon that I niver laid eyes on till this trip. As unsociable as a rattler, he was, and I'm sheddin' no tear at his funeral.

" 'Grab a gun!' sez he, and he opens the bombardment wi'out a by yer leave er a go to hell. I quit me seat like it was a red hot stove. My brake is kicked on. I dives headfirst over the wheel and into the gumbo, where I plays possum, layin' in the mud like I'm deader than a rock. Me face and me eyes is full av gumbo and I see nothin' av what happens. I'm drawin' stage driver's pay and gittin' not a dollar fer refereein' no gun fight.

"When the shootin' is over I paws wan eye clear av the gumbo and takes stock av the situation. The Well Fargo shotgun messenger is dead. There's a tall feller in a long yaller slicker and a black handkerchief acrost the face av him a-standin' by me. He kicks me in the ribs and tells me to unhook me four horses and pull off their harness and if I don't do the job done right now he'll fill me belly full av lead.

"Which I does. And then he tells me to start walkin' fer Buffalo Run and not to look back. 'Lot's wife,' sez he, 'looked back and was turned into a pillar av salt. I'll turn ye into somethin' just as dead if ye don't keep a-movin'.'

"I turned me head just wance, when I stopped fer to ketch me wind at the top of the rise. He sent me on my way wance more. And here I am. Fifteen miles av—"

"What did he look like?" Brice cut him short.

"He'd stand six foot and he was neither skinny ner porky. He moved quick and he talked as quiet as if he's passin' the time of the day. And now I'll be scrapin' the mud off me hide and soothin' me insides wid a warmin' nip

av the El Dorado's stummick liniment."

"I'll need a good horse," said Brice. "Mine's leg weary. And that's all I'll ask of you."

"You don't know the country," said Big Tim. "Take a posse."

"The road-agent's horse don't wear wings. The ground should be soft enough for trackin'. There's only one man to hunt. A posse would get in one another's way."

"Fetch the miscreant back alive, sir," said Plato Morgan.

"Return with your shield," Quesnell smiled thinly, "or on it. Bring back your man dead or alive."

"Or don't come back," added Brice grimly, "Is that what you're tellin' me, mister?"

THE gambler nodded. "You grasp things quickly, Bradford. I'm wondering if you picked up what I did from Toole's description of the road agent."

"Meanin'?"

"Meaning that bit about Lot's wife. The average run of outlaw don't quote the Scriptures. But a man riding a Square and Compass horse, for instance, might know something of the Old Testament?"

"And just what," Brice held his voice steady with an effort, "do you know about the Square and Compass brand?"

"Not half as much as I'd like to know. I came from the Mexican Border by way of Arizona. I crossed the Colorado on the Utah side, at the Crossing of the Fathers. I had a camp outfit with me and had been spending some months enjoying the beauties of the Grand Canyon country. I had a yearning to see more. I was luckless enough to get lost after I crossed the Colorado on the Utah side. I found myself in a strip of badlands country. Penetrating deeper into one of the most scenic spots I've ever seen, I came upon the hidden settlement of Rainbow. I was taken prisoner by men who rode horses branded with the Square and Compass.

"I was held there a week, then escorted on my way, Bradford, by two of their Avenging Angels. Before they let me go they burned a little brand on my shoulder. It's still there for them to find if ever I return to their Forbidden Land. The penalty of returning there would be death. Those men were not hoodlums. They are men, so I'm told, who broke away from the Mormon Church, or were driven out, more likely. I've heard some black tales regarding those men. Perhaps you have, too.

"At any rate, two men riding Square and Compass horses stopped at Buffalo Run a few days ago. I was recognized. I was asked if a man named Brice Bradford had shown up here. I told them no. They bought horses from Big Tim and headed for the Canadian Line. I'm passing this bit of information on to you for what you think it's worth. Because I'm not a talkative man, Bradford, I've kept my mouth shut concerning those two Avenging Angels from Rainbow. Perhaps there's a brand on the back of your shoulder?"

"And supposin', for the sake of argument, there is, mister?"

"Then we belong to the same brotherhood of the condemned," Quesnell smiled faintly. "There is no need to let those two Avenging Angels return to Rainbow alive."

"You poked your nose into their Forbidden Land, Quesnell," said Brice coldly. "They could have killed you and nobody would have known what happened to you, ever. But they let you go. They warned you not to go back there. Now you'd murder 'em. That's where you and me don't agree. You've picked the wrong man, mister, to do your murderin'."

Quesnell's hand slid under his black coat and his fingers closed over the pearl handle of his dagger.

"Don't," said Brice, his hand on his gun. "I've heard about that fancy Bowie knife of yours. Take your hand off it or I'll pull the trigger."

Brice's six-shooter was in a holster that left the end of the gun naked. The long barrel tilted under the downward pressure of his hand, the holster swinging smoothly on the cartridge belt. The muzzle of the six-shooter was pointed at the gambler's belly. Quesnell's hand came slowly into sight, empty. Brice grinned.

"I'll give you a chance to pick up the hand you just dropped, gambler, when I git back. I think there's somethin' you and me have got to git talked out. I'm going to ask you if you ever went back to Rainbow. I'll be expectin' the truth for an answer. That's all, Quesnell. I'm leavin' now to take the trail of a Bible quotin' road-agent. I hope to fetch him back alive. Both of 'em, if there was two of 'em."

Brice turned his back on the gambler and headed for the door, where Judge Plato Morgan stood talking to Pete Kaster. Big Tim Fogarty was still questioning his stage driver. Brice overheard a scrap of Jerry Toole's excited talk.

" '—and tell Big Tim Fogarty,' sez he, 'that it's a part of the tithe he owes.' "

"Shut up, you drunken fool," Big Tim's voice was a harsh whisper. His red face, unmasked completely now, looked mottled in the dim lamplight. The big bullwhacker was visibly perturbed.

BRICE passed on. His heart was pounding fast now. He wondered just what he had stumbled onto here at Buffalo Run. First Quesnell, now Big Tim Fogarty. Could Pete Kaster be another who had incurred the enmity of the Avenging Angels from the Forbidden Land of Rainbow? Not likely. Nor was it likely that Big Tim Fogarty was in any way connected by past or present contact with those men who called themselves the Avenging Angels. Big Tim had sold them saddle horses. If they were enemies, he would never have let them leave Buffalo Run alive. This puzzle was deeper than Brice had time now to figure out.

"I'd like a horse," Brice said to Pete Kaster. "The best horse in Buffalo Run."

"He's waitin' fer you, Bradford, at the stable. A big brown geldin' in my K iron that'll pack you a week without turnin' a hair. Ride 'im like you owned 'im. I had some money in that Wells Fargo box. So did Big Tim. Quesnell claims he had twenty thousand. There was anyhow sixty thousand dollars in that haul. Git it back fer us and your reward will be a fat 'un."

"So you each had twenty thousand dollars comin' from Fort Benton. That's a lot of money to be comin' in one shipment to Buffalo Run."

"That's none of your business, young feller. Your job is to git 'er back. Don't come back without it, neither."

Brice grinned faintly and took Plato Morgan's arm. "Got your Bible, Judge? Then let's git back to the house."

They stopped at the barn long enough for Brice to saddle the big brown horse.

Big Tim Fogarty, Quesnell and Pete Kaster were at the barn. They eyed him silently as he saddled up.

"Git goin'," growled Big Tim. "You're givin' that feller a hell of a head start."

"Can't follow tracks till daylight. It's only fifteen miles to the lower crossing on Cottonwood. Three hours before there's light enough to foller sign. Keep your shirts on, gents. You elected me sheriff. I aim to do my job in my own way and without takin' your orders. If you wanted a hired man, you've picked the wrong cowboy for the job. Let's go to the house, Judge. Take a barn horse and send him back later. There are some things I want to talk over with you before I pull out. Official business."

When Brice and Plato Morgan had ridden away, Big Tim Fogarty exploded.

"Quesnell, there's somethin' about this whole thing that stinks like a skunk. That Bradford rooster is actin' too damned headstrong, fer one thing. And unless Jerry Toole is lyin' like hell, we've bin robbed by somebody that knowed what was comin' in that Wells Fargo strong-box. Nobody but the three of us knowed that there was sixty thousand dollars comin' on the stage. Then one of us is double-crossin' the other two."

"The Wells Fargo office could have checked up on the package they took for shipment to Buffalo Run. Toole said they had a new man on. They didn't know when the stage left Fort Benton that Decker was dead. And they might have been suspecting Decker. If we've been crossed up it's been by some outsider who was either lucky or had some information from the Fort Benton end.

"What in hell's a tithe?" growled Big Tim.

They headed for Buffalo Run, a blood-red dawn at their backs.

"Tithe!" Quesnell's tone was sharp. "Who said anything about a tithe?"

"The road-agent told Jerry to tell me he was collectin' a tithe. Never heard of it. What'd he mean?"

"A tithe," said the gambler, scowling, his voice hardly audible, as if he were thinking aloud, "is a percentage of what a man earns. Like a gambling house takes a percentage chip out of every jack-pot."

"Taxes, eh?" guessed Pete Kaster.

"Taxes," nodded Quesnell, his eyes like smouldering coals.

"Then taxes are shore a-runnin' damn high," growled Big Tim Fogarty. "This thing shore stinks like a skunk's hidin' near here."

"It gives the new sheriff a chance to make or break himself," said Quesnell. He went back up the street to the El Dorado. He called the two men who had been guarding Brice.

"Slip out of town without Big Tim or Kaster finding it out. Cold-trail Brice Bradford. If he meets anybody and throws in with 'em, use your guns. Fetch him back here dead or alive. But don't crowd the play unless it looks like he and the man or two men he throws in with are trying to quit the country. If he acts like he's coming back with 'em to Buffalo Run, stay out of sight and let 'em alone. It's a cold-trailing job from start to finish unless

Brice Bradford tries to quit the country. That's all."

Quesnell drank a bottle of mineral water and took over the faro layout to relax his taut nerves. He was dealing when Big Tim and Pete Kaster returned to the El Dorado.

"If he's double-crossed us," muttered Big Tim, glaring at Quesnell's back, "I'll bust every bone in his Greaser body."

"If he spills your guts on the floor, Tim, I'll see that he dies quick of lead poison. Lead is quicker than steel."

"I'll make him eat his pig sticker if he ever pulls it on me," growled Big Tim. "But we lay low till we see what Bradford does. If he's in with Quesnell, he'll git his needin's."

"We got a good man a-trailin' Bradford, Tim. That ramrod of mine won't lose 'im."

Over at the Morgan cabin, Brice Bradford unbuckled a buckskin money belt he wore beneath his shirt. Its long, narrow pouches were bulging. He handed it to Virginia Morgan.

"In case anything happens to me, it's yours. There's more than enough money in it to take care of you and your dad. In that pouch that is sewed shut instead of just laced, are some papers. Don't open it unless you're certain I'm dead. Then read 'em and burn 'em."

"You scare me when you talk like that. You're coming back. You *must* come back, Brice!" Her voice trembled a little.

"If you want me to come back, then I reckon that settles it," he grinned. "Keep a-prayin'. Like my mother used to, when she was alive. Her prayers always fetched me back home safe. Then she died. Sounds like superstition, but right after that I got into trouble. . . . You keep on a-prayin', Virginia. And one of these evenin's I'll be showin' up for supper."

CHAPTER III

LAW OF THE LONG RIDERS

BRICE BRADFORD pushed the big brown gelding to a long trot. He reckoned that he would be followed and it gave him no little satisfaction to know that he was forking a horse that would put the miles between him and the men who cold-trailed him.

He had left the Morgan cabin with rude abruptness, dropping Virginia's hand clumsily. For the first time in his life he had wanted to take a woman in his arms and kiss her and tell her that he loved her more than he loved anything this side of eternity. But he had lacked the courage to do that. She had lost that queer look in her eyes when she told him she wanted him to come back. She had forgotten there for a minute that he had killed a man. He didn't want to do anything that might scare her. But he still ached all over from that sudden longing to hold Virginia Morgan close and tell her that she was the only woman he ever would love.

"I reckon," he told himself aloud as he rode into the night, "I must be moon-locoed."

He rode clear of the deep rutted, muddy road and hit a lope when he was on more solid ground.

A little more than an hour later he rode cautiously up to the deserted stage coach where it stood on the sloping bank of Cottonwood. He was taking somewhat of a chance of being bushwhacked, but he reckoned that the road agent or the pair of them, if he was guessing right concerning their identity, would not be hanging around the scene of their crime.

That they were the two Avenging Angels had become almost a certainty on his mind. He knew the laws of those men who had been exiled from the Mormon church. If Quesnell had broken their laws, they were collecting money that their own grim, sinister code said belonged to them. If Jack Quesnell had stolen so much as a horse that wore their Square and Compass brand, they would call themselves justified in taking whatever they chose of his in payment and fine by way of exacting punishment. The money would be turned over to the leaders of that secret, renegade clan. It would go to support the community.

Rainbow, in the heart of the Utah badlands, had no poor, no wealthy. No man, woman or child wanted for food

or clothing. No man could boast of having wealth. They had a church they attended on Sundays. They had laws, strict, grim laws. Punishment for the violation of even the lesser laws were drastic, severe. They were a frontier mixture of Puritanical severity and outlawry.

Outsiders called their Avenging Angels the Long Riders. A Long Rider is an outlaw. But the Long Riders were the men who followed and punished law breakers from Rainbow. The Canadian law breaker had the fear of the Northwest Mounted in his heart. The Mexicans had a respect for the Texas Rangers that is proverbial.

Law breakers from the Forbidden Land would tell you that they would rather have a whole company of Rangers or a troop of Mounties trailing them than the Avenging Angels, who traveled always in pairs.

Brice had his gun in his hand as he rode up to the deserted stage coach. The moonlight brought out every small detail of the picture with startling clarity. He could have counted the links in the chain tugs where the four heaps of harness lay, without stepping off his horse. He saw the Wells Fargo strongbox on the ground, its padlock shot away, the lid flung open, the contents rifled.

But there was no dead shotgun messenger. A painstaking search showed not so much as a single blood spot on the driver's seat or the flat top of the stage coach where the shotgun messenger had ridden. Further search showed the boot tracks of two men around the strongbox. Two men had ridden away from the scene. Brice smiled grimly as he figured the whole thing out in his mind.

There had been only one hold-up man doing the job. The shotgun messenger had been the road-agent's partner. The gun fight had been cleverly faked to throw a bad scare into Jerry Toole, the stage driver. There was something almost laughable about the simplicity and daring of the hold-up. It was a joke. A costly, grim joke on Quesnell and Fogarty and Kaster.

Right now, Brice grinned faintly to himself, Big Tim Fogarty and Pete Kaster were suspecting that the gambler Quesnell had double-crossed them. Big Tim and Pete Kaster would also suspect each other of having a hand in the thing.

Sixty thousand dollars had been in that strong-box. Each of the three claimed twenty thousand of it. Now that money was gone. All of it. And they had sent Brice Bradford out to recover it and fetch back the road agent, dead or alive.

Brice picked up the trail of the two stage robbers and followed it slowly. He was badly handicapped because of his lack of knowledge of this country. So far, the trail led northward and a little to the west of the stage road that led to Fort Benton.

Then Brice Bradford lost the trail. Lost it in a bewildering maze of horse tracks. The two Long Riders had used an old trick to blot out their sign. They had picked up a bunch of wild horses and had drifted for miles with the loose stock.

They had even been longsighted enough to pull the shoes off their horses. In a country like this there are not many rocks and the prairie sod is soft on a horse's feet.

Brice slowed to a running walk and let the big brown follow in the general direction of the tracks made by thirty or forty unshod horses. He rode for perhaps fifteen minutes like that before he came to a decision. The moonlight gave him a fair idea of the topography of the country. Hills, coulees, long draws, flats, a square, table-topped butte to the north. Following horse tracks now was a fool's game that only a greenhorn would play. After a while those horse tracks would begin to spread out, scatter. The loose horses would be spooked and scattered in all directions. They would travel five, ten miles even, before they finally stopped. And they would be scattered all over a wide expanse of country. Trackers would have to make a wide circle to cut for the sign of the two Long Riders. They would split up, those two men who knew every trick and twist of the dangerous game they were playing. They would meet

again at some hideout. It was Brice's job to guess the location of that hideout.

"The Little Rockies!" Brice spoke aloud.

BRICE knew that the Little Rockies would be their ultimate destination because he was drawing upon his memory, remembering stories his father had told him before he was killed. Five or six years ago a man had been allowed to leave Rainbow. That man had gone north, far north into eastern Montana to scout for a location to be used in case the Mormons ran them out of their Forbidden Land and Rainbow. That man had sent back word to Rainbow that he had found the right location and was settling there. He was getting a thoroughbred stallion and buying range mares and was breeding a type of cowhorse that was badly needed. He had described the country and sent back a rough map of the exact location of the ranch.

The man's name was Wade Applegate and his brand was WA. The A was made by running a bar through the inverted V of the initial W.

Brice's father had described Wade Applegate as being a just and stern man, slow to anger, never making a decisive move until he was absolutely certain he was altogether in the right. A man past the prime of life who had never married.

Wade Applegate stood for justice towards all men. Even Applegate's bitter enemies, the Mormons, had trusted him and conceded him to be an honest man with whom to deal. He would have made a splendid preacher or an honorable judge. He had chosen to be a friend towards all men. The two Long Riders from Rainbow would find refuge at Wade Applegate's ranch at the foot of the Little Rockies. They would be safe there, even as the son of Bob Bradford would be welcome.

Brice asked for nothing better than to meet the two Avenging Angels from Rainbow there under the roof of Wade Applegate. Fate seemed to be shaping Brice Bradford's destiny, pointing his trail out for him.

Brice swung the big brown gelding around. He had been traveling north and west. Now he swung eastward, taking his course from the stars.

Brice's horse was shod. If anyone was trailing him they would pick up his sign. His aim now was to get a long start on any men who might be following him. His course was a straight one. He made a rough guess that the distance he'd have to cover would be seventy or eighty miles. He rode the big, grain fed brown horse accordingly.

Brice welcomed the sunrise. He rode all the next day, halting an hour or two during the middle of the day. He saw scattered bunches of cattle and an occasional rider in the distance. Luck favored him and he came no closer than a mile to the nearest rider. He rode out of his way a couple of times to avoid cow camps or ranches. He had a notion that a pair of men on horseback were cold-trailing him, but they were too far behind him to make certain.

He sighted other men riding in pairs. Cowboys riding after cattle. It was difficult to tell if the pair of riders he sighted behind him three or four times were men trailing him or whether it was a different pair each time. It didn't much matter, because he was a long ways ahead of them and he reckoned he would be reaching the ranch of Wade Applegate by dusk. Again, he figured grimly, the pair of riders might be the Avenging Angels with their loot, though he reckoned that they had gone on ahead of him. They would be at Wade Applegate's place when he got there.

Sundown fetched him into the broken country south of the Little Rockies. Long ridges spotted with scrub pines. Long draws thick with brush. It was the fall of the year and berries were ripe. Wild currants, green gooseberries turning mahogany brown. Chokecherries in clumps so thick he had to ride around them. Brice would lean from his saddle and scoop his hand full of berries. Hunger wasn't bothering him much. A cowpuncher gets accustomed to going for a day or two without grub.

He topped a ridge covered sparsely

with scrub pines and came onto a wagon trail. Five minutes later he was looking down onto a small cluster of log buildings and corrals. He knew he had reached Wade Applegate's horse ranch.

NO MAN challenged his approach, not even the barking of a dog. But he knew that he was being watched as he reined up in the last slanting rays of sunset in front of a big log barn.

A tall, white-mustached man with a six-shooter swinging low on his lean flnak appeared in the wide doorway of the barn. His skin was leathery, seamed, stretched over a big boned, homely face. His deepset eyes were dark brown, flecked with gray.

"You are Bob Bradford's son," he said in a deep, soft toned voice. "You're the livin' image of your father. I've bin expectin' you to show up here sooner or later. Git down and put up your horse, Brice Bradford."

"There's men here ahead of me?" questioned Brice. "Two men?"

"Two men, yes. But keep your hand away from your gun. They've given their word. I want yours. This is not the time or the place for gun fightin'. Supper's about ready. Questions of any kind kin always be settled better on a full belly."

Brice dismounted. His hand was gripped so hard that he almost winced. This Wade Applegate was sixty or more, but he was hard as rawhide and his joints were limber.

"One of Pete Kaster's horses," he said, reading the K brand on the big, sweat streaked brown gelding. "A good 'un. But I raise better." Wade Applegate spoke without bragging. He simply stated a fact.

Brice unsaddled and watered his horse. There was hay in the manger, oats in the feed box of an empty stall the horse rancher pointed out.

They walked together towards the house. As Brice Bradford was motioned through the doorway he saw the two men he was looking for standing in front of the open fireplace, facing him. The larger, older of the pair had a black spade beard streaked with white. His eyes were as cold and hard as gray steel. The younger man had the same pale gray eyes and hawklike nose. His hair was straight and coarse and black like an Indian's. They were undoubtedly father and son.

"The older man is Matthew," said Wade Applegate, standing at Brice's back, his voice pitched low. "The other is Stephen. Seven and Fifteen."

The Avenging Angels, according to the Law at Rainbow, were numbered. Their last names were crossed out. They were given a number and allowed to keep their given names.

That they knew Brice's identity was a foregone conclusion. They had, he knew, watched him ride down the slope from the ridge above. And they had given their word to Wade Applegate that they would not stain his hospitality with bloodshed. Brice was likewise bound.

They eyed Brice with cold enmity. He faced them with grim-lipped defiance. These were the men who had been sent from the Forbidden Land to track him down and fetch him back to Rainbow. These men, or another pair from that sinister secret brotherhood called Avenging Angels, had killed Bob Bradford, Brice's father. Or so Brice had suspected when he had learned for certain that his father had been killed at Rainbow.

Bob Bradford, thirty years ago, had run away from Rainbow with the girl he loved. Bob Bradford and his young bride had rebelled at the straight laced, hidebound laws of those people. Bob Bradford was an orphan and had broken no family ties when he left Rainbow. But the girl bride's name had been Mary Rayder and the Rayders were a powerful family in that Forbidden Land.

Because of her sex she had been simply marked on their Black Book as dead. But because Bob Bradford was a man, he had been marked for death. It had taken the Avenging Angels twenty-five years to track down Bob Bradford. They had found him down in Texas and taken him back to Rainbow. Bob Bradford's wife was far beyond the reach of the Avenging Angels. She had died some years before.

Brice Bradford had returned from a

cattle buying trip down in Mexico. He had found a letter from his father at their ranch just north of the Mexican Border. Bob Bradford's letter of farewell to his son was brief and courageous. The Long Riders from the Forbidden Land, he had stated bluntly, had overtaken him at last. It did not matter much now, because Mary was dead and he was tired of dodging them any longer. He warned Brice not to try to follow him. He was going to Rainbow to stand trial. He was going back to face the parents of the girl he had stolen from them. He was willing to take whatever they dealt him by way of punishment.

"Don't try to follow me, son," he had warned Brice. "They will kill you. If they turn me loose, I'll be back at the ranch before long. If I'm not back in a month, that means I'm dead. I'm not scared to die. These years with your mother have made it more than worth while. Don't ruin your life by trying to find me. Above all, don't be foolish enough to try to avenge my death. I broke the laws of the people who raised me. I am going to take my just punishment.

"It is the law of those people that you, my male son, are marked for death. I am going back to Rainbow to free you from their death mark. Otherwise I would have killed the two Long Riders who came for me, riding horses branded with the Square and Compass. I had them covered when they rode up. I surrendered in order to go back to Rainbow and plead the cause of my only son. For my sake and your mother's, stay clear of Rainbow and the Forbidden Land."

Brice Bradford had not waited a month, there at the ranch on the Mexican Border. Disobeying his father's warning, he had sold the ranch and all the cattle and horses save his buckskin horse, and had ridden into the Forbidden Land to find out what they had done to his father. He had found Bob Bradford's grave at Rainbow. He had barely escaped with his life. The freshly healed scar of one of their bullets now marked his face.

Now he was facing the two Avenging Angels, the two Long Riders from the Forbidden Land. His emotions were conflicting, torn, bruised by hatred for these men and the laws they stood for. But Brice's mother had retained much of the religion of her parents. A saintly, sweet tempered woman, she had tried her best to instill gentleness and faith in the heart of her only son. And even Bob Bradford had carried away from Rainbow a hearty respect and awe for the people who had found him, a small boy, sole survivor of a wagon train that had been wiped out by Indians.

They had raised him. When he had grown to manhood he had rebelled. He had stolen two Square and Compass horses and they had run away in the night, hoping to find a freer and happier life beyond the grim boundaries of the Forbidden Land. They had both tried to teach their son the religion they had fostered.

Bob Bradford, for all his wild and reckless ways, had been honest and square dealing. Mexicans and Texans alike had respected him and liked him for a neighbor and friend.

BRICE BRADFORD stared hard at the two Long Riders from Rainbow. He wondered if they could be related to his mother in any way. Her name had been Mary Rayder.

"I had a look at your camp one night in the Jackson Hole country in Wyoming," he told them flatly. "I could have shot you both like I'd pot-shoot a couple of sleepin' hounds that's followed a wolf trail till they were tuckered out. I had a notion to set you afoot. I didn't do either thing. I let you go on ahead of me. I hoped to meet you like I'm meetin' you right now. I wanted to tell you that you'll never take me back alive to your Forbidden Land and murder me like you murdered my father.

"I'm not plumb certain yet just what I'll do about my father. There's no use in my askin' how he died. I know that. He could have killed the two Long Riders who found him. But he went back a willin' prisoner because he hoped that he could save my life, keep my life from bein' what his had bin for twenty-five

years, when he and my mother had to keep on the move like a couple of hunted animals. Packin' along with 'em a little baby.

"Since I kin remember, my mother and father were always on the dodge. We had to live in outlaw camps, with Injuns, with Mexicans. There were times when they didn't dare build a fire in zero weather because some pair of Long Riders might sight their smoke. A woman and a baby that went cold and hungry when they was sick and needed shelter and decent grub.

"You sing the praises of God Almighty. And you hound a sick woman with a nursin' baby in her arms. And you call yourselves God-fearin' Christians! I've got none of your belief in my heart. It was killed when I was a kid. You hounded my mother to death. You murdered my father. If either of you hired killers reach for a gun, I'll git you both. I'll kill you like I'd kill two rattlesnakes!"

Brice's hand was on his gun. His face was white, his eyes slits of shining steel. His voice was brittle as he flung his challenge.

A bony hand clamped his wrist, closing like a steel clamp. Brice's fingers went numb, relaxing their grip on his gun. Wade Applegate's left hand was holding him from behind, twisting Brice's left arm in a hammerlock.

"You're forgettin', Brice Bradford, that you give your word to me. Your father was an honorable man. He was my friend. This is my roof you're under." Wade Applegate's voice was like rolling thunder.

The two Long Riders, their hands on their guns, kept silent, their cold eyes watching Brice. Their mouths were grim, uncompromising, silent.

"I reckon," said Brice, his voice subdued, "I lost my head for a minute. I didn't aim to call for a showdown here. I'll respect your house, sir."

WADE APPLEGATE let go of Brice. His voice regained its mellow softness.

"The squaw will be puttin' the supper grub on the table, son. The water and soap and towel is outside the kitchen door in the little shed. We all need food. There is nothin' like warm grub in a man's belly to take the raw edge off his temper. Supposin' we hang up our gun belts."

"No." Brice made a brief gesture towards the outside. "We might need our guns. I think I was trailed from Buffalo Run. Men hired by Quesnell and Big Tim Fogarty and Pete Kaster." Brice managed a faint grin now as he looked at the two Long Riders.

"It sounds a little comical, I know, but I was elected sheriff of Buffalo Run last night. I think Quesnell had some notion of bein' able to use me in his crooked deals. My first job turned up right now. I was sent out to ketch the two road agents that held up the stage and robbed the Wells Fargo strong-box. But Quesnell and his pardners, not puttin' too much trust in their new sheriff, are havin' me cold-trailed. I reckon we'd better keep our guns. The sign I cut at the stage coach fetched me here. Because my horse wore shoes, my trail wasn't hard to follow. Quesnell's trailers will be watchin' to see what I aim to do, now that I've overtaken the men I was sent to fetch back dead or alive."

"You're the sheriff at Buffalo Run?" Wade Applegate's keen eyes studied Brice.

"I took my oath of office last night, sir."

"This gets a little complicated. The trail of the road-agents fetched you here, you say?"

"Into your house." Brice looked at the two Long Riders. Wade Applegate swung his scrutiny to them. The two Avenging Angels stood there silently, their backs against the wall.

"I was told nothin' about a Wells Fargo robbery," said their tall host, his voice stern.

Still neither of the Long Riders spoke. Brice wondered if they were bound by some damned oath of perpetual silence. They had some mighty queer laws at Rainbow.

"Wash up, Brice Bradford," said Wade Applegate. "Come back in five minutes or so. Don't feel uneasy about those Buffalo Run men coming down here. They've bin warned to stay away."

He motioned Brice to leave them alone in the room. Brice took his time washing out in the little shed. A fat squaw was taking the supper from the stove, dishing it into big bowls and platters of heavy white crockeryware. He would have given his right ear to be hearing what was being said in Wade Applegate's front room.

CHAPTER IV

MORMON JUSTICE

SUPPER was eaten in silence, save for bits of conversation that passed between Wade Applegate and Brice concerning the town of Buffalo Run. The white-mustached host did most of the talking. Now and then he would ask Brice some pertinent question. Brice would give him a straight reply. The two Long Riders maintained their grim-lipped silence.

"Quesnell, Fogarty and Kaster," said Wade Applegate, "are the three biggest rascals that ever dodged a hangman's noose. They've robbed and killed free-handed. The Wells Fargo Company has bin watchin' 'em close. It's hard to git evidence against men that hire others to do their dirty work. They have a gun toter named Charlie Decker—"

"Decker," said Brice, and the effect of his statement was as if he had suddenly thrown water in their faces, "is dead. I shot him yesterday."

"You killed Charlie Decker?" Wade Applegate stared hard at him. "Why?"

"Because he insulted a lady."

The two Long Riders looked at one another, then at Wade Applegate who directed his level gaze at them. They sat across the table from Brice. Wade Applegate sat at the head of the table in a huge arm chair. His guests sat on benches. There was a long moment of pregnant silence.

"You are like some magician," smiled Wade Applegate faintly, his eyes on Brice once more, "pullin' white rabbits out of a silk hat. Was this killin' of Decker done in the line of duty as sheriff?"

"Hardly. I'd just reached town. It looked like I might hang for it until Judge Plato Morgan made a speech that saved my life. It was his daughter that Decker tried to manhandle on the sidewalk in front of the El Dorado."

"Plato Morgan and his daughter Virginia were my guests for a week when they first came to Montana Territory. A fine old gentleman with only one vice. His daughter is the most beautiful and I reckon the saddest, in the country. Plato Morgan's mind is fogged by likker. Since the death of his wife, I understand, he's not been quite right in his head. He's as helpless in some ways as a child. But I'm gittin' off the subject. You killed Decker. You rid the earth of a scoundrel and murderer. But you killed the only man who might have hung Quesnell, Fogarty and Kaster. Decker was a coward. He would have talked to save his own neck from the rope."

"I'm sorry," said Brice fervently, "that I shot him. I'd never killed a man. But if I live, and if Plato Morgan lives, there's a good chance of hamstringin' Quesnell and Fogarty and Kaster.

"They elected Plato Morgan justice of the peace when they put me in the sheriff's office. The three of 'em aimed to use us. Instead, we're goin' to do our jobs accordin' to the oath of office we both taken."

Wade Applegate pushed back his chair. Supper was over. He led the way back into the front room. Filling his pipe with tobacco he whittled from a round plug of home-cured Virginia leaf, he lit it, his head wreathed in a cloud of blue smoke. Brice and the two Long Riders took chairs, watching their host as he stood in front of the open hearth.

"I was hoping, Brice Bradford," said Wade Applegate, measuring each word, "that you would find my house. I knew that you would come if your father had told you that in me you'd find a friend. Matthew and Stephen were here almost a month ago lookin' for you.

"Now you've shown up. And what at first had seemed a simple enough problem for me to decide has now become

complicated. It changes the whole situation. You give me an altogether new problem to decide. But before we go further, before any more talk is made, answer me a question. Did you or did your father know that Wade Applegate was the high judge of the Forbidden Land?"

"No, sir. My father never told me. He said you were one man from Rainbow he could trust. That if anything happened to him I would be wise to come to you. That's in the letter he wrote the day he left the ranch in Texas to go with the two Long Riders back to Rainbow. He said nothin' about you bein' the high judge."

"Then Bob Bradford and your mother didn't know. And the two Avenging Angels who took him were not allowed by the law to talk. They remained as silent as Matthew and Stephen are tonight. So Bob Bradford was killed before he ever found out.

"Bob Bradford never came to trial at Rainbow. He was shot down from ambush. So were the two Avenging Angels who were fetchin' him back to Rainbow for trial. Their bodies were found and buried at Rainbow.

"You stand accused of the murder of the two Avenging Angels and the death of your father. You were sighted there at Rainbow shortly after the dead bodies were found. You were surprised, there at the cemetery, when you visited your father's grave. You got away. Matthew and Stephen were put on your trail. You are accused of that crime. The supposition is that you made a desperate try at rescuin' your father, that one of your bullets struck him by accident. What is your answer?"

"Not guilty!" Brice's face was as colorless as the whitewashed log walls. "I never killed a man in my life until I shot Charlie Decker at Buffalo Run."

Brice's right hand was upraised as if he were under oath. His voice rasped in his dry throat.

WADE APPLEGATE and the two Long Riders from Rainbow were staring hard at him. The silence that followed Brice's answer was like the hushed silence of a death house. Brice Bradford was on trial for his life. He wanted to say more. He wanted to tell Wade Applegate that he had followed his father to that Forbidden Land. That he would have gladly killed every Long Rider who belonged to that mysterious clan if by doing so he could have rescued his father. He wanted to tell this man with the deep-set, understanding eyes that he would have risked all the dangers this side of hell's gates if he could have saved Bob Bradford's life. But he had found only a fresh grave marked by a wooden slab that was marked with the name of Bob Bradford.

But instead he stood on his feet beside his chair, white-lipped, unable to break this silence.

"Brice Bradford," said Wade Applegate, "tells the truth. He is innocent of that crime."

Brice would have had his say then and there, but the high judge motioned him to silence.

"It is the law," he spoke slowly, a little reluctantly, it seemed to Brice, "in a case of this kind, that the son shall stand trial for his father's crimes. The punishment that would have been inflicted upon the father shall be borne by the son. Bob Bradford broke the law. His guilt has been proven. He is dead. It is my responsibility to pass sentence now upon his only son.

"The crime, of which Bob Bradford was guilty beyond all shadow of doubt, is punishable by death. But there are attending circumstances that make that punishment unfair and inhuman. Justice must be tempered with mercy, gentlemen, and its interpretation of the law must have the sanction of God or it becomes an act of brutality. I am not prepared right now to pass judgment on Brice Bradford. Perhaps Bob Bradford and Mary Rayder suffered enough—"

"They were hounded," said Brice, ignoring the black scowls of the two Long Riders. "They were driven like hunted animals. The only crime they committed was to run away from a place they hated. They wanted to be free to live the lives God gave 'em when they were born.

"Bob Bradford and Mary Rayder were punished plenty. I'm not on trial here for any crime. I'd have fought every man in your Forbidden Land, understand, if I could have saved my father's life. He left me a letter. That letter is back at Buffalo Run in a money belt I left with Virginia Morgan and her father. I reckon that letter will tell you whether or not Bob Bradford was punished, whether or not he was an honest and brave man. You'll never take me back alive to Rainbow. I don't believe in your laws. I'm a free man." He faced the two Long Riders from Rainbow.

"You'll have to kill me if you start anything. And while you're doin' it, I won't be standin' like a dummy. You two men held up a stage coach carryin' the United States mail. You robbed a Wells Fargo strong-box of sixty thousand dollars. I'm the legal sheriff of Buffalo Run. This is the Territory of Montana. You two Long Riders are a long ways from home. Your medicine ain't any good up here. You're both under arrest. I gave my word not to pull a gun in this house and I'll keep it. But if you two road-agents will step outside—"

Brice Bradford stood near the front door. He flung it open with a jerk.

From outside in the darkness came the flash and roar of a gun. A bullet grazed Brice's head.

He jumped back, slamming the heavy door shut. Guns roared outside. Bullets tore through the plank door. Windows were shattered by the hail of lead. Wade Applegate knocked over the lamp on the table with a sweep of his long arm, plunging the room into a darkness that was broken by the red glow of the open fire.

One of the Long Riders ran into the kitchen, almost colliding with the fat squaw who was opening a trap door that led into the cellar. He grabbed a pail of water and came back into the front room.

The fire sizzled, the flames smothered by the water. There was the smell of smoke from the wet wood. The room, its windows heavily curtained by blankets, was in total darkness now. Wade Applegate barred the doors and put out the kitchen light. His voice sounded through the darkness.

"The citizens of Buffalo Run are putting a mighty small amount of faith in their new sheriff. Or were you fool enough to have a posse trailin' you, Brice Bradford?" His voice was heavy with biting mockery.

"Those men don't represent the citizens of Buffalo Run," Brice defended himself, hot with resentment. "I told you I was trailed. Quesnell and his pardners don't trust me."

"This is the first time Quesnell has ignored my warning," Wade Applegate's voice was hard, menacing. "Matthew, Stephen, you're no longer bound by silence. You've got your saddle guns. You know the house. Take your positions. It's moonlight outside. Shoot to kill. Young Bradford, there's a loophole to the right of the front door. That's your position. Your saddle gun is in the rack by the door. Use it!"

THE house had two bedrooms and a kitchen and the front room. Brice was left alone in the room. Wade Applegate was in the kitchen. Each of the Long Riders had taken a position in a bedroom. Brice found the long, narrow loophole near the door. It was so constructed as to give a man inside a good view of the approach to the house from the front. He shoved the barrel of his carbine through the slot and watched.

No living thing moved out there. There was no brush out there to give a man shelter. No rocks, nothing of any description to shelter a man. Brice knew that Wade Applegate had purposely given him a position where he was most unlikely to sight any of the invaders.

He heard Wade Applegate's gun roar in the kitchen. Before its echoes were out of Brice's ears he heard the guns of the two Long Riders go into action. For a few minutes the house was filled with the din of gunfire. Shots sounded outside, but still Brice saw no man out there. Then he saw a single rider top the ridge, spurring his horse to a run. The distance was better than three hundred yards. The man and horse made

a fast moving target. Brice shot twice. The man and horse rode out of sight.

The reverberations of the reavy gunfire still were in the air that was fouled now with the acrid odor of black powder smoke. Wade Applegate's voice sounded behind Brice.

"Your man got away. That's just as well. Matthew?"

"I got one."

"Stephen?"

"Only one, sir. The other man got out of range."

"I got him and let a fourth man get away to take the news back to Quesnell, so that he'll know that his men have failed."

Wade Applegate went back into the kitchen. Brice heard him talking to the squaw in the Indian language. Then he came back in, carrying a lighted candle.

"She says there were only four of 'em. Young Brice, you're too hot-headed. You nearly got yourself killed when you yanked open that front door. I knew that men were waitin' outside. The squaw told me while we ate supper. She was watchin' the only trail that leads down to the ranch. She told me, usin' sign language. You pulled open the door and surprised one of 'em into takin' a snapshot at you. Never open a door at night with a lighted room at your back. You won't last long in a country where you have enemies. Bob Bradford should have schooled you better in bushwhacker ways."

There was a smile on the tall man's leathery face. Brice flushed. He felt like some school kid being gently punished for making a clownish blunder.

"So, young Brice," Wade Applegate went on, "Quesnell and Big Tim Fogarty and Pete Kaster will get the news that their young sheriff has thrown in with Wade Applegate and the two men who took sixty thousand dollars of their ill-gotten money from the Wells Fargo strong-box. I'd like to be there when they get their bad news." He chuckled softly.

Brice saw a faint smile pull the straight lips of the younger Long Rider. But the spade-bearded one remained grim, hard eyed. The faint contempt stamped on his stern face only added to Brice's discomfort. He felt at the mercy of these three men. They were treating him as if he were some rattle-brained young idiot.

"The man who got away," said Wade Applegate, "is a free-trapper who works for Big Tim Fogarty. He knows where to steal fresh horses along the way. He'll make a pony express ride of it. We'll give him a start. By timing ourselves, we should reach Buffalo Run tomorrow night. Matthew, you and Stephen will sleep in the spare room. Young Brice will share my room. Brice, if you're not too sleepy, I'd like to use an hour of your time. I want you to tell me as much of your life's history as you can recall. The squaw will rebuild the fire and make a pot of fresh coffee."

Stephen looked at the man with the spade beard, then at Wade Applegate. Finally his eyes looked squarely at Brice.

"I'd like to hear it, if there's no objections—and no gunplay," he added with a faint grin.

Brice grinned back at him. There was something about this Long Rider who was about his own age, that Brice respected and almost liked.

"It might not hurt you either, Matthew," said Applegate, looking at the big man with the spade beard, "to hear what young Brice has to tell." He had stepped to Brice's side and his hand rested on the young cowpuncher's shoulder.

"We're all four going to Buffalo Run, Brice. The sheriff, his two prisoners, the sixty thousand dollars. I'm going along to represent the prisoners when they appear before Judge Plato Morgan.

"But right now we are four men under my roof. A couple of Indians who are my friends will attend to the burial of the dead men out yonder. We'll light our tobacco and smoke as friends. Matthew and I were friends of Bob Bradford and Mary Rayder. As friends we'd like to hear your story, my son."

BRICE nodded. The lump of bitterness inside his heart was melting. He told his story as he would have told it to close friends, without letting his bitter hatred

for the Laws of Rainbow taint the story with gall. The three men listened, smoking in silence.

There were times when they left their tobacco get cold. More than once the warm brown eyes of Wade Applegate misted.

He sat in front of the open fire, staring into the blaze, as if Brice's words were conjuring up half forgotten things, bringing out the colors of pictures that had dimmed in his memory.

It was the story of a man and a woman and their son. Their hardships and bitter struggles, their dreams and hopes and ambitions forever shadowed by fear of a grim retribution that followed them night and day. Even their laughter had been stifled. For that man and woman had paid heavily for this thing they called their freedom. And their eternal fear had blighted the youth of their son.

"My mother was dead," finished Brice. "The Long Riders had taken my father. I sold everything but my top horse. I took that money and my father's letter and headed for Rainbow. I aimed to stand trial with him. I wanted a chance to tell his people at Rainbow the things that Bob Bradford would be too proud to say.

"I took my guns along because if my story failed I planned to fight. I slipped into the Forbidden Land at night. I was almost caught near the border by two men. I caught a glimpse of 'em in the moonlight. One of 'em was a dead ringer for Jack Quesnell. I hid and let 'em ride past.

"I came to the graveyard at Rainbow first, before I reached the town. It was moonlight enough to make out three new graves. One of the graves was marked with Bob Bradford's name. I was kneelin' there when some riders sighted me. They hollered a challenge at me and I got on my horse and ran for it.

"I headed north, not carin' much where I was bound for. Two men were trailin' me. I shook 'em off in the Jackson Hole country in Wyoming. I hadn't got things clear in my mind yet. I could have killed 'em, but I had my father's letter in my pocket. He'd told me in that letter not to kill anybody. So I let you two men live. I traveled slow to rest my horse. I rode into Buffalo Run. Before I had put up my horse and had time to eat, I'd killed Decker."

Brice told the rest of his story in the same simple, straightforward manner. They heard him out without once interrupting.

"So here I am," he finished. He stood facing the three men who had risen when he got up from his armchair in front of the fire where they had sat in a semicircle.

The man with the spade beard extended a large hand that was calloused and hairy.

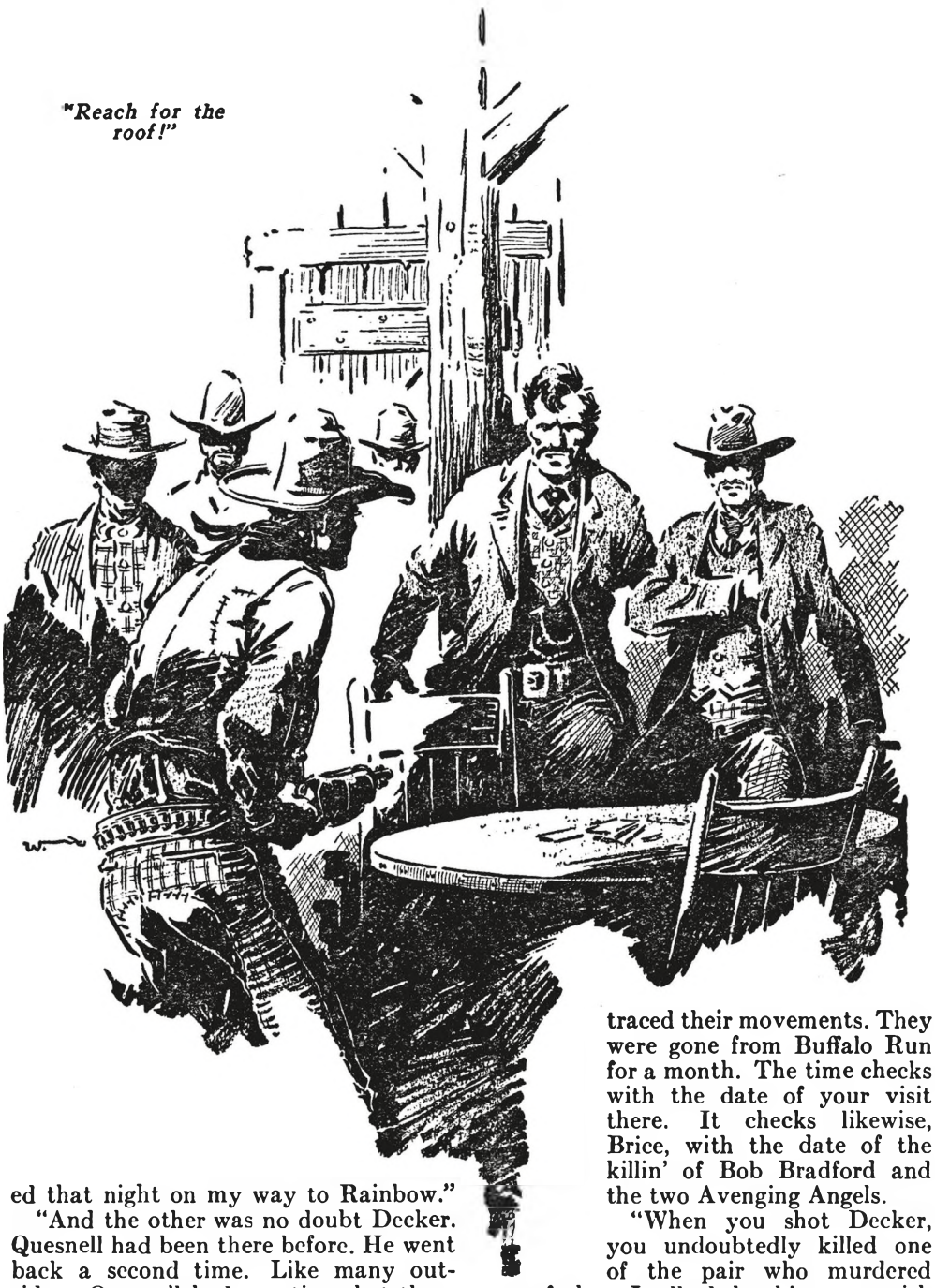
"I don't reckon any man would have condemned Bob Bradford if he heard the story you just told, Brice. He and Mary and you suffered enough to satisfy any law of God or man."

Stephen grinned as he shook hands. "I'm mighty glad I kin do this, Brice. I think it was my bullet that made that scar on your face. I shot to scare you, but your head jerked, just as I pulled the trigger. I'm shore glad I didn't kill you."

"That goes double," Brice gripped Stephen's hand.

"Your story has cleared you and your father, son," Wade Applegate told him. "What's done can't be undone. The dead can't be brought back to life. But amends can be made. We're goin' with you to Buffalo Run so that we can atone for the sinful mistake that was made when Mary Rayder and Bob Bradford were driven out of Rainbow. I'm afraid it's too late to get any sleep now. It'll be daylight in an hour. The squaw's gettin' breakfast. We'll eat and be on our way. We'll spring a surprise on Quesnell, Fogarty and Kaster. You think you sighted Quesnell near the boundary of the Forbidden Land that night, Brice?"

"It never occurred to me until just before I left Buffalo Run that there was somethin' familiar about Quesnell. He talked about bein' there once and havin' a brand on his shoulder. On my way here I had time to remember things. Quesnell is one of the two riders I sight-



"Reach for the roof!"

ed that night on my way to Rainbow."

"And the other was no doubt Decker. Quesnell had been there before. He went back a second time. Like many outsiders, Quesnell had a notion that there is a huge deposit of free-milling gold near Rainbow. There is gold there. Placer and quartz. But not in any bonanza quantities. Quesnell went back with Decker. I've checked up and traced their movements. They were gone from Buffalo Run for a month. The time checks with the date of your visit there. It checks likewise, Brice, with the date of the killin' of Bob Bradford and the two Avenging Angels.

"When you shot Decker, you undoubtedly killed one of the pair who murdered your father. I talked the thing over with Matthew and Stephen before you showed up. That you show up as the sheriff of Buffalo Run on the trail of two road-agents is a twist of fate. A more devout man than you, Brice,

would say that the hand of God had pointed your way."

An hour later they rode away, four grim-lipped men on mahogany bay horses that wore the WA brand. They headed for Buffalo Run, a blood red dawn at their backs.

CHAPTER V

COTTONWOOD RECKONING

JACK QUESNELL, gambler, stood with his back to the wall in the back room of the El Dorado. His right hand was gripping the long, thin-bladed dagger under his black coat. His eyes, glittering like those of a snake, watched Big Tim Fogarty and Pete Kaster, who stood just inside the door. Kaster closed the door with his left hand and slid the bolt. Kaster's right hand was on his gun. Big Tim's fists clenched. He chewed on a half smoked cheroot.

"Well?" Quesnell's voice was as sharp-edged as his hidden steel.

"We don't like the way you've bin a-runnin' things," said Big Tim Fogarty. "You and this Brice Bradford feller ain't as slick as you figgered. Me'n Pete Kaster lost twenty thousand dollars apiece. We don't aim to take a whuppin' like that a-layin' down. Pay us each what we lost and we'll let you keep your hide awhile."

"What makes you two thick-headed guzzlers think I had anything to do with the stage hold-up?"

"The fight between the shotgun messenger and the road-agent," said Big Tim, "was faked. It was ribbed thataway to scare off Jerry Toole. They made a clean getaway. It's damned queer that you'd fix it to elect Brice Bradford sheriff that same night. You send this would-be sheriff to fetch back the road-agent *and* the money. The money that was the proceeds of the jobs that Decker had bin' doin' for us three.

"The Brice feller taken the trail. He wasn't fooled by the tracks that headed north and was blotted out by the tracks of loose horses. This Brice Bradford didn't go north. He headed due east, straight to Wade Applegate's ranch. That's where the two road-agents went and that's where Brice Bradford went. That's where you knowed they'd go! One of these days you'll git your twenty thousand and the bulk of ourn. So me'n Pete is collectin' right now."

"It's plenty plain now," growled Pete Kaster, "that you sent fer this Brice Bradford. You hired him to kill Decker. You elected him sheriff, give him orders to git that sixty thousand, pay off the two road-agents, and he'll split with you later when things is simmered down. I even staked that fake sheriff to the best horse in the K iron. The horse will cost you just five hundred dollars, gambler."

"What makes you two lousy, stinking sons so certain that Sheriff Brice Bradford is not returning to Buffalo Run with his prisoners and the sixty thousand dollars intact?"

"Because it looks right now," chuckled Big Tim Fogarty, bursting what he reckoned to be a verbal bombshell, "like your Sheriff Brice Bradford has double-crossed you, tin-horn. Yeah. You sent two men to cold-trail the gent, didn't yuh?"

"I did," nodded Quesnell.

"They crowded their luck. They was killed at Wade Applegate's ranch last night. So was the man that Pete Kaster sent to look after his share. My man was the only one that come back alive. A free-trapper I sent out after 'em. The trapper throwed in with Pete's cowpuncher and your two gun slingers. They figgered that Brice Bradford had throwed in with the two road-agents at Wade Applegate's place. They was damn fools enough to try to smoke 'em out. They didn't stand a chance.

"The trapper got away. He says that they could have killed him like they killed the other three. Wade Applegate let him git away so's he could fetch back the bad news. Bradford, the road-agents and Wade Applegate will be cuttin' that sixty thousand dollars four ways. You wasn't so damned smart as you figgered, Quesnell. Brice Bradford crossed you up. You've seen the last of your new sheriff." Big Tim Fogarty laughed harshly, but his bloodshot eyes were hard and merciless.

There was a loud rapping at the door

that silenced Big Tim's roaring laughter.

Pete Kaster's six-shooter was sliding slowly from its holster.

"If you're expectin' help from out in the hall," he growled, "they'll be too late to do you ary good in here."

"I don't need help to trim you two thick skulled clowns," Quesnell sneered. He raised his voice.

"What do you want, out there?"

"You said to call you, boss," called the man in the hall, "if that new sheriff showed up. He's in the saloon now, askin' for yuh!"

"Fetch him back here!" called Quesnell, his voice losing its calm in spite of his effort to control it. His thin-lipped, sneering smile mocked Big Tim Fogarty and Pete Kaster.

"Well, my slow-witted friends!"

"It's a trick," growled Pete Kaster. "Watch yourself, Fogarty! The tin-horn is dealin' us cold hands."

"I don't need to cold-deck clumsy bullwhackers." Unbolt the door unless your nerve is gone, Kaster."

They stood there in silence, listening to the approaching sounds of Brice Bradford's spurs and boot heels.

BRICE rapped on the door of the back room. He was carrying a gunnysack that was partly filled with something.

"Come in, Sheriff!" he heard Quesnell's voice from within. Brice opened the door, shoving it with his toe. He held the sack in his left hand. His right hand was on his gun. He stood framed in the doorway, a faint grin on his dusty face.

"I fetched back your money, gents. There's sixty thousand dollars in currency and gold coins in this gunnysack. You take a queer way of showin' your welcome. Don't tell me that you're mournin' the loss of three gun-slingers that bungled their jobs of trailin' me. You ain't bothered none with tenderness of the heart."

Brice tossed the sack of money on the card table in the center of the room. He stood there in the doorway, still grinning mirthlessly, his eyes hard, his hand on his gun.

"Come in, Sheriff," said Quesnell, "and bolt the door."

"Why?" Brice's tone was cold.

None of the three, not even the nimble witted gambler, could give him an answer to that blunt question.

"Count your money, gents," said Brice. "All of it. Just to make certain I haven't stolen any of it."

"Hell, mister," Big Tim Fogarty found his voice, "we'll take your word fer it. You git a reward a-comin' fer—"

"Count it!" snapped Brice.

Quesnell, scowling faintly, shrugged his shoulders. He slid his dagger from its armpit sheath and with a single deft motion ripped open the tied sack. Sheafs of banknotes and a pile of gold coins were revealed in the lamplight. Greed and bewilderment showed in the eyes of the three partners. Here was the money they had been quarreling over.

"Come in and shut the door, Bradford," snapped Quesnell.

"Why?" repeated Brice.

"Damn it, man, we want a little privacy!" Quesnell's tone was brittle.

"You're forgettin', Quesnell, that I'm sheriff here at Buffalo Run. I'm runnin' this show. Count your money."

"Don't let a little authority go to your head, Bradford," said the gambler. "You're drunk, perhaps?"

"I've never tasted liquor in my life, Quesnell."

"Hell, quit the augerin'," said Big Tim Fogarty. "Count the money, Quesnell. Me'n Pete Kaster want ourn before it plumb vanishes. None of your tricks, tin-horn. Count 'er out."

Quesnell's face was a shade white as he stared hard at Brice. He began counting the money into three piles. Big Tim and Pete Kaster watched him closely to see that he did not cheat. The gambler's long white fingers moved nimbly, with deft sureness. His flat-toned voice counted the amounts.

"Twenty thousand dollars," he finished, "in each pile."

Quesnell looked up. His eyes narrowed. His two hands froze on the pile of money in front of him. Big Tim Fogarty and Pete Kaster saw the queer look on the gambler's face. They, too, looked up.

Brice Bradford's six-shooter was in his hand. It clicked to full cock.

"You're under arrest!" Brice's voice barked harshly. "Reach for the roof!"

The three men slowly raised their arms. Quesnell's tongue licked his dry lips. There was the sound of shattered glass behind them. They turned their heads. The two Long Riders from Rainbow stood outside in the dark alleyway. Their guns covered Quesnell, Big Tim Fogarty and Pete Kaster. Brice kicked the door shut.

"The charges," said Brice, "against you three men are robbery and murder. I don't need to tell you that you'll be shot down if you try to rabbit. You elected me sheriff and I'm gittin' the job done. Now back up till you reach the window and feel the guns of my deputies pokin' you in the back. I'm drawin' your fangs!"

"Talks like he meant it." Big Tim Fogarty forced a grin. "You shore played hell, Quesnell, when you elected that young warthawg. He's takin' his job too damn' serious."

They obeyed Brice's orders. Matthew and Stephen, a gun in each hand, poked the muzzles of their long barreled six-shooters in the backs of the three partners. Brice had kicked the door shut and slid the heavy bolt. There was nobody in the hallway. Quesnell's men were being held in the saloon by a group of men Wade Applegate had singled out and deputized. They were men who hated Quesnell, Fogarty and Kaster. None of them belonged to the inner circle of the Vigilantes.

Brice made a thorough job of disarming the three. From Quesnell's inside coat pocket he had also taken some papers. He shoved the papers into his chaps pocket, grinning at the gambler.

"I wouldn't be surprised, Quesnell, if there's somethin' in those papers that might hang you."

He dumped the money in three separate canvas money sacks. In a fourth sack he shoved the guns and Quesnell's dagger.

"We'll go out the window," Brice told his prisoners. "I'd hate to embarrass the three of you by paradin' you through the saloon. Your trial will be plumb quiet, gents. We're holdin' it at Judge Plato Morgan's cabin. It's right handy to the cottonwood limbs."

"You're goin' to murder us," said Pete Kaster.

"You'll git the fairest trial ever held at Buffalo Run," said Brice. "Fogarty, break the trail through the window. Then Kaster. Quesnell last. Any kind of a break you try to make will be your own funeral. Git goin', hombres!"

WADE APPLEGATE had left the El Dorado in charge of picked men. He had chosen twelve more men he knew and told them to be at Judge Plato Morgan's cabin in half an hour. They would bring the stage driver, Jerry Toole, with them. Toole was to be a star witness at the trial.

Wade Applegate got on his horse and rode to the Morgan cabin. A light showed behind drawn blinds. Virginia Morgan opened the door cautiously in reply to his knock. The color returned to her white face as she recognized her visitor.

"Uncle Wade!" There was a choking sob in her voice. The tall man took her in his arms.

"You're shakin' like you had chills and fever," he said. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing! Oh, everything!"

"Well, well, young lady. Make up your mind. Where's Plato?"

"He's sick in bed, Uncle Wade. Feverish. Out of his head at times. He's terribly ill. And there's no doctor in this terrible little town. Only drunkards and hoodlums and gamblers. The only decent man I've known here is dead. They killed him. And I'm afraid daddy is dying!"

"Has Plato been hittin' the bottle a little strong?"

"He hasn't taken a drink since they made him judge in a horrible, cruel farce they called an election. They did it to ridicule him, of course. He's taken it seriously and—"

"Plato Morgan," said Wade Applegate, "has been drinking whiskey since he was old enough to lift a julep glass. It's food and drink and medicine to the old rascal. Let's have a look at 'im."

Plato Morgan had heard voices. He appeared in the bedroom doorway, clad in a knee length nightshirt and his black hat, a shotgun in his hands.

"Unhand my daughter, you—Wade! By Jupiter and Mars!"

"Put down that gun before you hurt yourself, Plato. You never could hit the side of a barn with a gun. Virginia, this old rascal needs a drink. A long drink."

Wade Applegate took a bottle from under his coat. "Compliments of the El Dorado bar, Plato. I took it. And no more of this tectotaler nonsense. A quart a day man can't quit like that. Want to leave Virginia an orphan? It's time I showed up here. And put on your pants and a clean shirt and coat and tie. Court's about to open. The sheriff will be along directly with three prisoners. Quesnell, Fogarty and Kaster. An ambitious young feller, this Sheriff Brice Bradford—Don't drop that bottle, Virginia. It's from Big Tim Fogarty's private stock."

"You said Brice—" Virginia Morgan's voice was trembling. "Quesnell said he was dead. Killed by road-agents!"

Wade Applegate smiled and took the bottle from her. "I reckon Brice has corrected that rumor by now. He's got those three blacklegs under arrest at the El Dorado. Now what's wrong?"

"I—Oh! I betrayed his trust! I opened his money belt. I read his father's letter and a sort of death letter Brice had written."

"I don't reckon he'll want you shot at sunrise for that. Where's your corkscrew and glass, Plato?"

"I can't face Brice Bradford!" cried the girl.

"Nonsense. Dip your pretty nose in the flour barrel. It's redder than Plato's should be."

Wade Applegate poured a stiff drink into a glass and shoved it at Plato Morgan.

"Warm your gizzard with that, you old idiot."

"I took a vow—" began Plato Morgan.

Wade Applegate snorted. Plato Morgan drank his whiskey like a docile child swallowing soothing syrup.

"Now git dressed. A judge without pants on can't expect to maintain dignity in his court." Wade Applegate looked around the room, shaking his head.

"Too small. We'll have to hold court at Big Tim Fogarty's warehouse. Open the trial to the public. Eh, Plato?"

"Did I hear you right, Wade, when you said that Quesnell, Fogarty and Kaster have been hamstrung?"

"Convicting 'em is another matter, unless we give 'em one of their own kind of Vigilante hearings. Our only real witness is Jerry Toole. I hope to make that scoundrel talk."

"Take his bottle away from him," suggested Plato Morgan, pouring himself a gentleman's drink. The twinkle had come back into the judge's eyes.

There came the sound of voices outside. Then a rapping at the door.

"Open it, Uncle Wade!" Virginia's voice was a little panicky.

"Into the kitchen with you," he told her. "Stay there till you're sent for. This is a man's job." He patted her shoulder and closed the kitchen door on her. Then he opened the front door to Brice, smiling a little as he saw Brice's eyes search the room for sight of Virginia.

"This house is too small to hold all of us. A jury of twelve men take up a lot of room. We'll use Big Tim Fogarty's warehouse and hold an open trial. The judge is dressin'."

Plato Morgan appeared, fully dressed, even to his gold headed ebony cane. He greeted Brice warmly, and save for Wade Applegate's intervention, would have delivered a speech. There was a telltale bulge in the tail pocket of his frock coat. Wade Applegate smiled at Brice, taking the judge's arm and leading him outside.

"I think the judge has forgotten his Bible, Brice," said Wade Applegate. "Virginia will locate it for you. When the jurymen show up, fetch 'em over to Fogarty's warehouse. You'll find Virginia in the kitchen, I reckon."

He almost shoved Brice into the house and closed the door. Brice stood there hesitantly for a moment. Then he strode resolutely to the kitchen door and opened it. Virginia had been standing with her ear pressed against the door, trying to hear what went on. She literal-

ly fell into Brice's arms, nor did she struggle when he held her closer and buried his face in her hair.

HALF a dozen lanterns with black - streaked chimneys threw a flickering light across the crowd of men and a dozen or more women. Roughly clad, unshaven men, dance hall women with painted lips and smeared cheeks, looking tawdry and old and pitiful in this big warehouse that was partly filled with buffalo hides and animal pelts.

There was a sort of platform that had been erected by Big Tim's men for the last meeting of the Vigilantes. On that platform Judge Plato Morgan stood beside a bar-room chair, a packing case his desk. His gavel was a heavy bung-starter some tipsy wag had fetched from the El Dorado. Perhaps every man there except the three prisoners who were fetched in under heavy guard was armed. There was something of the wolf pack thirsty for blood in the attitude of the crowd, though they were orderly enough. As Judge Plato Morgan rapped for order a hush fell across the crowd.

A man whispered to Wade Applegate who stood in front of the platform near the judge.

"Jerry Toole croaked. Dropped dead on the way over. Booze, I reckon. And he was scared he'd hang or be shot if he talked."

Wade Applegate nodded. "Don't let anybody know." His face did not change expression. The star witness for the prosecution was dead.

"This court," sounded Judge Plato Morgan's sonorous voice, "will come to order! Wade Applegate will conduct both the prosecution and defense. You all know him to be a fair and honest man. Any objections from the accused?"

"Applegate will do fer me!" Big Tim's voice filled the place.

Pete Kaster scowled and nodded his head. He was watching Brice put the three canvas sacks of money, his six-shooter and Quesnell's knife alongside the Bible that he had placed on a packing box at the edge of the platform. Kaster had more need for his gun than for any sort of defense attorney.

Quesnell stood up, his opaque eyes flicking the jury of twelve men who sat down stolidly in the chairs fetched from the El Dorado. He could expect no mercy from them. For Plato Morgan he had a faint sneer. He looked briefly at Brice, at the two Avenging Angels from Rainbow, then spoke directly to Wade Applegate, his flat-toned voice falling across the tense silence that held the crowd.

"My luck has played out. I haven't a friend in this place who would lift a hand to save my life. That jury has already convicted me. They know I'm guilty as hell. I'd hoped to go out fighting on my feet. But you'll hang me like a common horse thief. Let's get it over with!"

Matthew and Stephen pushed him back in his chair. Quesnell smiled thinly, eyeing them and Wade Applegate.

"Anything you have to say, Quesnell, will be weighted in the scales of justice," said Wade Applegate. "Besides your crimes of robbery and murder here at Buffalo Run, you stand accused of murder in Utah—"

"I told you I was guilty as hell. You're curious to know why I went back to your Forbidden Land? I was fooled by rumors that there was a rich gold cache at Rainbow. I took Decker with me. We found no gold. On our way out we met three men. We happened to see 'em first and killed 'em. Two of 'em rode horses branded with the Square and Compass. The third man rode a horse that was branded a Lazy B. Brice Bradford's buckskin horse is in the same iron. He was some kin of yours, Bradford?"

"My father." Brice's voice was as toneless as the gambler's.

"I'm glad of that," was Quesnell's startling comment. "When you rode into this town you drove out my luck. You killed my right hand man. I'm glad I killed your father. If you had stayed away another twenty-four hours I would have had the only woman in this country who is worth fighting for.

"I'd planned to clean up here, with Decker's help. Wipe out Tim Fogarty and that cattle stealing Pete Kaster. I'd have owned this town. Decker had his work cut out for him. When he killed Fogarty and Kaster, I was going to stick a knife in his ribs. You killed him be-

fore he got his chores finished. I made a mistake by not letting the Vigilantes hang you.

"Decker had the letter that you took out of my pocket tonight. He hoped to use it as a weapon. I kept it with something of the same idea in mind. I could scare Fogarty and Kaster with that unfinished letter written by a Wells Fargo detective, even though that letter is only partly true.

"Fogarty and Kaster had nothing to do with the robbing of the Wells Fargo Express on half a dozen occasions. Decker was *my* man. But I cut Fogarty and Kaster in on each haul because Jerry Toole, Fogarty's stage driver, had to be bought off each time. Kaster managed to get his men jobs as shotgun messengers. Twice when an outsider got the messenger job Decker had to kill 'em. Decker was quick-triggered. This last job was something that still puzzles the thick brains of Big Tim and Pete. I've laid my cards on the table, Applegate. I dare you to tip your hand!"

I'LL TAKE that challenge, Quesnell," said Wade Applegate. "You were caught once in what is called the Forbidden Land in Utah. You were caught robbing the strong-box in the meeting house at Rainbow. You were sentenced to banishment, marked with the brand of thief. You were bound by oath to pay a tithe of all your earnings, wherever you went, for the remainder of your life. The tithe was to be five percent of all you made.

"You located here at Buffalo Run. You sent back money at stated intervals to Rainbow. But instead of five percent of your earnings, you paid less than one percent. I had ways of checking up.

"Two men came from Rainbow a month or more ago. They were trailing Brice Bradford. Brice Bradford had not then showed up here at Buffalo Run. They came to my ranch hunting him. He was not there. I told them that Jack Quesnell at Buffalo Run had been holding out on the tithe money.

"The two men went to Fort Benton. I had given them letters to men of influence there. One letter was to a banker, another to the Wells Fargo agent.

"The sixty thousand dollars was no ordinary Wells Fargo shipment. It was money being sent to you at Buffalo Run in exchange for gold dust you had sent to Fort Benton—proceeds from Decker's recent robberies. Stephen acted as shotgun guard. Matthew held up the stage. The mail sacks were sent out empty. The only money in that borrowed Wells Fargo strong-box was sixty thousand dollars Stephen had signed for at the bank. Thus they collected the tithe owed their people. They were responsible to the bank for that money. I was to write you or see you personally to inform you of the exact nature of the deed. You would settle with Fogarty and Kaster. Matthew told the stage driver to tell you the tithe had been collected.

"Instead," said Quesnell, "the drunken fool told Big Tim. Tim Fogarty had never in his life heard of a tithe. I knew who had done the job. The same two men who had asked about a man named Brice Bradford.

"Figuring that Bradford was wanted at Rainbow and would be shot on sight, I sent him out after 'em. But my luck had run out. Sheriff Brice Bradford came back. Do any of you gentlemen know how to tie a hangman's noose? I'm afraid not. Give me the rope. I'll tie my own knot. I don't want my hanging to be a sloppy job."

"Later," said Wade Applegate. "When the proper time comes. We will proceed now with the trial of Pete Kaster. Judge Morgan, this first defendant, Jack Quesnell, has pleaded guilty."

Judge Plato Morgan rapped for order.

"Pete Kaster stands accused of claim jumping and murder. Are there any witnesses, Wade Applegate?"

"Probably twenty, your honor. I've picked six from the bunch."

The testimony of the six witnesses was damning. Pete Kaster was guilty beyond all doubt. He sat slumped in his chair, sullen, defiant. Now and then he took a pull at the bottle of whiskey he had asked for. Pete Kaster had killed at least five prospectors for their gold claims. Others he had simply robbed and let them live under the threat of sudden death if they did not quit the country.

"Have you anything to say in your own defense, Pete Kaster?" asked Judge Morgan.

"Don't hang me on the same tree where you're swingin' Quesnell. He didn't have the guts to do his killin'. He hired Decker to do his dirty work. I done my own killin' personal, played my string out. To hell with the pack of yuh! If I had a gun—"

"You haven't a gun," said Wade Applegate. "Sit down."

"The next man on trial for his life in this court," said Judge Plato Morgan, "is Big Tim Fogarty. He stands accused of—Wade Applegate, what are the exact charges against Tim Fogarty?"

Big Tim Fogarty tossed aside his two husky guards and stood on widespread legs. He was wearing the same mud-stained clothes he had worn the first day Brice Bradford had come to Buffalo Run.

"Ladies and gentlemen!" Big Tim's voice bellowed. "I'm not bellyachin' a damn bit. I'm not beggin' or whinin'. I've taken money from Quesnell, taken the cut he give me for givin' Jerry Toole orders to keep his mouth shut about them hold-ups. But as true as I'm standin' with my hand on this Bible on the table, I swear that never a dollar of that dirty money has bin spent on myself. I give it away. Gave it to men that lost their money at Quesnell's gamblin' tables. I staked prospectors that lost their claims to Pete Kaster. I give it to the pore females that worked in the El Dorado and wanted to git away from the honkeytonk life. There's fifty men and women in this warehouse right now that will tell ye that Big Tim Fogarty ain't lyin'!"

A roar went up from the crowd.

"I've bucked the American Fur Company," Big Tim went on, doubling his big fists. "Fought 'em with these two hands of mine. Bought furs from the free-traders at fair prices. Staked 'em to traps and grub. I've taken money from the Hudson's Bay and the American Fur Company. I've never robbed a poor man of an ounce of gold dust. I've fought my enemies in the open. I never packed a gun in my life. I never killed a man or hired a man to kill an enemy.

"Judge and gentlemen of the jury and the men and women that's hearin' me now, here stands Big Tim Fogarty with the mud of Buffalo Run on his only suit of town duds. I've fought with my fists for every last dollar I ever got. Worked as no man here ever worked with his two hands and legs and a strong back and a bullwhacker's brain. If that's a hangin' offense, then string me up along with Pete Kaster and Jack Quesnell. But pick a stout limb, men, and use a heavy rope. Because there'll be a big hunk of bone and tough meat a-kickin' at the wrong end of it!"

Big Tim Fogarty sat down. The warehouse that he had helped build with his own hands reverberated with cheering. One of the dance hall girls was laughing and screaming hysterically. Men stomped their booted feet and cheered hoarsely. The whole place was thrown into confusion as the crowd shoved forward to shake Big Tim Fogarty's hand and slap him on the back.

FOR the moment Quesnell and Pete Kaster were forgotten. That moment was all that doomed pair needed. No handcuffs or leg irons or ropes hindered them. Matthew and Stephen, at a glance from Wade Applegate, had moved away from the gambler prisoner.

There was a large window behind the improvised prisoners' bench. Quesnell and Kaster dove through it. Quesnell had grabbed his knife, Pete Kaster his six-shooter, from the box where lay the weapons and three sacks of money.

Matthew and Stephen were through the broken window before any man there realized what had happened. With them went the three sacks of money.

Brice made a leap toward the window. Wade Applegate shoved out a long leg, tripping him. Brice fell heavily. As he went down, Quesnell's dagger slid like a silver streak through the air. Its long blade sank halfway to the hilt in the log wall. Wade Applegate's swift move had saved Brice's life.

From outside the warehouse came the sound of shots, then silence. The crowd in the warehouse, stunned, stared at the shattered window.

The shoulders and head of Matthews appeared now, framed in the open window.

"There'll be no hangin'," he said. "Pete Kaster and Quesnell are dead."

Wade Applegate had gripped Brice's arm as he scrambled to his feet.

"The law of the people," he said in a low tone, "has avenged the death of Bob Bradford. Go now to Virginia Morgan without any more blood on your hands. Go, Brice."

Brice went out by way of the window. Matthew and Steven stood out there in the shadows. They gripped his hand in silence. He knew that he would never see the two Avenging Angels again. Their horses, wearing the Square and Compass brand, were saddled and waiting. Their job here was done and they were going back to their Forbidden Land—Matthew, whose number was seven, Stephen, whose number was fifteen.

Later Brice Bradford was to learn that Plato Morgan had married the sister of Wade Applegate, in Virginia. That Wade Applegate had gotten into trouble and had killed a man. He had fled to Utah and found refuge at Rainbow.

Brice was to learn how Plato Morgan, dreamer, scholar, idealist, had drifted from Virginia with his daughter and his invalid wife. The doctors had told him that the only hope for his wife was to get her to the high, dry climate of the Rockies. Her brother, Wade Applegate, lived there on a ranch. They had come up the Missouri River by boat. She had died en route. Plato Morgan had buried his wife on the bank of the Missouri there. He had taken Virginia and they had traveled the forty miles on horseback from the lonely grave to Wade Applegate's horse ranch at the foot of the Rockies.

Plato Morgan had wanted to go to Fort Benton. They had reached as far as Buffalo Run. There Plato Morgan, racked with grief from the loss of his wife, had been caught in the spiderweb trap of the El Dorado. His love for cards and whiskey had taken his money. Virginia had been hoarding the few dollars they had left. Plato Morgan, too proud to go back to Wade Applegate's ranch, too impoverished to travel on to Fort Benton, had stayed on at Buffalo Run. His dream of bringing law and order to the frontier town had become an obsession. Now that dream had been realized.

For tonight history had been made at Buffalo Run, Territory of Montana. Its date marked the beginning of honest, unbiased judicial ruling in that frontier cow town. Judge Plato Morgan was to become a figurehead of justice. His recitation of bar-room ballads and his lasting comradship with Big Tim Fogarty but added to his legendary fame. For men still speak of Judge Plato Morgan, Wade Applegate, his friend and brother-in-law, and Big Tim Fogarty, the bullwhacker who became a power in Montana. They still point out Brice Bradford, the first sheriff of Buffalo Run.

Brice Bradford mounted the first horse he came to and headed at a lope for the Morgan cabin.

Virginia Morgan heard his voice calling her name. Her eyes were misted with tears. She opened the front door and stood there, the lamplight at her back. Brice Bradford had come back to her.

We waited to crash after the fuel gave out.

OVERDUE

By PAT FRANK

IT IS eighty minutes from Washington to Newark, as the transport flies, but this time it was going to be eternity.

This is a run considered safe as peddling around the block on a bicycle. The landscape is thick with emergency fields, and Army fields, and private fields. There are clusters of towns and villages, etched in neon at night, each with its own adequate airport, and there are sprawling cities like Baltimore and Camden, with their floodlighted wide acres of runway. There isn't a hill higher than the brim of your hat. Washington to Newark is the pilot's delight, but this time we weren't coming in.

You carry Senators and Congressmen, and Jimmy and Mrs. Roosevelt, and Big Businessmen with a glazed look in their eyes, and earnest young alphabet boys with their noses in their brief cases. This trip we had twenty-one run-of-the-mill passengers behind us. For some it was their first flight, for all of them it was to be their last.

It is eighty minutes from Washington to Newark, and we had been in the air exactly five hours and forty minutes. We had thirty minutes of gas left.

It was one of those things that couldn't happen. But it was happening, and it was happening to me, sitting with the earphones cocked back of my ears, for

there was nothing to hear, and utterly helpless and useless, as only a co-pilot can be helpless and useless when there is nothing for him except to sit and wait.

It was happening to Jim Braden, beside me, the creases around his mouth and eyes deep as the sculptor's slash into gray granite. Jim never talked much, in the nine months I'd been at his left hand, and he wasn't talking now. His eyes were steady on the muck in front of us, but there was nothing to see, and nothing to say.

Had we landed in Newark, as scheduled, Jim Braden would be in bed now getting a good night's sleep. Tomorrow he would take off his blue uniform, with the long line of gold chevrons down the left sleeve that told of 12,000 hours flying time with the company. He would never have to wear it again, because he was going to sit at a desk on the forty-second floor of a building on Manhattan Island and be executive assistant to the vice-president in charge of operations. And I would have been, had we landed in Newark, a chief pilot.

They say a soldier in the trenches never figures any of the shells coming over is meant for *him,* personally. I know that no pilot ever believes *he* will ever crash and burn. It may happen to the other fellow. It never happens to *him.*

But here we were, marooned in the sky, and I thought of what an old pilot told me once—that what the airlines really need is a "sky hook", so in a case like this you could catch hold of a cloud and hang on.

EVERYTHING east of the Mississippi from the ground up was one big cloud now. The clouds were broken, and scudding across the sky, when we left, and sometimes they erased the top of the Washington Monument, 555 feet up. Weather said there was eight hundred foot ceiling and three miles visibility, at Camden, but Newark had one thousand feet, and four miles, and that was plenty, even if the ground was blotted out for direct navigation all the way up. All you have to do is follow the beam, and Newark with its one thousand ceiling was only eighty minutes away, and Jim wanted to get back to his home and his new job, and I wanted to be a chief pilot in the morning.

It was that simple, until the cold front moved in from the west, and blanketed everything in the north with rain and fog and one great cloud, so that Newark suddenly said the ceiling was down to three hundred, and wouldn't even guess the visibility.

Does that sound bad? It really isn't —not on the run around the block from Washington to Newark. All you have to do is bank around and head back for Washington, following the beam, and sit down where you came from, say "so sorry" to your passengers, and send them along by train.

If the cold front wipes out Washington, still we don't worry particularly, because south of Washington is Richmond, and south of Richmond, Raleigh, and south of Raleigh, Atlanta or Savannah or even Jacksonville. We had six hours and ten minutes of gasoline, leaving Washington. Translate that into miles, at two hundred miles an hour, and you have one thousand two hundred miles or better.

Jim made an even banking turn, somewhere between Camden and Newark. We rang for the stewardess.

"Tell them," said Jim, "that we are heading back to Washington because of bad weather up front, and not to be disturbed. And tell 'em easy."

The girl—she was twenty-two, and had even gray eyes until they turned blue with her uniform, and was just over the one hundred twelve pounds which is minimum weight for an airline stewardess—nodded and pulled her head back into the cabin.

I watched her in the mirror as she bent over each chair in turn and smiled and said a few words, carefully casual. Some of the men looked at their watches and frowned and fidgeted. Some of the women stiffened, and the color went from them. The light of adventure glowed in the eyes of a boy in a military academy uniform. But the old white-haired woman in seat nineteen smiled and whispered back to the girl and touched her shoulder. So that part was okay.

Washington was zero when we reported over Beltsville—or where we figured Beltsville should be—and Washington control told us to go on and try Richmond. We started climbing to see whether there was a top to the stuff. There wasn't. Then we were over Washington, but you would never know it, except that the north leg of the Washington beam suddenly cut off, and we were groping for the south leg of the beam, to follow it into Richmond.

We never found it. Why, I don't know. Call it atmospheric conditions. Say we drifted east of the south leg. Maybe it shut off. And we were lost, lost in swirling sea without a top, without boundary, with only a bottom. If you struck the bottom of this sea at two hundred miles an hour you never knew it.

"Trip 58 calling Washington," I told the mouthpiece. "We are three minutes south of Washington, but we are not on the beam. Please try to locate us."

For two hours thereafter I talked to Washington, and to Richmond, and to Newark, and to Cleveland, and once when we were heading east everything faded and I knew we were over the ocean and pointing for Europe, and Jim turned us around and we went west again.

Every five minutes I told the world that this was Trip 58, and gave them our speed and altitude, but that was all we could give them. The amateurs began hearing our signals, even as we switched on the lights in the cabin, for the night was there. They weren't much help. At one point people reported hearing our motors over Hightstown, New Jersey, and Warrenton, Virginia, at one and the same time.

And still it wasn't so bad, because we knew that eventually we would get on a beam—any beam—again. It wasn't hopeless until the something that couldn't happen—happened. The radio went out. The earphones were dead and cold. They didn't even register static. I suspected the mike was dead, too, but every five minutes I called into the mouthpiece, stupidly:

"This is Trip 58. We cannot hear you. Where are we?"

There was never any answer, and Jim and I knew there never would be any answer. He took her up to six thousand, just in case we were over the Pennsylvania Appalachians, or Virginia's Blue Ridge, or the Adirondacks—that's how much we were lost—and waited. He throttled back until our air speed dropped to one sixty, to save gas, and we waited to crash after the fuel gave out.

I COULD see in the mirror that the stewardess was serving coffee back in the cabin. Only the cadet and the old woman with the white hair took any. The others were frozen, except one fellow who was busy writing. I figured he was writing his will, and he was having some trouble with it, biting his pencil and making revisions. Anyway, they were staying in their seats. I hoped they wouldn't make a run for the cockpit door. I hoped they would just sit still and die right.

"Dick Merrill put one down in the woods and nobody got killed," I told Jim, thinking of the cadet and the white-haired woman and the gray-eyed girl behind me. "Maybe we'll make it."

"This is a bigger ship, and a faster one," Jim said, "and we are carrying two thousand pounds of freight and I don't know how much mail. So unless we put down on a big long runway—

"But we're not going to burn, because I'm going to run her out of gas way up here. It's not a crash that worries the public so much. They do that in their own cars. It's the headline that says 'crashed in flames.'"

And Jim looked at the gas gauge for the right wing tank, and we had twenty-five minutes left.

"Trip 58," I called into the dead mike. "Trip 58 calling Newark. We have twenty-five minutes gas remaining. Our receiving set is dead. We are at six thousand, air speed one-sixty."

I looked out to the left and the sharp wing tip was cutting through the gray, and I could not see beyond the red port light.

"There is no visibility," I added.

"Well," said Jim, "I am sorry you will never be a chief pilot, because this trip

proves you can keep your head as well as fly, and that is the sort of man we need. And I am sorry this is going to ruin our safety record."

This was the largest number of words Jim had ever said to me, in succession, and it surprised me. I said it wasn't so tough for me. I didn't have a wife and two kids, and wasn't going to be executive assistant to the vice-president in charge of operations.

"I know," said Jim. "I know this is going to be bad at home. But for my part, I am overdue. I was washed out ten years ago."

"Tell me about it." I hoped he would keep on talking. He pulled the wheel back a fraction, and continued:

"Do you remember the old tri-motors? We called them flying washtubs, because they were made of corrugated tin, or something, and they rattled like a model T on a corduroy road.

"But in their day, they were good ships, and although they'd shake a motor loose once in a while, still you could dump that motor into a river and keep on flying. I did that once, but I don't think I'll have time to tell about it now."

JIM took his hands from the wheel and lighted a cigarette. It was the first time I'd ever seen him smoke and fly too. My hands were itching for my half of the controls, but he had his hands back in a second.

"It was the first year," he went on, "that we went over the Andes, Buenos Aires to Valparaiso, and I was flying one of the Fords.

"One day I left B. A. with ten in the cabin. I was alone up front. We couldn't afford a second pilot then, or a stewardess.

"You have to fly at nineteen thousand to get over the mountains. I was used to the altitude, but it was pretty tough on the passengers, especially the ones with weak hearts or lungs. Every trip I expected one to conk out on me.

"But on this particular trip we hit what we called an updraft. The big trade wind comes out of the sea and starts up the slope of the Andes. It comes fast, and it goes high, and the plane hasn't been built that can buck it."

And, I thought, the plane hasn't been built that can see through this soup either.

"This thing caught us," Jim said, "just as we hit the crest. It kicked us up, and it kicked again, and every time it kicked the altimeter hopped five hundred. I put her nose down, and gave her all the juice. From our flying position you'd have thought we were diving, but we kept right on going up.

"When we hit twenty-two thousand the nose was still down and we were still climbing. It was beginning to get to me, and I felt light-headed, the way you do at the first whiff of gas in a dentist's chair. So I opened the cabin door and took a look at the ten back there. They hadn't noticed anything, except maybe that it was a little colder. We gave them steamer rugs on those first trips, and they were pulling them tight around their shoulders, and hunching up."

In the mirror the cadet and the stewardess were talking, and both of them were grinning. That guy with the will was still writing it. Two government tax experts were comparing their wrist watches, and arguing. A girl with a wide hat was crying into a tiny handkerchief.

"The cabins weren't sealed in those old flying washtubs," Jim rambled on, "and we didn't carry oxygen.

"When we hit twenty-three thousand and I looked back all the ten were asleep. That's the way it gets you. You just go to sleep and don't wake up.

"I was swimming, by then, and I couldn't feel my hands or my feet, but I kept pointing the nose down, and holding it down, until I went out.

"I don't know how long the old washtub flew herself. I don't know how high we went, or when we started down, or how we missed all those peaks on the way down where, if you hit, nobody will ever find you or even bother to look. But when I woke up we were swinging from side to side, and the altimeter said ten thousand.

"I levelled her off, and looked down, and there was a string of bright pearls stretched out on water and I knew it

was the harbor of Valparaiso. Then the lights at the airport went on."

Jim looked at the gauge, and there was eighteen minutes gas left. I thought maybe I'd better switch on the lights that outline the sign for the passengers: "No Smoking. Please Adjust Seat Belts." Then I thought maybe it would be better if they got it all of a sudden.

"Well," Jim continued, "I put her down. I didn't dare look back to see how many were still alive. There was one old lady—she must have been sixty-five-aboard, and I figured the altitude got her sure."

Subconsciously, I wondered whether Jim wasn't talking just to keep me happy in my last few minutes on earth, or in the sky, or maybe to keep himself from thinking too much about his wife and kids and that nice job behind that big desk, and how a pilot looks after his head and face have been mashed by several thousand pounds of metal nose and mail. But it was an interesting story, and I couldn't help wondering what happened. So I asked him, because it was hard to make Jim talk.

"Well, I got out of the ship," he said, "and I gave my flight chart to the guy who was waiting, and I opened the cabin door and said all out, this was Valparaiso."

Jim stopped talking, and looked at the gauge, and it said fifteen more minutes, maybe. I asked him whether everybody got out.

"Yes, they all got out. And none of them looked bad, and none of them said a word, except the old lady in the rear seat."

I had to ask what she said.

"She said it was the nicest flight she'd ever made," Jim drawled, "and it was so smooth she'd even slept most of the trip. And then she winked at me, and I've always wondered why she winked."

By that time we had twelve more minutes to fly, and all the rest of the time to come down. But Jim didn't stop talking.

"So I figure," he said, "that I am overdue anyway, and that if an old flying washtub can find her way down alone, maybe this job, which cost the company $124,000, can find her way down by herself, too. So we're going down, now."

I picked up the dead mouthpiece and said into it:

"Trip 58 calling Newark. We have ten minutes gas left. Altitude six thousand. We don't know where we are. We are coming down."

I STRAINED my eyes against the black outside, but the circumference of our world was the red light at the tip of the port wing, and the green light at the tip of the starboard wing, and below there was no light. The altimeter started its sweep. The air speed picked up to one eighty as we started down. At three thousand I thought there was a break in front of us, but it was only an illusion in the glare of our nose lights.

I looked at Jim. He had taken his hands off the wheel. He was letting her come down by herself. I wanted to put my hands on my wheel, and send her up again for a few more minutes of life, but he was the chief pilot.

We were still headed down at two thousand, and I remembered the pictures of a ship that piled into a mountain out west, and prayed for level country.

At fifteen hundred Jim eased the angle of glide a little. We dropped more slowly, and the air speed fell back to one sixty.

"Any minute now," I said, "we will smack a hill. How about the flares?" Jim didn't answer. I started to pull my seat belt tight and he jerked his thumb back at the cabin.

"Give 'em a chance, too," he said.

I touched the switch that told the twenty-one behind: "No Smoking. Please Adjust Seat Belts."

I looked in the mirror, and they were all laughing, and slapping each other's shoulders, and there was color in their faces. I never saw a condemned man get a reprieve, but I think I know how he would look. Of course, they didn't know. They thought we were coming in for a safe landing at an airport, a perfect, three-point, Jim Braden landing. They didn't know about gas limitations. They didn't even know our radio was out, and that for five hours we had been blind in the sky. They thought a miracle was

happening, and it wasn't. They thought they were going to live.

But not all of them were dancing in the aisles, because the white-haired old woman in seat nineteen was adjusting her glasses and peering out of her window, carefully and long, and she was seeing the same thing we saw up front, which was just a blank, forbidding black wall. She didn't say anything to the others, and smiled when the gray-eyed girl helped her adjust the belt.

I hoped the gray-eyed girl would pull those belts so tight they hurt, because a loose belt can cut you in half, literally, when you hit at a hundred-odd miles an hour. I saw she was pulling the belts hard.

At twelve hundred Jim flicked the wheel back another fraction, and it was there the right motor stuttered and quit, and then the left quit, and you could hear the sing of us coming down through the soft, yielding, blinding muck before us.

In the mirror it was like watching the melodramatic part of an old silent movie. The exhilaration of the reprieve came to a shocking close with the last spit of the motors. The girl with the wide hat beat with small fists against the glass that separated her from the mysterious blackness outside. Her mouth was opening again and again, and I knew she was screaming, but where I sat I heard no cry except the triumphant rush of the wind through the stilled blades of the propeller. The man who made the will wasn't ready to go yet, after all. His fingers fumbled for the clasp to the safety belt, and his mouth was twisted and his eyes wide with fear. Presently the gray-eyed girl came and stopped him. She was still smiling, but not really.

One of the government tax men covered his eyes with his hands, and crouched low in his seat. The other's hands were knotted together, and his mouth was half open. He may have been praying. The eyes of the cadet stared straight ahead, but his chin was out, and while he was tense and afraid, still he said nothing.

Only the old woman with the white hair was quiet and waiting. Her hands were folded neatly in her lap, the palms up. Her coat was adjusted, and a minute black hat was perched on her head. She looked out the window, expectant as if she waited to see someone she knew.

"Well," said Jim, "this is it," and he pulled the flare lever just as the altimeter touched a thousand. He banked, so I could watch the flare. The magnesium flamed below its little parachute two hundred feet below, but it was sallow and yellow, like an old headlamp far away on a misty road. The flare lighted nothing below it. It was only a yellow, swinging ball in the soup. He jerked loose the other flare at nine hundred. I still didn't see any bottom to the sky. I wondered whether we were over water.

They were our last shots, those two flares, and they hadn't connected. I felt the ship lurch into a sideslip, and Jim put the nose down to gain speed and regain control. When we came out of the slip, the altimeter read five hundred. Then the lines grew deeper in his face and he stared into the narrow, shallow hole our lights bored into the fog, but there was no end to it yet. I came thinking how Dick Merrill came down in the woods, and my hands started for the wheel, but Jim motioned my hands away and let the ship settle herself.

I LOOKED out the side. There still wasn't anything there beyond the red glow of the wing light. Then I turned my head to the front and waited to hit. I remembered what someone told me once—to relax in a crash—and even as I tried to relax I knew I wasn't up to it, and that I was rigid as a steel strut.

The altimeter read two-fifty when I felt something tug at our undercarriage and I knew it was old Mother Earth reaching up her treetops to pull us down. But we kept on, in our even path.

Then our lights touched something that was not nebulous, but solid, and a wall of brush and wood was rushing at us. There was a tearing, raging noise. A giant's hands were tugging at my belly, and twisting me and tearing me. It shot through my mind that it wouldn't be all over in a flash, after all; that it took time. The giant kept on tugging and pulling at me, and shaking me, and

the noise kept on. Then everything stopped and I was pushed back into the seat, and looked at my hands twisted around the wheel before me, and realized, slowly, that I was not dead.

"Get going," said Jim, and I saw he was loosening his belt, and I yanked mine away. The door behind us was jammed and we had to jump from the nose. I landed on my face in weeds that were wet, and my fingers bit into the mud, and I believe I kissed the ground before I straightened up. The gray-eyed girl was shooing the passengers out of the plane. It was only a step down, for there were no wheels on her. There were no wings on her either. The wings were attached to two fat elms a hundred yards back. I saw a light bobbing towards us from a farmhouse. I saw we had come down in a little clearing, and then crashed through the trees.

The cadet had a cut over his eye, where his head bashed the seat in front, and it was bleeding. The gray-eyed girl wanted to use her first aid kit on him, but he wouldn't let her. He was pointing back into the cabin.

The man who made the will was tearing up paper behind what was left of our elevators.

The girl who had been pounding at the window was flat on the ground. One hand held what was left of a broad-brimmed hat, and she was sobbing. The tax men were crying on each other's shoulders.

I saw all this, and then realized the boy was still pointing back into the cabin, and I went in, and the white-haired old woman hadn't stirred from her seat. I unbuckled the belt and felt her pulse and she didn't have any. Her face was the color of old parchment. I picked her up, and there was no weight there, so delicate was she, and carried her outside. The gray-eyed girl brought her first aid kit and kneeled beside her and tried ammonia, but nothing happened.

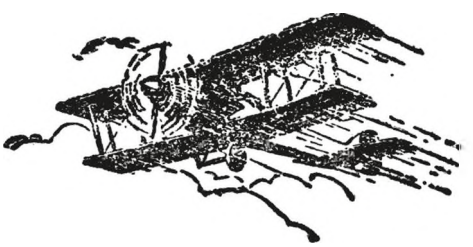
"Something's wrong with her, inside," she said, and I noticed a fleck of blood on the old woman's white lips. The girl found a half pint of brandy in the kit, and poured it through her teeth. The old woman opened her eyes, but her hands, in mine, were growing colder and colder.

Jim walked over and said "Is she all right?" The stewardess shook her head, no. The old woman wanted to say something and we all leaned over to catch it.

"I don't mind," she said, "because I have lived ten extra years. Why once before. . . ."

We never found out what she had to say, because she died there, with her hands in mine.

It was morning before I found we had come down in a bowl in the Blue Ridge, with the mountains all around.



THE WRECK OF *THE LAURENTIC*

From the forthcoming book, "Men Under the Sea"

By COMMANDER EDWARD ELLSBERG

THE year 1917 had just dawned. For thirty months the war had raged in Europe, and German submarines had taken heavy toll of British commerce. And now to cap all, Germany had just announced an unrestricted submarine campaign, with every ship, neutral or belligerent, approaching the British Isles to be sunk without warning.

In the offices of the Admiralty at Whitehall strained faces looked at the mounting curves of tonnage sunk by U-boats and knew that the threat was no idle boast—Germany had enough submarines in operation to bring England to her knees in a few more months if sinkings continued at the current rate. Regardless of what happened at the front, the war would be lost at sea unless a curb on U-boat successes was soon found.

For hard-pressed Britain, with her man-power drawn away from farm and factory to hold back the German hordes pressing across France, was vitally dependent now upon the steady flow across the seas of those supplies she could neither raise nor manufacture in sufficient quantity—American wheat and cotton, American steel and powder. But the getting of them to Britain was as much of a headache to the Exchequer as it was to the Admiralty, for somehow those purchases in neutral America had to be financed or they would never become reality enough for Britain's sea lords to have to worry about safe transportation through submarine-infested waters.

Every device known to finance in London had already been used—British balances in the United States had been exhausted; the maximum that Britain could borrow in America had been raised; American securities owned by British investors had been mobilized in London and shipped to New York to be sold to provide further credits. But still all this was not enough. If the pound sterling were not to drop against the dollar in New York to the point where it would sadly cripple further purchases, gold must be shipped in huge quantities to bolster up the pound.

For some time, for this purpose, the tide of gold had been flowing westward. Now, in January, 1917, another huge shipment was to start, and the lords of the Admiralty were confronted with a major problem. How should they route that priceless gold shipment to escape having it sunk at sea?

To start with, they chose R. M. S. *Laurentic*, a large White Star liner, as the carrier, a vessel fast enough to outrun any submarine which sought to chase her, a vessel already converted into an auxiliary naval cruiser and heavily enough armed to fight off any submarine which might attack her, a vessel already manned by a naval crew as skilled as any in detecting lurking periscopes among the waves.

Next they sought the safest route westward. The seas to the north of Ireland were not so much traveled and were usually too boisterous in winter time for U-boat commanders to lie in wait for victims—the chart of sinkings, indicated that the waters south of Ireland and in the Channel were the favorite hunting grounds for lurking submarines. So for the course of the *Laurentic* they chose the route around North Ireland.

A special train with 3211 ingots of gold ran from London to Liverpool carefully boxed up for shipment on the naval auxiliary cruiser *Laurentic*. At that time it was valued at £5,000,000 or $25,000,000—in present dollar value, about $44,000,000. In boxes weighing 140 pounds each, the gold was carried aboard the *Laurentic* through one of the entry ports low down in her heavy steel hull, carted athwartship to the second class baggage room, and there locked up—forty-three tons of gold. In secrecy such as surrounded the movements of every naval vessel, the *Laurentic* sailed from Liverpool with her precious freight and little else aboard other than her crew.

AFTER a short run to the northward through the protected Irish Sea, the *Laurentic* pointed her bow westward through a wintry January gale, plunging heavily into head seas as she fought her way into the Atlantic with the nearby north coast of Ireland looming up on her port hand across the tumbling seas.

The *Laurentic's* captain had good cause to congratulate himself on his luck; in that weather no submarine, even if present, could hope to make a successful torpedo attack, and he would shortly be out on the deep Atlantic, where submarines rarely went.

Then off Lough Swilly came disaster. A terrific explosion rocked the ship. The hapless *Laurentic* had struck a hidden

mine, inflicting damage far worse than any torpedo might have done.

Heeling over, she started to sink rapidly. As best they could in the freezing weather, the crew struggled to launch the boats from their foundering vessel. Between the icy water, the driving seas, and the heavy list of the stricken liner, they were none too successful in getting away, and when the *Laurentic* disappeared, over half her crew, several hundred seamen, went with her.

When the frozen survivors finally made shore in the ice-coated lifeboats and the news of the *Laurentic's* fate was radioed in code to London, deep despair struck the Exchequer and cold fury reigned in Whitehall. £5,000,000 in gold gone—the largest sum in all history to be lost at sea! But it was worse than the mere loss of £5,000,000. The loss was in gold, and gold above all else was needed in New York to bolster up the tottering pound sterling and keep the stream of food and steel flowing toward Britain. Could the Admiralty do anything?

If it was humanly possible, the Admiralty would and could. The gold had been lost while in the hands of the navy; it was the navy's obligation to recover it.

Commander G. C. C. Damant, R. N., the British navy's premier diving authority, was given the task, with orders to start immediately. He was not to regard his mission as a salvage job but as a military undertaking of the utmost urgency. It was winter, but it was wartime. There could be no delay.

MINE-SWEEPERS located the hulk not far off the mouth of Lough Swilly in a depth of 132 feet of water or 22 fathoms, and buoyed the spot for Damant.

It was a terrible place to work. Unsheltered by any land, the *Laurentic* lay in the open sea, exposed to the full sweep of every northerly or westerly Atlantic gale and with Lough Swilly to the southward to allow a stiff sea built up by any southerly gale to strike full force over the wreck. Racing tides sweeping back and forth along the coast meant fierce currents to be encountered by the divers. To top off all, January in that latitude meant freezing spray on deck to hamper the workers and icy cold in the depths below to numb the divers.

Then there were the Germans. It was unduly optimistic to hope that the loss of the *Laurentic* and her fabulous cargo could long be kept secret from Prussia's prying intelligence agents. What the prize they had struck from Britain's grasp meant in the way of munitions would be as well realized in Berlin as in London. Damant could expect, if Germany found out what he was about, to have submarines sent north for the specific purpose of blowing his little diving ship out of the water.

With all that in the back of his mind, Damant went to work. The *Laurentic* was lying in the sand on her port bilge, heeled over about 60°, so that walking on the deck was wholly impossible and even clinging to the sloping starboard side was out of question except where the diver could grip some protruding fitting.

Nevertheless, with lead-soled boots braced against rivet heads on the shell, and freezing fingers clutching at what they could grasp, divers crawled over the badly listed side, looking for the entry port through which the gold had been loaded. Amidships in the second class baggage room, down what would now be a steeply inclined passageway leading from that sealed entry port, they would find the gold.

Long ocean swells were sweeping in steady succession over the *Laurentic's* tomb; even in the depths each wave set up a strong surge as its crest passed. The divers found themselves nearly swept from their precarious perches on the *Laurentic's* side by each wave, and were forced to cling tightly most of the time to the nearest fitting, scrambling along a few feet only between pulsations.

To make matters worse, the *Laurentic's* crew, in abandoning ship, had of course lowered all the boats they could, and the boatfalls now hung down the ship's side to what had once been her waterline, with the heavy blocks at the lower ends of the falls swinging erratically with every surge, like huge pendulums from the davits overhead.

To see one of those massive boat blocks go flying through the water within inches

of his face-plate, nearly braining him, was a sight to chill any man's blood. Damant had first of all to cut loose those death-dealing boat blocks before his men could proceed in such reasonable safety as even divers are entitled to.

ANOTHER diver soon found the entry port and tied a buoy-line to it. The mooring buoys of the diving ship were then immediately relaid about this marker as a center, so that the diving ship might plumb the hatch below and minimize the danger of fouling a diver's lines.

Damant, a fine diver who as a lieutenant had taken a leading part in developing the theory of stage decompression, now had a charge of guncotton placed against the heavy steel entry port doors and exploded electrically from above.

His next diver found the doors torn loose, but resting a few feet inside the ship against something, still a total obstruction to entrance. Only with some difficulty were the doors torn out of the ship and removed, to expose behind them a heavy latticed iron gate across the passage against which they had been resting.

Another charge of guncotton took this gate off its hinges, but it required two more dives to remove some heavy packing cases in order to clear the passage inboard to the strong room.

In ordinary weather, what had been done by the divers might easily have been done in a couple of days, but Damant had been struggling to cling to his moorings in a continuous series of mid-winter gales punctuated by snow squalls, and two weeks had gone by during which diving was possible only for brief intervals and even then under fearsome conditions. But each time the wind and sea lulled enough to make it seem probable that the moorings would hold his ship even for an hour, down went a diver into the freezing water; and bit by bit, over a fortnight, Damant had managed to get done two whole days' work.

He began to breathe a little more freely. He had not yet been torpedoed; his men were doing well in that cold water, and the backbone of his job was broken —the way to the treasure room was cleared. It was a difficult way, down a passage sloping at an angle of 60° and around several corners, but Damant had often seen worse. It looked now as if a few weeks' work would see the forty odd tons of gold in the *Laurentic's* strong-room lifted box by box to the surface and shipped safely back to the vaults of the Bank of England.

IN THE late afternoon of the fourteenth day over the wreck, the last obstruction in the passage was removed. To Diver E. C. Miller, one of his best men, Damant gave the task of getting into the strongroom.

With a chisel and a short-handled sledge hammer lashed to his belt, Miller went over the side of the salvage ship, slid sixty-three feet down the descending line to the opened entry port on the high side of the listed *Laurentic*, and crawled into the ship.

With his tenders carefully paying his lines out, Miller half slipped, half dropped down the now nearly vertical deck going inboard, groped his way in the utter blackness around several bulk-heads, and then felt out the steel door leading to the strongroom.

With sledge and chisel he smashed his way through the nearly horizontal door, to slide again into the black water inside the strongroom and bring up sharply with his lead boots clattering on a pile of bullion boxes jumbled in a huge heap against the port side bulkhead of what had been the second cabin baggage room.

Never before nor since has it been given to any diver to land on such a hoard of gold. Forty-three tons of it in 3211 bars lay in a scrambled heap against the bulkhead, where it had been tossed when the crazily heeled *Laurentic* hit bottom. Everywhere Miller reached out a canvas clad arm through the black water he felt stout boxes of gold—$40,000 worth of it in each box, $25,000,000 of it altogether.

Excitedly Miller telephoned to Damant that he was in the bullion room and that except for the smashed door, the bullion room was intact and the treasure all there! He was more entitled than he then knew to his excitement—Miller was

the only man to ever see that bullion all together on the sunken *Laurentic*.

Miller had been down an hour already; it was dark on deck, and the sea was none too good. Sharply they signaled him to come up, so that the ship could unmoor.

But with all that gold about him, Miller was not going to come up empty-handed. He seized the nearest box of gold, a small box about a foot square and six inches deep and got, as everyone gets when first he grabs a golden ingot, a shock at its weight. The little box weighed one hundred forty pounds, no easy load even for a strong man to carry under the best of circumstances. But he refused to drop the gold—he had first found it, he would be first to bring some up.

Up through the strongroom door, around the bulkhead corners he struggled in the water-filled passages with his golden ballast, little help possible from his tenders above on the salvage ship because of the many turns and twists his lifelines took inside the wreck on their way down to him.

Pushing the box ahead of him, he wormed his way up the steeply sloping decks until, finally in the clear, his tenders got a straight pull and heaved him up to the entry port, where he was able to lash his precious burden and send it up on a line, the while he himself spent the next half hour dangling at various decompression stages in the icy water.

The strain and the excitement must have been too much for his circulation; within an hour he was being jammed into the recompression chamber for treatment for the "bends". Bubbles of air had gathered in his joints, doubling him into knots with pain. After having been gradually decompressed for several hours, however, he emerged from the tank feeling quite all right in his joints and much elated over his success.

WHEN morning dawned again on the gray sea tumbling over the *Laurentic*, the barometer was falling. Commander Damant, eyeing it uneasily, concluded that with luck he might get in one more dive before he had to let go his moorings and run before the rising storm. Only Miller, who already knew the way, had a chance of getting into the strongroom quickly enough for any useful work, so in spite of his bout with "the bends", Miller went overboard again.

Miller quickly demonstrated that he had profited by his experience of the previous evening, for in one dive of only sixty minutes, he managed to mule three more boxes of gold up out of the strongroom and send them to the surface, a feat which, to some degree, took the sting off the imperative necessity of letting go the moorings immediately upon his coming up.

With four boxes of gold, about $160,000 worth, in his hold, Damant ran for shelter into Lough Swilly before a mounting northerly gale, but with every expectation of coming back soon to lift out the rest of that $25.000,000 within a few more weeks. Had anyone then told him that he was to be at it for seven more years, Damant would have been completely incredulous. But so it was.

For a solid week a fierce winter gale blew from the north, with ever-heightening storm waves sweeping over the grave of the *Laurentic*, twenty-two fathoms down. Long before that storm blew itself out, the north coast of Ireland for miles around was strewn with wreckage from the sunken *Laurentic*, an ominous portent to Damant and his men of what those waves were doing to their wreck.

In deep trepidation, when the storm finally moderated and diving could be resumed, Damant watched as the first diver went overboard to secure a new buoy line to the entry port. And his heart sank as he noted that the pressure on the diver at that entry port now showed it at a depth of one hundred and three feet, whereas before it had been but sixty-two feet from the surface. Somehow the side of the *Laurentic* was now forty feet lower than it had been before the storm.

He soon enough found out why. The diver going through the entry port into the passage below could get but a few feet; the deckplates forming the ceiling of that passage were squeezed down to within eighteen inches of its floor, and buckled bulkhead plates had completely

sealed off what little space was left.

Under the endless pounding of the storm waves the *Laurentic* had folded up like an accordion; even an eel could no longer squeeze through that flattened out passage to the strongroom!

That was indeed a body blow! But they had to get through again to that stronghold. With successive charges of guncotton exploded in the crumpled passage, they forced apart the steel plates, shoring up as they went inboard to make a tunnel through which a diver might crawl.

It was a terrible job. The broken plating overhead, five decks of it, groaned and creaked and worked like a thing alive as the surging waves beat down through the depths; and the diver, alone and in darkness stretched out in that quivering mass of steel supported by nothing in particular, well knew as he wormed his way along that if those plates should fold up on him no one could ever get him out.

THAT it could ever have been done had not Commander Damant been himself a diver, I very much doubt. But where a leader will go, other men will follow, and the tunnel advanced until at last the way was cleared to the strongroom once more.

For the third time, Miller slid down into the strongroom, reaching it now at a depth of 120 feet, right down on the sea floor where the collapse of the *Laurentic* had dropped it. But this time, as he slid into the inclined room, Miller brought up against the far bulkhead with a metallic clatter as his lead-soled boots landed directly on the steel and no heap of stout wood bullion boxes broke his fall. Anxiously he felt about him, but it was useless—the bullion room was completely empty!

In a daze, Miller groped through the water, his numbed fingers traveling over deck, bulkheads, and ceiling, but he found no gold. Instead, gaping rents in the steel deckplates and in the lower bulkhead showed only where it had gone—in the widespread collapse and flattening out of the *Laurentic*, the strongroom plating had given way, spilling the precious bars downward somewhere into the general tangle of wreckage of the ship to port.

It was a heart-breaking discovery. Gone now was every hope of quick recovery of the treasure. The sea seemed to have taunted them with the feel of it, only to snatch it far beyond their reach.

On the surface, Damant gloomily recast his plans. It was obvious that the tunnel driven from the entry port in the starboard side of the ship down to the strongroom was too dangerous for use in the gigantic task that lay ahead; in spite of the peril and the labor spent in clearing that tunnel, it must now be abandoned. Nothing remained except to tear the *Laurentic* to pieces, plate by plate and beam by beam, working vertically downward from her upper deck into her hold, till they came on the spot in the port bilge into which the gold must have been spilled when the strongroom gave way.

With explosive charges, Damant began to blast his way down through the collapsed wreckage on the port side. To his despair, he discovered that the loosely lying steel plates failed to break under the action of his explosives—with no strain any longer on those steel plates, they simply flopped loosely up or down under the impact of the exploding guncotton like flags waving in the wind, without ever parting. It would be necessary to seize each plate with clamps, heave taut on the clamps with a line to the boom of his salvage ship until the plate was strained hard out, and then fire a charge under it to cut it free at its lower edge. Thus the work went slowly ahead as one after another the *Laurentic's* plates were blasted out and dumped well clear of the ship. But not wholly without mishap.

Blackford, a veteran diver, was working below. Twenty fathoms down, clutching gingerly a charge of guncotton with its detonator imbedded inside, Blackford crawled on hands and knees over torn steel to get beneath a plate which swayed at its outboard end from a line to the salvage ship. His immediate predecessor on the job, Diver Clear, had hooked it with a shackle, and

one end was now being held up, stretched taut by the straining wire line to the winch on deck.

Crawling in on all fours under that waving ton of steel, Blackford stretched out on his stomach and wiggled along as far beneath it as he could get, then thrust the guncotton ahead to the limit of his extended fingers, jamming it hard between the lower end of the wobbling plate above and the wreckage on which he lay. Carefully he felt out the lead of the firing wires to make sure they still ran unbroken past him to the detonator, and then telephoned up.

"Take in the slack on the firing circuit."

On the surface, a tender hauled gently on the electric circuit—and at that instant, the wire rope holding the plate up over Blackford suddenly shot up out of the sea like a broken fishline and fell back in a tangle of slack wire onto the deck of the diving ship. Startled, Damant looked at the writhing coils. Something had let go below. The heavy plate had dropped, and Blackford was right under it!

DAMANT pressed Blackford's telephone to his lips, feverishly calling his diver. After several very long seconds he got a welcome reply, in strained and measured syllables, "Give—me—all—the—air—you—can—sir."

Thankful that Blackford, with the crushing load of that steel plate on his back, was still at least alive enough to talk, Damant signaled hastily to raise the air pressure on Blackford's diving line. Immediately there came another call from the agonized diver, "That's right! Give me more yet! And get another diver down here quick!"

As for the last request, that was wholly unnecessary; for already the previous diver, Clear, who had just come aboard after his decompression and was still in his wet suit, partly undressed, was in hot haste having his weights replaced and his helmet screwed back on, while other seamen hurriedly were reeving off a fresh hoisting wire and some new slings to lift that plate again.

But at the request for still more air, Commander Damant paused. The pressure gauge on Blackford's air line already showed a huge excess over what he needed to balance the water at the depth at which he lay; unquestionably under that pressure his suit must be completely ballooned out. To increase the pressure further meant grave danger of bursting the canvas suit and drowning Blackford immediately. On the other hand, his suit might already be torn somewhere and partly flooded, so that he badly needed the extra air to hold the water back from his face as he lay there unable to move under the crushing load of that steel plate.

Should the air pressure be increased or not? Damant was in a terrible dilemma, with Blackford's very life depending on his decision and no help from the telephone in resolving it, for the air roaring now through Blackford's helmet all but drowned out the diver's voice, and very evidently he could not hear Damant's. And when carefully the air was throttled down a little to improve the hearing, before Damant ever could get in a word, he heard over and over, slowly articulated by the trapped diver the anguished plea, "Give—me—more—air!"

But balancing all the risks, it seemed to Damant unwise to raise the pressure any further, and thus matters stood when Clear, on whom everything now depended, was dropped overboard with the new hoisting sling, to slide directly down Blackford's airhose as a quick guide to the spot where he lay trapped.

Clear landed twenty fathoms down, in the crater of wreckage already blasted through the *Laurentic*, and followed the airhose through the dark water to where it disappeared beneath a twisted steel plate with some loose wire tangled about one end.

There was no sign of the trapped Blackford save a mass of air bubbles rising in fine clusters from all about that sheet of steel.

Hastily Clear dragged up the fresh wire sling held by a marline lanyard to his wrist, carefully slipped the clamps of a new wire bridle over the edges of the steel near the free end of the plate.

Swiftly he secured the clamps, trying not to jar the plate, working all the time with the knowledge that aside from Blackford, jammed in under the other end of that sheet of steel was a fulminate detonator buried in guncotton, and that sometimes even more stable explosives than fulminate did queer things. Should his jarring of the wreckage set off that cap, both of them would be blown to bits.

Clear finished securing the new sling, stepped back a little.

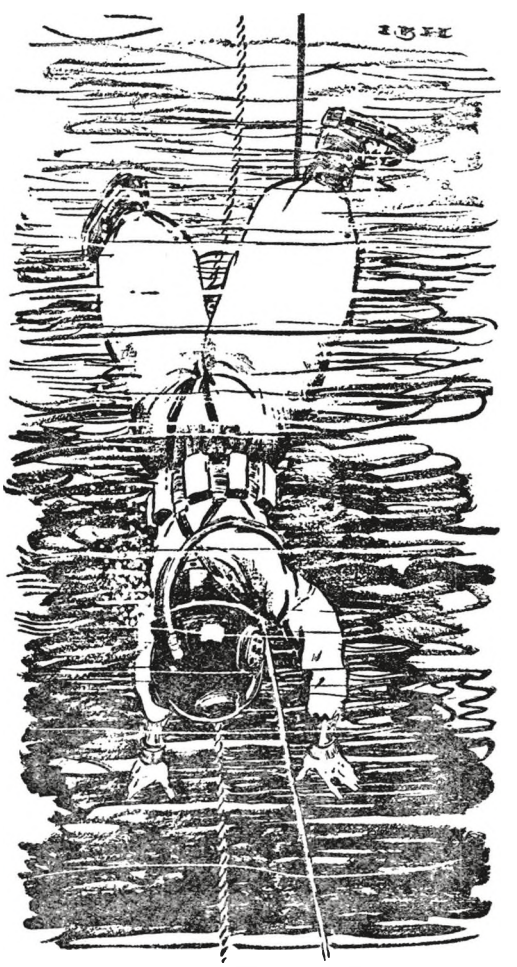
"On deck! Heave round!"

The wire line in the water above him stretched taut; the end of the plate lifted slowly and evenly, exposing Blackford's feet, then his body, soon his helmet. Queerly, in that topsy-turvy world of water, as the distorted steel sheet rose up, Blackford, still nearly horizontal, rose with it, pressing against its under side as if glued there, for with his rig bulging like an overstuffed sausage, he had tremendous buoyancy and could not stay down.

Here a new danger entered. Should Blackford slide out from beneath the steel with that inflated rig, he would "blow up" instantly. And Blackford was helpless to do anything himself to prevent it, for spread-eagled as he was, he could not get his fingers into his control valves. But Clear could. Seizing his helpless shipmate by one bulging leg to hold him beneath that restraining steel plate lest he suddenly go shooting skyward, Clear reached in, opened the exhaust valve in his helmet wide, and bled the excess air from his suit until Blackford shrank to more normal proportions. Becoming heavy once more, he dropped away from the overhanging plate and crawled free of it after having been a prisoner for nine minutes.

Fortunately Blackford's copper helmet had protected his head when the plate dropped, or his skull would unquestionably have been crushed by the blow. As it was, the load pressing on him was in a fair way momentarily to break his back and only the excess air expanding his suit like a pneumatic tire had taken weight enough off him to make the pain bearable till the plate was lifted. Naturally, he wanted all the pressure he could possibly get. Damant, solicitously examining Blackford when finally he came up, was not surprised to learn that it had never occurred to his diver, in imminent danger of being crushed to death, that overmuch pressure would rupture the canvas fabric of his suit and drown him.

FOR two months the blasting went ahead. Monotonously they tore the *Laurentic* apart, with their major excitement the activities of German submarines in that vicinity. Strangely enough, no torpedoes came Damant's way, but his divers had ample reason to know that U-boats were working near, for British



. . . streaming in the tidal current like an anchored balloon.

mine-sweepers steaming by them in pairs with long wire sweeps dragging between their sterns occasionally exploded freshly planted submarine mines.

One went off two miles away; the detonation coming through the water struck a diver like a triphammer, giving him a violent and a dangerous shock. After that, whenever mine-sweepers got within five miles of his ship, Damant hastily dragged his divers out of the water, but even so, a detonation six miles off soon gave another unlucky diver a severe jar. However, nothing could be done about it; Damant dared not still further extend his margin or he would have been forced to quit diving altogether, what with the endless forays of U-boats planting mines and the continuous counter-activities of trawlers sweeping them up.

But after two months of blasting, they suddenly forgot all about U-boats. Miller, with a scent unequaled by any of his mates, ran across the gold again! Delving amidst the rubbish sandwiched in between the now uncovered lower deck wreckage lying to port of the flattened out strongroom, he spotted a yellow ingot! Like a hound on a fresh scent he was off, burrowing through the wreckage for more. His time on the bottom ran out; Damant signaled him to come up, but nothing could tear him from the job until, having been down ninety minutes, he could be lifted with $80,000 in gold to accompany him.

Here was welcome news for London! Promptly Commander Damant slid into a diving rig and dropped to the bottom to spend a long hour in the depths in that water they had blasted in the *Laurentic*, checking what next to tear away to expose more gold. Finally, with a picture of the wreckage vividly impressed on his memory, he started up, taking only a relatively short decompression on his rise.

On coming to the surface, he was dismayed to find that Miller had developed another case of "the bends" and had had to be shoved into the recompression chamber for treatment. Damant peered through a glass port at him; Miller, inside the little single-chambered tank—which was all they could accommodate on their diving ship—seemed to be already relieved of his pains and resting comfortably, so Damant left him to direct the next diver where best to look for more gold.

But within an hour after emerging from the sea, Commander Damant was no longer concerned over gold. He soon found himself in difficulties with one of the rarer manifestations of compressed air disease—his eyeballs began to diverge radically and he began to see double. Then, to top off his troubles, the air bubbles developing in his forehead began to pain him excruciatingly.

The only recompression tank they had on board was already occupied by Miller, who would not be out from under pressure for forty minutes yet, and unless the pressure in that little single chamber were completely released, no one else could enter. With his eyes diverging more and more each minute and the top of his head feeling as if it were about to explode, Damant could hardly wait forty minutes.

Fortunately for him, Miller, looking out the port, and glimpsing the most cock-eyed set of optics he had ever seen looking longingly in at him, immediately sensed the situation. Chivalrously he blew down the pressure in the tank at once so that the door could be opened to admit his commander, with the result that his own torments promptly returned to double him up in pains worse than ever.

With the door slammed tight behind him, Damant opened the air valve and started to raise the pressure once more. With gratification he noted as the air roared in and the pressure rose, compressing the bubbles in his head, that the two entirely distinct figures of Miller he saw before him gradually began to approach each other till finally at ten pounds pressure the two Millers coalesced into one only, while at the same time the tortures in his head magically disappeared. However, he had to run the pressure up to double that amount before Miller himself got any relief.

Unfortunately, as the pressure was thereafter gradually reduced, while Damant's troubles were gone for good,

Miller's were not. At four pounds pressure, Miller again began to suffer the tortures of the damned and there was nothing for it except to jump the pressure up again till his pains vanished and then to try releasing the air at a slower rate. But nothing helped; each time the pressure dropped "the bends" doubled Miller up again.

Finally, after six and a half hours in the tank the temptations of a warm meal and a bed overcame the restraints of reason and the two divers blew down the few remaining pounds of air so they could emerge.

But Miller paid for it, for he was soon back in the tank, to suffer all the rest of the night and most of the next day before he could finally rid his system of the nitrogen he had soaked up.

THROUGH the summer and the early fall, taking the iron wreckage apart bit by bit and searching amongst the jumble of smashed furniture, bedding, waterlogged provisions, and wooden panelling thus gradually exposed, the divers recovered 542 gold bars, to a total value of about $4,000,000, all of which went promptly back to Britain's hungry treasury.

After September, wintry weather hit the salvagers once more. It was now apparent there could never be any quick recovery, and something else had meanwhile occurred to put a new complexion on the whole affair.

On April 6, 1917, a few months after the sinking of the *Laurentic*, the United States had entered the World War on the side of the Allies; within a few months of that time arrangements were completed between London and Washington whereby America undertook to finance Britain's purchases in the United States, with the promise of reimbursement later.

Britain no longer had to support the pound sterling in New York; while the war lasted, there was no longer any necessity of shipping another ounce of gold westward; and so far as its effect on the conduct of the war was concerned, the pressure to recover the *Laurentic's* treasure was completely gone.

As a result of this, when winter set in, the Admiralty withdrew its divers from the *Laurentic*, and while the war lasted, they never came back. Not that Damant and his divers were given any rest even during that winter—quite the contrary, for during the next fourteen months they were kept busy searching the smashed wrecks of sunken U-boats for codes and other useful wartime information.

In the spring of 1919, having been away eighteen months, Damant and his divers returned, a little easier in their minds than formerly as they resumed the job, for they had under them at last a properly-equipped salvage ship, the *Racer*, and their fears of submarine attacks were gone.

The *Laurentic*, to their surprise, had changed but little. Apparently the seas had already battered her so flat that not much more crushing was possible, and the divers took up where they had left off, promptly beginning to find more ingots in the wreckage.

But soon a new danger began to threaten. They had been working in what had originally been a well deck aft; forward of them, rising a sheer two deck heights, was the after end of the superstructure carrying the first class cabins, and abaft them a similar superstructure carrying the second class accommodations. Oddly enough, while the heavy hull plating had given way and folded up, these lighter superstructures had remained fairly well intact, rising like two islands fore and aft of the crushed hull where the divers worked.

Damant noted that these two superstructures were leaning more and more toward each other as he undermined their foundations by tearing away the hull between, but so long as he was finding gold, he was exceedingly reluctant to take his men away from treasure recovery to dismantle the adjacent hull.

Keeping an eye on these threatening leaning towers, he kept on, recovering that season some $2,350,000 more. But as the summer drew along, ingots became scarcer and scarcer, and he could only conclude, as has many other miner before him, that his vein of gold was pinching out.

Damant decided that in the collapse of the strongroom, the gold must have separated into two parts. One part, which he had apparently retrieved, had shot to port through the ruptured bulkhead, while the major part, some $18,000,000 worth, had disappeared through the torn floor of the strongroom and must be buried somewhere in the hold underneath everything. No more bars could be found, and winter came to end his labors for 1919.

1920 and 1921 were heartbreakers. The salvagers returned in the spring of 1920 to find that the winter storms had finally torn away the toppling superstructures, spilling them in a mass of twisted steel into their excavation, and filling in the chinks with mattresses, springs, broken china, smashed chairs and tables, tiles and cement from bathrooms and every conceivable kind of rubbish.

To make a complete job of it, the profile of the wrecked hull had been further flattened out so that sand and stones from the sea floor now swept over the broken sides to settle in amongst the wreckage, there to be pounded by the tidal currents and the surging waves into a compact caked mass of conglomerate for which the remains of broken mattress springs formed excellent reinforcements and binders.

For the next two years, during which time very little gold was recovered to encourage anybody, the divers struggled in the sea to remove this debris. Against the sand and the rubbish covering everything, explosives were worthless. Powerful pumps brought in to suck away the sand were equally ineffective; and grabs and clamshell dredging buckets got nowhere, partly because of the short periods during which the *Lacer* could be held steady over the wreck, partly because of the obstructions below.

Nothing showed any effectiveness against this refractory mixture except streams of water from hose nozzles which the divers used to break up the hard packed sand, after which they hastily filled bags with what sand they had washed loose and tore away any more substantial wreckage exposed during the washing.

But it was disheartening work, with storms continually washing in fresh sands so that for months it was questionable whether success would ever be possible. In fine weather, the divers gained, and in bad weather, the sand. The discouraged divers found themselves, as storm succeeded storm, beginning to believe that they would never make way against the overpowering forces of the sea. Fortunately, a few scattered bars of gold turned up now and then to revive the drooping divers when defeat seemed inevitable, and finally Damant's ingenuity saved the day.

After every possible mechanical contrivance had folded up in the face of that mixture burying the *Laurentic's* treasure, Damant pulled the job to success by making a hotly contested competition out of the amount of sand each man could dig out in a thirty minute dive under standardized conditions. For twelve minutes he could wash sand with a hose; for thirteen minutes thereafter he could pack the sand he had washed free into a nearby sack; and his last five minutes he had left to get his bag of sand over to the hoisting bucket to be weighed on deck when he came up.

Scores were carefully kept on what each man brought up; the ingenuity of the divers in fabricating scoops and scrapers to help their speed in digging was amazing; and for the next twenty days the amount of sand brought up per man daily increased as brains came to the aid of brawn and the competition to dig up sand waxed keener. It soon became evident to all that Balson, the strongest diver on the job, was unbeatable, after which interest somewhat declined; but by that time a high standard had been set below which no diver's pride in the contents of his bag of sand would allow him to fall, and the salvagers started to gain on the sea.

1920 and 1921 dragged wearily away, with very little gold to encourage anybody, and only mountains of worthless sand and an occasional steel plate blasted loose as signs of progress. Still, the hole in the *Laurentic* was continuously

getting deeper, and when in 1921 the winter storms arrived to chase the salvagers off, they had at last exposed the shaft tunnel and some of the inner bottom plating nearby, so that they knew that they had worked their way completely through the ship's hull from top to bottom, and now had only the sand-filled hold to search.

1922 saw the *Racer* and her crew back again as soon as spring allowed, full of eagerness now that the shell of the ship was near. The first diver down got the surprise of his life when he landed on the bottom of the crater in the *Laurentic's* hulk to actually see bars of gold sticking out of the sand! For once the currents had worked on the side of the divers, and during the winter had washed out some two feet of sand which previously had silted in.

With a glad cry, the diver started to pluck golden ingots from the sand; before that day was over, nineteen bars had been recovered. "They gave themselves up like lambs," the divers reported to Damant.

From that lucky spot the trail of gold led away through the sand toward the port bilge. Daily scraping and digging unearthed more gold nestling in the sand against the shell of the ship, usually one bar at a time buried in hard-packed grit. But the divers nearly went delirious when they came across one nest of ninety ingots surrounded by the broken remnants of the boxes in which originally they had been packed. $750,000 worth of gold went up that day!

That happened only once. The other bars they had to dig for one at a time, completely uncovering the steel skin of the *Laurentic* section by section till some 440 square feet had been scraped, by which time the divers found themselves out to the turn of the bilge with the shell there covered by overhanging deck plating that had been pressed down to within a foot or two of the outer skin. Somewhere between those two layers lay the rest of the gold, millions and millions of dollars of it yet.

To blast away the overhanging plating meant delay and the removal of a shield which was partly holding out the sand. As long as the divers could in any manner squeeze in beneath the wreckage overhead, Damant determined to keep on as he was. Stretched out flat, the divers snaked themselves beneath the broken deckplates to wiggle along on their stomachs over the shell, searching in the deep corrugations (which the collapse of the hull had pressed in the flat shell plating) for gold bars which might have come to rest there.

The corrugations of course, were all filled with sand, and the digging was hard. Diver after diver wore away his fingernails grubbing through hard packed sand for ingots. They might have worn gloves; but inside gloves a man would lose his sense of touch and waste time digging out rocks and broken crockery, whereas with his finger tips he might become expert enough in the feel of gold to pass over the rubbish he encountered and save precious minutes.

The divers now had a tough time of it. To avoid having the strong sweep of the current on the long stretch of lifeline and airhose tear them away from their work or perhaps foul the swaying hoses in the wreckage overhead, they tied their lines when they reached bottom to a convenient plate, leaving themselves some thirty or forty feet of slack line to get to their job.

Then they slid headfirst in between the plates and started burrowing, but it was a ticklish business. As a man's feet were higher than his head in that position, air started to work up from the helmet into the canvas legs of the suit, gradually inflating them so they tended to float in spite of heavily weighted shoes. When that happened, there was nothing for a diver to do except to crawl out backward on all fours and stand erect a moment until the water about him had pressed all the air upward again into his helmet, when he could slip back into his hole and resume digging for gold with his fingernails.

IN THIS wise, one of the divers, Light by name, was working away trying to dig free an ingot which he could barely feel through the sand with the

tips of his outstretched fingers. Tantalizingly his fingers traveled over it, but the refractory bar was so solidly imbedded in the sand that it refused to tear free.

So absorbed did Light become in getting a better grip on that $8,000 bar of gold that he completely forgot his own precarious state until his legs suddenly floated upward to touch the overhanging plates, leaving only his helmet bearing on the steel below.

That brought Light back to the realities of his situation, and immediately he attempted to crawl out backward, but with his helmet in the sand and his legs floating up, crawling was a physical impossibility.

With his buoyant legs starting to pull him upwards, Light hastily took a fresh grip on the ingot (which had gotten him in trouble) to anchor himself down, and shouted desperately into his telephone,

"On deck! Shut off my air!"

On the *Racer,* strange though the request sounded, a tender rushed to comply, but it was too late. Light was light indeed now; despite his frantic efforts to hang on to that gold bar, the pull of his inflated legs tore him loose, to send him shooting up the slope beneath the plating overhead and then with increasing buoyancy to float him upside down through the water until he brought up with a jerk on the end of his slack lifeline, forty feet from the bottom, pulling hard against the lashing which held his lines to the wreckage below. There, helmet down, arms stiffly outstretched, feet up, he hung spread-eagled with his rig ballooned out to the uttermost, streaming in the tidal current like an anchored kite balloon.

TO MAKE matters worse, Damant, who had seized Light's telephone to learn what was wrong, now learned that there was some water in his helmet and he could not tell where it was coming in.

That was bad; every diving suit usually leaks a little, but except for wetting the diver the quantity of water entering is of no great moment. However, in Light's case, even a little water was now dangerous. Upside down as he was, a quart of water inside his helmet might well drown him.

It so happened that Blackford, the diver who had preceded Light on the bottom, was still in the water not far below the *Racer's* hull, being decompressed on his way up. Damant promptly had him dragged over by the tenders until he could clutch the airhose running down to Light, then ordered him to slide down that hose to the bottom, cut the lashing that held it there, and ease out on Light's lifeline until he came to the surface.

Down through the sea went Blackford, who having been once himself in a tight spot on that wreck, knew well enough the need for haste. In less than a minute he was on the bottom, and there at his feet was the lanyard holding his shipmate's airhose, while stretched taut from it, running up to the invisible Light, floating somewhere above midway in the depths, was the rest of his airhose.

Blackford drew his diving knife. Getting a good grip with one hand on the hose leading upward to Light, with the other hand he slashed savagely at the lashing and cut it in one stroke. And then things happened fast. In a twinkling, Blackford felt himself shooting upward through the water.

So great was Light's buoyancy that the instant the lanyard was cut, the straining lifeline which Blackford was clutching dragged him surfaceward, with poor Blackford no more able to hold Light down than if he had hold of a stratosphere balloon.

Before the astounded Blackford could let go his grip, he had been jerked so high himself that the air in his own suit expanded enough to spread-eagle him also, and there were both divers, Blackford and Light, with tremendous buoyancy, helplessly racing surfaceward!

A few seconds later they shot from the sea in quick succession and splashed back, to float horizontally in their distended rigs on top of the waves, fortunately both of them having missed killing themselves by colliding with the *Racer.* Hurriedly their tenders reeled them in alongside, where Light was has-

tily taken aboard and jammed immediately into the recompression chamber to get him back under pressure again, while Blackford, after enough air had been bled out of his suit to get him vertical once more, was sent down under water to complete his decompression in the normal manner.

BY OCTOBER, 1922, when stormy weather again stopped the job, the season's work had yielded 895 more gold bars to a total value of $7,500,000, and matters were looking better. Still further to brighten up the picture, 1923 was nearly a repetition of the year before, only better, with 1,255 additional ingots, valued at nearly $10,000,000 recovered in that one season from the depths.

By 1924, all except 154 bars, worth about $1,200,000, had been retrieved, and so thoroughly had the divers scavenged the wreckage inside the now exposed shell of the *Laurentic* that it was hopeless to expect to find anything further inside the wreck. Still, $1,200,000 in real gold, the leavings, so to speak, of six years work in picking the *Laurentic's* bones, was in itself a substantial prize.

But where was the rest of that gold? It wasn't inside the shell, so all Damant and his divers could do when they came back for their seventh year's struggle with the *Laurentic,* was to start digging beneath the shell plating into the clay bottom of the sea beneath.

So down on the shell plating went the divers again, ten feet now below the level of the adjacent sea floor, fighting to hold back the inflowing flood of sand the while they probed every tear and hole in the steel carpeting the bottom, for ingots beneath. Once in a while they found one, and whenever a diver came to a gap large enough to let him slide through, he started to excavate underneath, with the surprising result that some ingots were discovered under the shell several feet away from the opening through which they had fallen.

The only possible explanation of this phenomenon was that in the years that had gone by since the gold fell through the holes, the entire shell plating of the wreck must have slipped a few feet, covering the ingots.

Excavating wholesale beneath the shell to recover the lost bars was both slow and dangerous, so Damant decided instead to cut the last layer of the *Laurentic's* bottom up piecemeal, searching the uncovered ocean floor beneath as he went along.

With explosive charges in long strings to do the cutting, the thick steel skin of the *Laurentic* was taken apart plate by plate and the sea floor beneath carefully combed, till an area of over 2000 square feet had been thus searched. The result of months of this was that one hundred twenty-nine out of the last one hundred fifty-four bars were found buried in the clay when winter finally came to end the search in 1924, leaving only twenty-five bars out of the 3211 which eight years before had gone down in the *Laurentic* still missing.

Where to look for those last twenty-five bars no one could tell, but with 99.2% of all the gold recovered, it appeared that searching another year for the few remaining ingots would not repay the cost of holding back the sand. Accordingly, in the autumn of 1924 the job was concluded, eight years after it had started and with seven years actually spent in salvage. The total cost of the work was between 2 and 3% of the bullion recovered.

The recovery of that $24,800,000 in gold from the *Laurentic* stands unique in salvage annals. Over five thousand dives were made and a large ocean liner was cut to pieces by divers from top to bottom under the worst working conditions imaginable.

Work has been done before and since at greater depths, but no recovery job approaching in magnitude and difficulty the *Laurentic* salvage has even been attempted. That no diver was killed nor any even permanently injured, is a tribute to the technical skill with which Damant managed his job, and that such a heartbreaking task was ever successful in the face of practically insuperable obstacles is due only to the extraordinary leadership both on deck and under the sea exhibited by Commander (now Captain) G.C.C. Damant, R.N.

Then he heard the jib blow out. . . .

BOUND FOR JUCARO

By LEW DIETZ

THE firing began again just before sundown. A rifle pecked somewhere. A machine-gun started stuttering from a roof-top across the square. There was a shrill of whistles, a rattling of sabers and a squad of ragged police came clattering out of an alley and went dashing down the *avenida.*

The skipper, coming down the quay, neither changed his stride nor lifted his head. He was scarcely aware of the roar about him. His shapeless sea cap low on his jutting nose, hands deep in the pockets of his grimy jacket, he strode across under the overhanging balconies and down towards the *Cafe Gracias a Dios.*

It took the aching glare from his eyes, but the heat still pressed down upon him like a hot steamy blanket. All that day the sun had poured down upon the cobbled streets of Porto Largos. There would be no respite that night. Even the light breeze that would come off the Caribbean when the sun went down

would be hot as a spent dog's breath.

But he wasn't going to be here that night. The skipper had made up his mind to that.

He stepped out of the glare and into the doorway of the café, into darkness and the dank smell of stale beer. Presently he saw Twinkletoes, the bartender, looking at him across the bar, showing his bad teeth.

"So the black boy found you, eh skipper?"

"He found me," the skipper said. He went over to the bar and leaning his great frame against it, shoved his hat a little off his eyes. "Well, rummy. . . ?"

Twinkletoes went on smiling. He reached down and fetched up a bottle. "Drink, skipper? On the house."

"When I want a drink I'll pay for it. What's on your mind?"

Twinkletoes shrugged and slapped the cork back in the bottle. "Have it your way, skipper. Have it your way. If a guy don't want to be sociable, it's no skin off my nose."

Something let loose again outside. A Tommy gun began spattering. A few bottles on the shelf over the mirror shattered. Twinkletoes shook his head and began mopping off the bar with a dirty rag.

"No, sir, it ain't no skin off my nose. 'Course, if the skipper don't think I'm good enough to do a bit of business with, it's all right with me too. Maybe the skipper just don't like the way I smell."

"Maybe I don't," the skipper said. "If you've heard of a ship, I'll talk business. If you haven't, just say so and I'll be on my way."

"Oh, just like that."

"That's right. Just like that."

"And maybe when I tell you what I got in mind you're goin' to be choosey. Maybe you'll tell me how you used to be master of one of them damned floatin' hotels before you came upon evil days."

The skipper didn't move, but his back stiffened and his loose jacket grew suddenly tight at the shoulder. The firing had died off momentarily and there was only the low whir of the fan over the bar, the buzz of a fly trapped in a half-empty beer glass.

TWINKLETOES had backed off slightly. Then he was grinning again. "Okay, skipper, okay. Keep your shirt on. If you meant it when you said you'd take anything, you just got to say so. Never see anything like you down east skippers for touchiness—"

The skipper had straightened up, his eyes gone suddenly cold. "I'll give you another minute to start talking, rummy."

"Sure, skipper, sure. Take it easy. I didn't mean nothin' personal. It's just that I figured you for a down east Yankee when I first seen you about. When you been around like me they're as easy to spot as a Hog Islander. They walk different, they talk different, and they act like the ocean was made for them—Now don't get me wrong; I'm not sayin' it ain't—"

"Are you going to talk, rummy?"

"That's just what I'm comin' to, skipper. When I heard of this little job, I think of you right off. Never too much trouble to keep an eye and ear open for a friend. When this little spik come to me—"

Twinkletoes hesitated and looked at the skipper again. "—You were givin' it to me straight. You'll take anything out, no matter?"

"You heard what I said."

"Sure and that's what I told him. I said this bloke's a sailor. I said hurricane season don't mean anything to one of them down east—"

"Never mind that."

"Okay, okay. I just tell him I got just the man. But I says, 'This ain't no ordinary broken-down beach bum an' it's goin' to cost *dinero*. Now let's talk mazuma,' I says—"

"I'm not interested in what you said. Where can I find him?"

Twinkletoes was looking sly again. "I'm comin' to that, skipper. Not that I don't trust you. You down east Yanks will kick a guy down the companion as soon as look at 'em, but you're honest. I know I'll get treated right, skipper. But just to keep it sort of businesslike, let's say fifty fifty. Share and share alike, that's the ticket, eh, skip?"

"You'll get it, rummy."

Twinkletoes wiped his hand on his greasy apron and jerked his head towards the back room. "Speaks good English, so don't let him act spik-dumb. Cash in advance, mind you, American. And I get treated right, eh, skipper?"

The skipper had turned off. He moved back and through the beaded curtains into the rear room. There was a small brown boy standing there. His bare feet stuck out from a pair of sleazy duck trousers and his coat was too big for him. He looked very young and very frightened.

The skipper said, "You want to see me?"

The boy nodded quickly. "You sail boat? Very small boat with sails?"

"I sail any damn thing that floats."

"This boat no engine. Only sails. Okay?"

"You heard what I said. When do you want to sail?"

"Tonight. We go to Jucaro. You take? Okay?"

He was taking her all right. He was taking anything that floated. But he asked perfunctorily, "What is it, Chinese?"

The boy shook his head violently.

"Somebody running out on the revolution?"

The boy didn't answer.

The skipper shrugged. "Let it go. What's her name and where is she?"

"*Ladybird,*" the boy said. "I come for you here." Then, suddenly puzzled, he said, "How much, no? Two hundred American money okay?"

"A hundred's okay. Toss it to the weasel in there. And I'm ready now."

HE LAY there deep in the weeds in the brief coppery twilight. The night closed down and overhead a few stars broke out blinking and unsteady. The firing had died off from the direction of the town, but back in the hills a rifle kept cracking away. Somewhere near by a tree toad went on and on. Lying there he felt no regret for the decision he had made. And once he got her out, something told him it was going to be too late to change his mind if he wanted to. These past days had been weather breeders. Jucaro was four hundred fifty miles across open sea. Not even the sun could burn out of him the instinct he'd been born with.

Then he heard the harsh grating of a skiff on the pebbly beach and the boy came poking through the weeds and beckoned.

The boy didn't speak as he rowed him out across the black water. The skipper had no questions to ask. He might have asked what sort of a boat the *Ladybird* was, but he didn't bother. He didn't care really.

Then they slid out from under the stern of a rusty old tramp and he saw her.

He might have laughed. There was rather a bitter humor in it. She was small right enough, hardly more than a toy. She was a yawl rigged double-ender, something under sixty feet over all. She loomed just ahead, her naked masts barely discernible against the dark growth of the opposite shore, looking for all the world as though her anchor chain was holding her up.

The skipper didn't laugh. You don't laugh at your last command. He'd been right about one thing. Once he got her out his decision was sealed. From the looks of her she had less than an even chance in a mill pond.

The skiff banged alongside and a figure appeared in the companion. It was a small dark man in a plumed hat and a sword. He said something to the boy in Spanish.

The boy spoke to the skipper. "The general says we sail at once."

The skipper nodded. "We'll wait till the tide swings. We're going to need it. But you can set the skiff adrift; we're not going to need that."

The general disappeared below and the skipper stepped aboard. He stood there for a moment shaking his head. The starlight had flattered her if that was possible. *Ladybird!* A fish monger's wife after an all night drunk would look infinitely more respectable. Her littered decks were scarred and battered. Scaly paint hung from her deckhouse, and great slivers had been sliced from her masts as though by an ax blow. She'd been a good little craft once, but no

more. Like a lady of the evening, her history was written on her face.

Then he saw the crude words cut into her hatch cover. *Né Pour Souffrir.* The self pity plaint of a French penal convict. The *Ladybird* hadn't missed much in her degradation. And he guessed that her cabin smelled of smuggled Chinamen. She had run rum too, no doubt, and arms. Every crime in the book from arson to piracy had been committed on her. And for an instant anger smouldered deep in him. But it was only for an instant. He shrugged and set to work.

HE TOOK her out that night when the tide swung. With the help of the boy whose name was Ricardo he set the patched mainsail and broke out her hook. Lights dark, he eased her out in a light wind on an easy reach for the headland. The boy Ricardo lay flat on his stomach, his eyes scanning the dark line of the shore.

A long rolling swell met them just under the headland. He broke out all the sail she carried and put the boy to dousing the canvas to hold the meagre breeze. It was still oppressively hot. What wind there was blew from the southeast, hot and lifeless.

But the skipper felt a curious sense of peace. It was good to be sailing out again, sailing into nowhere free from the past, free from the future. He lay back against the tiller and gazed aloft along the slender mainmast. The stars fled across the sky as the *Ladybird* took the long swell. They came rushing back like a school of silver fish in still water.

And looking back now it was almost as though it were someone else chained to that past. A past that was more than his brief life, more than his father's. A past that kept going back and back, indivisible as a forged chain, to the first Harnett who laid a keel, to the first Harnett to take a ship out through the islands to the sea.

For six generations the Harnetts had built fine ships, had bred good sailors to sail them. Harnett ships, with Harnetts at the helm, had been known and respected from Horn to Horn. They had built great clippers that had shown a heel to anything afloat, small bankers no bigger than the *Ladybird* from good Maine oak that grew right down to the water's edge. And with the end of wooden ships they had built in steel. Not great ships any more, perhaps, but good ships. The Harnetts had never built a bad ship. They had never bred a bad sailor. Never but once.

There was only Cameron Harnett, who took a Harnett tanker and sent her with a full head of steam on the rocks off the Colorados. The skipper was remembering that night he'd lost his first command; he could never forget that hideous scream as her boilers let go. She had screamed like a fire-crazed stallion as she went down with her head in the sky.

Sighting aloft, the skipper noted that the wind had backed a point more to the eastward. He brought the *Ladybird* off a little and once more accommodated his back to the tiller. The swell had increased. The *Ladybird* slapped a bit now and again as she took the quartering seas. It was still oppressively hot.

The little general appeared and stood at the companion a moment. He still wore his plumed hat, but he had unbuckled his great sword and left it below. After a while he moved over and stepped into the cockpit.

He bowed a little. "I am General Moyas of the Army of the Liberation."

The skipper nodded. He didn't bother to look up. "Glad to know you, General."

The general bowed once more and sat down. He sat down, wincing a little from clenched teeth. The skipper looked at him then. In the light from the binnicle he looked very pale and very, very weary. There was a bulge of a bandage just below his shoulder and a stain was coming through.

"You wonder perhaps," the general said in careful English, "why we go to Jucaro?"

The skipper hadn't wondered. "You hired me to sail, General."

"True. But it makes little difference now. I much fear I shall never see Jucaro."

The skipper didn't think the general would ever see Jucaro either. But he didn't say anything.

"It is too bad," the general said. "It is too bad. It is too bad I shall never get to Jucaro. It is too bad that sometimes one's best is not good enough. I should like to try once more. I should have liked so very much to get to Jucaro."

"You have friends in Jucaro?" the skipper asked. He didn't really care.

It was so long before the general spoke that the skipper thought he hadn't heard him. But at last he said. "Jucaro is just a place to start back from. Yes, there are friends there, friends of our cause who believe the land belongs to the people—my people. My people who are taxed for even the windows in their hovels, so that a tyrant may keep an army that in turn shoots them down in the streets when they ask for justice. It seems useless, of course, to fight. The army is always too strong. But I would like to try just once again."

There was a great bulging swell coming out of the east now. The wind was freshening a little, bellying the canvas. The skipper didn't say anything. He didn't say that there had been a time when he felt that way too. He had struggled ten hours in a black immensity of water to keep afloat. He wouldn't make that mistake again.

Presently the little general rose and made his way forward along the canting deck. Supporting himself on the shrouds he turned and looked back to the dim line of the receding shore. He stood there for a long time like that. Then he came aft again and stood there in the companionway. In the light that seeped up from the cabin he looked very small and a little ridiculous in his plumed hat. Then he turned and looked shoreward again and the skipper saw that he'd been crying, though he had made no sound.

"*Buenas noches,*" he said. But he didn't seem to be talking to the skipper. Then he was gone.

THE wind had freshened perceptibly. The *Ladybird* was rolling heavily over a swell as smooth as an oil slick. There was a new aspect to the sky. The horizon ahead was smudged and light cirrous haze veiled the great bowl of the heavens. Forward somewhere a loose block began banging with a monotonous rhythm.

There was no mistake about it now. He knew the overture. He also knew he should be shortening canvas. He should be plotting his position, working out the curve of the track, the probable bearing of the center of a swiftly approaching hurricane.

Only there wasn't going to be any fight this time. The sooner it came, the sooner it would be over and done with. Nor would he struggle when the *Ladybird* broke up under him. That night a year ago he'd fought because he hadn't known quite what else to do. It just seemed that you had to fight. Even with your future, your ship and twenty-three men under you in fifty fathoms, it just seemed you had to fight.

But a lot can happen to a man in a year. A lot can happen when a man is torn up by the roots from his soil and left to rot in the sun. It had been unthinkable to go back. Skippers were only allowed one mistake like his; there was no place for him. Without a name, without papers, there aren't many decent ways for a sailor to keep afloat in the Caribbean. One humiliation leads to another. A man can be tossed into the street too many times. It may be months or years, perhaps, but there is always the time you lie there in the sun.

He hated that sun. He hated the glare of white walls, white houses. He hated the lush profusion that springs up overnight. He hated the harsh light against harsh shadow, the violence of night and day without twilight, the jarring clash of tropic color that neither mixes nor jells. He was free of it now. Free from everything.

The pitching of the boat had awakened the boy Ricardo. He sat up rubbing his eyes and looked around the horizon. The *Ladybird* was roaring along now with her lee rail down, straining under all her canvas.

The boy looked questioningly at the skipper.

"Bad?" he asked.

The skipper nodded. "Bad."

"I will tell the general," the boy said, scrambling to his feet.

The skipper shrugged and let him go. He didn't suppose it would do any good to tell him that there was nothing the general could do about this. Even a younger, sounder craft would have less than an even chance. The *Ladybird* was beaten before she started. Like him, she had been out in the sun too long. The sun had burned the youth and fight out of her, the dry rot was into her vitals.

She was brittle and battered and tired; the first broaching sea would crumble her to kindling.

A sudden chill had come into the wind. Dead ahead, behind black low-hanging clouds, lightning began quivering fitfully. There was a new vibrant quality in the air. Lying over under her press of sail, the *Ladybird* commenced vibrating.

The skipper glanced at the barometer hanging from a rusty nail in the cockpit. He tapped it with his finger. He watched it quiver, fall off. It was a mechanical, meaningless gesture. He knew what was riding down upon them. And he knew it was no longer a matter of hours.

And sitting there against the straining tiller, hearing the moan of the wind aloft, he knew his heart was pounding.

THE drumming grew louder in his ears. Lightning flickered again; this time it encircled the horizon, unveiling for an instant the *Ladybird* boiling now with her flank and nose under; the boy Ricardo, standing there in the companion white and frightened.

Still the skipper sat there, gripping the tiller now, his eyes straight ahead. His jaw was set like granite, but just behind his jawbone there was a small movement under his skin like the pulsating of a fish gill. The *Ladybird* took a thudding load of sea on her nose. The skipper was shouting,

"I tell you it won't make any difference. It won't make any difference, I tell you! Take this tiller, you little brown beggar!"

So the boy grabbed the tiller. He took the wind out of her while the skipper fought with the mainsail. The deck was heaving and awash and the canvas flogged like frenzied devils as it came down. But he got it furled. He dropped the staysail and mizzen. He hove to under trysail and jib.

Barely had the last gasket been lashed when it struck. The binnacle lamp went out and blackness crashed down over and about them with a sudden violence. It seemed to explode all about them with a staggering concussion. There was nothing in that first instant but solid water in a roaring black void.

The skipper never knew how the *Ladybird* shook off that first stunning onslaught. For a moment he wasn't at all sure that she had. Then he felt the pressure of deck under him and found himself with the tiller in his hands. Then the lightning flashed again and he saw the boy Ricardo flat on his face, clinging to the deckhouse coaming.

He roared. "Get yourself below! Get below, I tell you!"

But he couldn't hear his own voice above the wind. The boy looked at him helplessly and the skipper motioned with his arm. After a while the boy seemed to understand.

He never knew how the boy got below. For then the rain came. It might have been the solid sea over him, except that some water was fresh to the taste. The lightning was almost incessant now, revealing snatch-visions of the *Ladybird's* buried nose, the jib taut as a drum, and all around great shouldering white-streaked seas hurling by.

It wouldn't be long. Anyone of those seas catching them broadside would batter her to matchwood in a flash. Something had to go soon!

It was then that he heard the jib blow out. It went out with a crack like a rifle shot. The trysail would go next. Double reefed as it was, the *Ladybird* couldn't carry it much longer. Once her nose got into the wind it would come a-shiver and blow out like tissue paper.

It would happen then. She would lie over broadside to the seas. In one swift instant her brittle timber would be pounded into tinder. There was no more future for the *Ladybird*. She, like the general, like himself, was through with battles. And this was a decent end for

her. Far better than lying down somewhere in the sun, falling apart until there was nothing but her bleached ribs in the mud.

The skipper put his whole weight against the straining tiller. The wind had redoubled its force. There was something unholy in the shrieking aloft, something personal and avenging about the pounding water. But the *Ladybird* lunged on. She seemed for whole moments to be lifted clear out of the sea, held in air with a tremble in her. Then a long, sickening plunge and the sea took her again and thundered over her length.

The skipper heard himself roaring, "She can't take much more, I tell you. Something's got to go!"

IT WAS the rotten mizzenmast that went next. The *Ladybird* went over on her flank and struggled back as a double wave took her. A low rippling crack and the mast came down. The skipper saw it come. He lay far to the windward as the butt came past his head and crashed over the deckhouse. In a tangle of rigging he fought erect, still grasping the tiller.

He saw the boy Ricardo in the companionway. The boy just stood there looking out at him, white showing in his eyes.

"She's breaking up!" he bellowed. The boy didn't hear him. The skipper went on yelling. But he wasn't yelling at the boy any more. He was yelling into the wind, and cutting himself free of halliards with a knife from his pocket.

He was cutting free of his thralls. He was lashing the tiller amidships. From below came the clatter of splintering crockery as the *Ladybird* went over. Stripped of her last stitch of sail, she went broadside to the sea, the full force of wind flattening her. But she hung there, fighting to get her keel under her.

The skipper was bellowing: "You want to get to Jucaro? You're bound for Jucaro, eh! And what for! You fish monger's wife—what for, I say? It's just another place to rot, I tell you!"

But as he hung to the sheering deck, cutting his way clear, he was thinking swiftly, coolly. Clear her deck, that was the first job. He was thinking of the one slim chance she had now. She had to get her nose back into the wind. He had to rig up that splintered mast and boom. Rigged as a sea anchor, it might give enough drag to hold her head in.

He was working his way forward, yelling to the boy Ricardo, who neither heard nor understood. The skipper squirmed over and was yelling into the boy's ear, "An ax. Get an ax, you brown beggar. We've got to cut that mast free. Ax, you get it—*hacha*."

The boy seemed to understand; he dropped back into the cabin. Water was knee-deep below, slopping over the lee bunk. He could see the little general in the light of the swinging lamp. The boy had lashed him to the bunk. He lay very still, a glaze over his half-opened eyes.

The boy returned with a small hatchet and they set to work. He lashed the boy to the capstan and set him to work on the mast. The skipper started working his way forward. His progress was checked every few feet as a white flash of sea loomed high overhead. He clung face down on the deck as the wave struck and thundered in a smother over him.

There was rope there in the forward locker, something over forty fathoms and a few lengths of spare chain. The boy had the mast cleared now. They set to work rigging and lashing. He saw that the sea was practically under him now. The *Ladybird* was over at a thirty degree list, shaking with the pressure of wind on her flank and bottom. There was something wrong with his arm. He began using his teeth to draw up his hitches. His swollen eyes weren't much good any more. But the skipper went on working. He went on roaring into the wind:

"Bound for Jucaro, eh? Taking your dry, splintered bones to Jucaro! So you don't know when you've had enough! With sharks over your mainmast, you'd still kick up a fuss!"

They got the thing off somehow. They got it off the rail and the skipper, flat on his face, played out his rope as the seas swept it off into the darkness. With a turn about the capstan, it went tearing

through his hands, burning the flesh. He played out his forty fathoms and made it fast. It snubbed up, straining every fiber. It held. Nothing happened for a while. It seemed nothing would happen. Then the *Ladybird,* feeling the drag, began slowly, almost imperceptibly, to nose into the wind.

THE skipper nodded to the boy and sent him below. He wiped his bleeding hands across his shirt and tested the tiller lashing. The dawn was coming. A gray light was creeping out of the east, crawling out over the desolation. It was then that he found that his left arm was broken above the wrist. He wrung the salt from his eyes and started easing himself down the companion.

Halfway down the skipper stopped. He looked at the boy's face down on the sodden bunk, where he had fallen from exhaustion. The general lay lashed in the windward bunk, mumbling fierce jumbled words in Spanish, his plumed hat by his side. His eyes were open but the skipper knew he wasn't seeing him. He was on a white horse somewhere, the skipper knew, at full charge with his sword flashing in the sun.

Then the general's voice died away. All at once he was very still.

The skipper eased himself painfully down another step. He stopped again. The lamp swayed crazily overhead, throwing a flickering yellow light over the plaque on the bulkhead. He reached out, rubbing at the green corrosion. He could read it plainly now.

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1896

The skipper stood there, his head above the hatch, his good arm braced against the list and pitch of the boat. He was hearing the thud of boarding seas, the falsetto shriek of the wind aloft. He saw the *Ladybird,* her one mast thrust skyward, her scarred deck looted and torn, bury her nose and stumble up.

He saw that the wind had backed deeper in the eastward. It would fall off in an hour. Then it would come snarling back again out of the west.

"We've got a fight still ahead," the skipper said. "A man-sized fight. But I figure to take you in. Jucaro is as good a place as any to start back from."

"I am careful not to interfere with things that don't concern me."

THE FOLLY OF MOHAMMED SLEMAN

By S. L. BENSUSAN

MOHAMMED SLEMAN looked up from his table in the corner of the little restaurant when the pedler saluted him in the Arabic of the Maghreb.

"You speak my language," he replied civilly, "but how comes it?"

"I have carried my pack in years past from Tangier of the Christians to Marrakesh," explained the pedler. I know El Araish and Casablanca, Rabat and Fez. I have here in my basket many beautiful things." He lifted the lid and displayed bright silk scarves, knives,

scissors, imitation jewelry, rolled gold watch chains, watches, cuff-links.

The Moorish soldier looked at the gaudy attractions with sparkling eyes.

"It has pleased Allah the One," he whispered, "to make me a poor man. If I were rich I would buy all these things. If I had power, if I were a Basha, I would take them from you. But all I have saved is forty francs, and it is not easy to add ten in a month after I have been here to eat *causcous*. We have none in camp—may Allah burn the cook!"

"It is nothing to me that you are poor," said the trader. "Give me ten of your francs now and give me ten every month and you shall have this watch at once."

"You are mocking me!" cried Mohammed Sleman, bewildered by the offer.

"I am a man of one word," replied the pedler, using the Arabic idiom to tell of his honesty. "Tell me your name, your number, your company and your captain. Put your name to this piece of paper, if you can write," he added doubtfully.

"I can read and write," replied the Moor proudly. "When I was a baby in Marrakesh my father was killed fighting. My mother could not support my brother and me and the missionaries took us. They were infidels; they will burn in the pit; they were mad, but they were kind. We had enough to eat, we were not beaten, they taught us to read and to write, but Allah had darkened their minds. They welcomed the sick, they wrought many cures, but they read to men and women out of a book that was not the Koran. Devils must have written it."

The pedler, preparing his paper, listened carefully, as though with a real interest. Mohammed Sleman signed his name, using Arabic letters. He took the watch and listened attentively to learn how it was to be wound, paid his ten francs and went back to barracks, the proudest man in all his company.

The men from French Morocco were working on fortifications and carrying heavy burdens under the blazing southern sun.

They were poorly paid, ill-fed and housed, but happy because nearly all had known far worse conditions of life.

The older men remembered the Kaids who would "eat up" a village that could not pay taxes levied quite arbitrarily. In case of resistance the men would be killed, the women carried off. All veterans could tell stories of a tyranny that was now an ugly memory. Here in the army they were hard worked but not ill-treated; and by nights they enjoyed leisure, playing on their gimbris and ghaitas and singing the songs of their native land. Their non-commissioned officers were Moors, so that no tyranny was alien.

But although surrounded by his countrymen, Mohammed Sleman hid the watch; he would not put temptation in their way. He wound it secretly and only looked at the time when he was unobserved.

When the novelty of possession had worn thin and his fourth installment was paid he ventured a little protest.

"The watch is old and the money is new," he said. "If we were back in the Maghreb I would cut your throat and end this matter. It is not that I am angry; it is that I am tired. In this country the strong men do not take, and the meek do not keep silent. It is a crazy world. The curse of Allah upon all Unbelievers," he added mechanically, just as one might say "Here's luck," or "See you soon." Happily the pedler knew all about the forms of Moorish speech and was in nowise hurt.

"It is tiresome to keep up payments," he admitted, "but it is ordained. Do not think about it. Think only of the way the watch speaks faithfully and tells how the hours pass from the morning when you start off to the evenings when you play and sing. It must be hard work. Perhaps you are tired when all is over."

"I do not tire," replied Mohammed Sleman proudly. "I have great strength. I can move heavy stones, break the hillside with my pick. There are some who cannot work under the ground, some who cannot be trusted to find their way, but I know all the twists and turns. For me there are no fears, because I was taught to draw and have made myself a map of all the underground workings. Moreover, I have not

seen one djinn, though Abdullah the Riffian and Cassim of Fez each said they saw one. They were punished."

"Punished for seeing the djinni?" queried the pedler.

"The captain said he punished them for lying," explained the soldier. "He has neither faith nor fear."

"Are the underground works so long and so deep?" enquired the pedler and the soldier grinned, showing his white teeth with all the lavishness of a film star.

"Nothing can touch them," he declared. "The devil guns will rise up from them and sink down again when they have finished killing. The soldiers will see without eyes. Never was such devilry known."

"Have you seen much?" asked the pedler, quite interested now.

"More than any of my company, because I am strong and not afraid," explained the soldier boastfully. "Sometimes when I walk along the road and look at the hill I can tell where the workings are and where the guns will speak and kill folk. I have plans in my head; I can draw lines on paper, tunnels, slopes, levels. The captain once told me I might have been an engineer. But I do not mind. To have been that, I must have been an infidel. Now the time will come when I shall lie in an orchard by a flowing river. Many houris will be mine and I shall see the captain burning in hellfire."

"I have been very interested, Mohammed," said the pedler. "I will pay for the couscous today and we will meet next month." The Moor stared hard. "It may be," he said, "that Allah in His mercy will save you from the pit. We come from Him—we go to Him; He is all powerful."

"No doubt," agreed the pedler, as they rose together and went their different ways.

THREE more months had sped and the monthly meetings between Mohammed Sleman and M. André had not been interrupted. They met in the same little café restaurant where the café was open to the mountain road, the restaurant hidden in the garden at the back. The small room could hold a score of people and allow four pairs the luxury of an alcove where none save the discreet proprietress was likely to intrude.

As a regular patron of the house M. André favored privacy. Whether his companion was a blond lady who answered to the name of Mathilde, or a lean commercial traveler, or the Moorish soldier, Madame Lavigne had discrimination; she saw that nobody spoiled a *tête-a-tête*.

M. André had taken a liking to the brawny young Moroccan, who no longer regretted that he could not quit his debt by means of cutting a throat.

He, too, was very well satsified. Although he paid no more than his ten francs and had his receipt, there was always couscous or pilaf with a glass of raki or mahia to follow. Then the little red-haired pedler with the strange blue eyes that could laugh or threaten would encourage him to tell all the details of his daily life: the drill, the marching route, the bayonet exercises and the work on the subterranean fortifications.

He was not quick-witted. He could not understand those curious constructions of galleries and stairways and gun emplacements, but Mohammed Sleman was infinitely patient and would trace them in wine on the metalled table, laughing at his puzzled friend. He even brought a gimbri and showed how it should be handled, but the pedler's fingers were all thumbs.

"The time has come," said the Moor one evening, "to add a chain to my watch. Lo, you said I must pay for ten moons and eight have gone. If you could trust me before, you can trust me now. Therefore, O Father of Trinkets, give me my choice."

"When we meet next time," said the pedler, "I will bring a chain fit for a Kaid Erha."

"I am your slave," cried Mohammed Sleman. "All that I possess is yours."

THE fierce summer heat had passed from the land. The Café of the Heart's Desire enjoyed little casual custom now. But there were always a few non-

descripts in the restaurant and M. André was a weekly visitor who never dined alone.

When Mohammed Sleman arrived Madame Lavigne beckoned him to the alcove by the side of the kitchen with a wintry smile of welcome; she disliked men of his race.

This alcove was better screened than any of the others; it had a small door through which one could reach the road without going through restaurant and café.

M. André was waiting, and when the Moor arrived Mme. Lavigne brought in a very large dish of pilaf and a mass of stewed vegetables.

"In the Country of the True Faith," said Mohammed, regarding the table suspiciously, "there is nothing of this deviltry of knives and forks and spoons. Here men cut bread with a knife."

"Why not?" demanded the pedler indulgently, rousing himself from his deep thought.

"A knife is used to kill," explained the Moor. "Bread is our life. Only infidels would take a knife to it. Curse their religion."

So saying, he broke the loaf with his hands.

The meal over, M. André produced a sheet of paper and two pencils from one pocket and from another a silver gilt watch chain. The Moor was instantly excited.

"Write me your paper and I will sign!" he cried.

"There is no need," explained the pedler. "When I went home last I told my wife how I had met a man from Morocco who could describe anything he had seen and could draw the underground forts he has been working on. And she said, 'Draw them for me, because they seem marvelous.' I tried, Mohammed, and I failed."

"Of course," said Mohammed Sleman contentedly. "Allah has not given you eyes like mine, O Father of Trinkets." M. André bowed his confession of inferiority.

"She would not be satisfied," he went on. "'I must see these works,' she told me, and I said that they would not show them to her, since she is a woman and women are not allowed in the fort. Then she said, 'Ask your friend to draw them for me,' and I said, 'How shall I ask him for this work?'

"'Give him a reward,' she told me, and then I thought of the chain. Draw the plan for my wife, Mohammed, and I will give you the chain in payment."

"Quick with the paper and the pencils," whispered the Moor, "and leave me, Father of Trinkets. I would work alone."

"I will stroll along to the road," said M. André, "and come back in half an hour. But take care, Mohammed, that no man sees or hears. This secret is yours and mine and my wife's." He opened the door and stood for a moment on the threshold, musing deeply.

The blond woman was unreliable; she drank and used drugs—not badly yet, but once on that road decline was swift. Her memory was failing, and the officer who had been so lavish no longer trusted her. Still she had done him one great service when she repeated what her lover told her about a remarkable Moor who could see in the dark and grasp engineering problems, and carry a design in his head. Without this he would never have found Mohammed Sleman.

The Moor was a gift. He cost nothing, thought of nothing save his own cleverness. The lights were out in the café and in the open restaurant, but there was a full hour before Mohammed must take the road and he could move along at a great pace. Fifteen, twenty, twenty-five, thirty minutes passed before M. André opened the door again.

"Here is the sketch for your house," cried Mohammed gayly. "Now give me my chain." The gifts changed hands, and suddenly the Moor stood alert.

"Listen," he whispered. "The patrol."

M. André's strained ears told him nothing.

"There are five men nearly two kilometers away," the Moor continued. "Is aught wrong, O Father of Trinkets?"

"Get back to barracks across the hills, Mohammed." M. André had lowered his voice too. "Do not show the chain. Do not say you were here tonight. Do not say you have seen me. I have enemies. Good night."

A MOMENT later the Moor had vanished. M. André slipped into the kitchen, where Mme. Lavigne was supping alone.

"*Vite*," was all he said and disappeared. In less than five minutes the café restaurant of the Heart's Desire gave every appearance of being closed for the night: in ten mintues the patrol halted.

The sergeant in charge came to the door and asked questions. Mme. Lavigne described her visitors; she must have forgotten the Moor and the pedler.

"Have you seen the little red-haired pedler?" demanded the sergeant.

"He was here a week ago tonight," replied Mme. Lavigne truthfully. "He said he was going away to replenish his stock."

"What do you know of him?"

"He eats, drinks and pays," replied Mme. Lavigne without any trace of concern. "Sometimes he comes alone, sometimes he brings a lady. I am careful not to interfere with things that don't concern me."

"The room at the top of this house looks to the hills," said the sergeant. "If you have a lamp given to you, would you set it in the window when he calls next? Soldiers come here. If you were to refuse to help us your café might be put out of bounds."

"I understand your threat," replied Mme. Lavigne bitterly. "But when my little Marie was ill he brought toys in his pack and I should be sorry to see him in trouble."

"He has to be questioned," said the sergeant. "If he can answer satisfactorily all will be well. We expected to find him here tonight. You will have the lamp tomorrow." He turned to the Moor and presently the patrol marched towards the hill.

From her veranda Mme. Lavigne listened to the diminishing footfalls. Then she went to the garden, by the well, and thrust an iron handle into a socket. Two or three turns of the handle raised the cover of the well, revealing steps that led to the water.

M. André was standing on these, his head just below the ground level.

"You've not too much time," she said. "You will find food and a bottle of wine in here," and she handed him a satchel.

"My bicycle is in the hut with my pack," he said. "I can get there within the hour. I'll keep to the tall grass as much as possible. How lucky that our ass from the Maghreb has such long ears."

WHEN his next leave day came round M. André was nowhere in the Café of the Heart's Desire and Mohammed Sleman paid for his dish of couscous and his glass of mahia. When the second month had passed, M. André was still invisible and there was a new landlady, short, dark-haired, black-eyed, red-cheeked, vivacious. But the couscous was not good.

"This couscous was made in Satan's kitchen," he declared angrily.

"I'm sorry," said the landlady. "I will give you a glass of mahia to make up for it." The glass was a large one, the date-cordial strong. The landlady sat in the alcove with him while he drank greedily.

"There was a little man with red hair," said Mohammed Sleman. "He came here month after month and paid for the couscous. Now he has gone. May his father's grave be defiled by dogs. Yet I called him friend and made drawings for his wife."

"He ought to have come back," said the landlady a moment later, as she went to the kitchen next the alcove and fetched the stone bottle of mahia. "So you can draw?" she said, refilling his glass.

"It is a *sheitanieh*,—(a piece of devil work)," said the Moor. "The missionaries taught me. Curse their religion. I drew him a plan for his house; she wanted to know all about the work on the hill."

"Could you carry all that in your head?" she went on. He leered at her, half drunk and very proud.

"A man is one thing," he said with drunken gravity. "The Father of Trinkets was my friend, but his house is nothing to me. I could not think of all these things in half an hour, but I made

him a pretty drawing of cellars and cannon and passages just as Allah put it in my mind. How should his wife know? O, Mother of Dainties, my head is heavy. The world runs round me. How shall I reach the barracks?"

"Stay here," she said. "I will speak for you to the sergeant and say you were ill. He is my friend."

"That is well," said Mohammed Sleman. "I will sleep. Call me in the hour of false dawn and I will get back over the barrack wall. But," he added, "I will not return here, lest I meet the Father of Trinkets and he ask me for ten francs again. Or it may be he will ask me for the chain. He has gone away; the matter is ended. If he seeks to rob me I will cut his throat. I—" Here sleep intervened.

IT WAS all past understanding, a long way past the understanding of Mohammed Sleman. Why had that woman not roused him? Why had he wakened from his long sleep in a prison cell? Why had the warder refused to answer questions? Why had he been summoned to a part of the barracks he had never seen before and questioned by a real officer about the red-bearded man?

There was a saying in his country—"If a questioner be too greedy fill him with lies." Remembering this, he had denied all knowledge of the man, denied that he had gone regularly to the Heart's Desire, declared that he had found the watch and the chain by the side of the road.

They took him away and brought him before five men, officers all, including the colonel. They had told him he was charged with betraying military secrets, but this meant nothing to him, and he persisted in his lies.

There was a young officer who spoke up for him, who begged him to confess all he knew; there was the black-eyed woman from the restaurant who had plied him with mahia. She told them all he had told her and more, and ended up by saying he had boasted that he could climb the barrack wall.

He could only declare that he had betrayed nothing and nobody; that he had been a hard worker and of good character. His sergeant spoke of him in friendliest fashion too, but very soon he understood that those five men had met to murder him because he, who knew nothing of their enemies, had been accused of selling information to them.

"It is all *sheitanieh!*" he cried to the five men. "Curse your religion!"

Then they took Mohammed Sleman back to the prison cell and gave him food and he threw himself down on a mattress and slept. In his dreams he saw the white-walled village of his birth, with its mosque and tower in which the pigeons and the hawks lived side by side. He saw the Zowia, the tomb of the village saint, and the well with the puddled trough to which the flocks came to drink.

He passed in his dream the mission school in Marrakesh and the date palm forest that ringed the great city round; he glimpsed the kaleidoscopic colors of the market. And then the cell door opened and two men entered.

"Time, Momhammed Sleman," said one. "Drink this and be brave." It was his corporal and "this" was steaming coffee with brandy.

"Rejoice, Mohammed," whispered the corporal in Arabic. "Yet a few minutes and you shall rest in Paradise in the garden of the river where the fruit trees are ever laden and the virgins are waiting for True Believers. The Prophet has said this."

Yes, he, Mohammed Sleman, was going to the reward granted to the Faithful. He would look down upon those who had brought him to his death when they were consigned to the unquenchable fire.

Dawn was breaking over the barracks. They had offered to bandage his eyes, but he had told them scornfully and truthfully that he was not afraid. There was an officer whose sword was drawn; there were half a dozen men who were not of his country—they were mere black Senegalese. He saw the first arrow of light shoot from the East and heard two sharp words of command.

"Instantaneous," said the man with the sword a moment later.

THE BLACK RATTLESNAKE

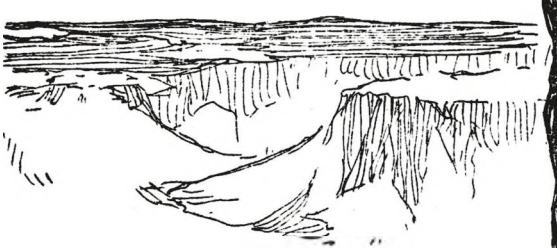
By MURRAY LEINSTER

PERHAPS it really was a personal matter between the mesa and the Indian. Rock Lizard, the Piute, certainly thought so. When he got down to level ground again he made sure that he was not under any slope from which a rolling stone could reach him, and then he turned and grinned triumphantly at the mesa. Then he went back and struck the mesa's monstrous stony base with his fist. His ancestors had counted coup on defeated enemies by just such blows, which entitled them to wear extra coup-feathers in their head-dresses. And Rock Lizard grinned as he counted coup upon the mesa.

Then he went back to town and sold the melanistic tropism of *crotalus terrificus* for twenty dollars, and bought the red velvet slippers that Lily Red Fawn wanted so badly, without reason.

Being a man as well as an Indian he told her all about it, and she was so proud of him that she wanted to go and spit on the mesa for a share in his triumph. But he did not let her do it. There are limits to the chances one can take.

It began with Lily Red Fawn, anyhow. For no reason whatever, she wanted a pair of red velvet slippers in a store window. She was mostly Shawnee and very fascinating, and Rock Lizard wanted her very much. And there was a professor out in the mesa country just then, who had a theory that a melanistic tropism should have survival value for



It faced him, cornered.

crotalus terrificus under the local conditions.

He offered twenty dollars for a specimen, to prove his point. Albino specimens, of course, are known, though rare. But he wanted a melanism—a black one. And Rock Lizard heard of the offer he made.

In his mind he translated twenty dollars into red velvet slippers, and the slippers into admiration and gratitude, and that into something else and something else again. He wound up imagining Lily Red Fawn as cooking his breakfasts. So he made his mind to go hunting.

That was the beginning of it all. Rock Lizard had no thought of personal enmity with the mesa. No man, to be sure, had ever climbed it, but if melanistic tropisms of *crotalus terrificus* existed, that was where they should be, where no man had ever been.

He set out for the mesa. It was twenty miles away. When he first sighted it, it looked forbidding, but he paid no attention. Nearby, it looked even ominous, but still he did not think of enmity. He reached its base, surveyed it with a professional air, and professionally commenced his climb.

He was a Piute, and his skin was the deep copper normal to his tribe. His hair was inky black and long and held in place by a fillet, and he wore shapeless trousers with fringes on the sides and a blue cotton shirt manufactured in Troy, New York. But he was not the impassive, emotionless Indian of tradition. No Piute is. Rock Lizard, even among his fellows, had a name for a cheerful recklessness. And he had been thinking of Lily Red Fawn as cooking his breakfasts and grinning at the thought.

HE CLIMBED up, and up, and up. One hundred feet. Two. Presently the going was harder. It became difficult even for him, and he had not gotten his name for nothing. Then he found climbing almost impossible. He continued to think of Lily Red Fawn and was insensitive to the gathering feel of hostility about him. To him, the mesa was a mass of rock on which he should find the thing he could trade for red velvet slippers.

He got up three hundred feet. Four. An ordinary Alpinist would have been baffled by the going Rock Lizard had already covered. But even Rock Lizard was finding things more and more difficult. He was not equipped for climbing, save for a stout stick like a broomstick with a wire loop in the end. And that was not for climbing but for the capture of his prey.

He was still quite confident. He was oblivious to any deepening of the atmosphere of threat the mesa had exhaled from the beginning. When a black thing slithered suddenly across his view and vanished on a narrow ledge that led over nothingness, he still did not think of enmity between the mesa and himself. He followed the black thing cheerfully. He was elated. It was red velvet slippers for Lily Red Fawn—when he captured it.

But there was enmity in the air and in the rocks. There was a sardonic malevolence in the mesa, which had never been climbed by man. Rock Lizard woke to it, presently. He heard rocks rolling. They made a deep, deep thunder and a roaring sound, and then they launched themselves into space and a long time later made detonations like cannon shots when they struck at the mesa's foot.

Rock Lizard stopped stock-still. He had already come a long way along the ledge his quarry had fled on. The ledge had narrowed and the cliffside had curved, so he could no longer see the place from which he had started. But he knew what had happened. Something had carried away the beginning of the ledge. He could not retrace his steps.

And then, quite suddenly, he felt the mesa's enmity. It was a feeling only. The sun shone down fiercely. He was pressed flat against the rock of the cliff. Above him was a hundred feet of seamed and fissured stone, with light-bleached sky and the brazen sun beyond. Below was sheer emptiness. Behind him was half a mile of vacancy to another stony cliff, and in between the air wavered visibly—seemed actually to writhe—from heat-waves.

There were other cliffs and other

mesas in view, but Rock Lizard could not really see them. He could not turn his head so far. He could see only the rock of the cliffside, the wall of the mesa; and that rock was sun-scorched and sun-rotted, with very many minute cracks in it, and with a surface which was powdery from the temperature changes of ten thousand years.

It was here that Rock Lizard felt the hatred of the mesa as if it were a tangible thing. He listened to the sounds which told of the destruction of his way of retreat, and they seemed to him like premonitory growls. But because he was Rock Lizard and had earned a name for cheerful recklessness, he merely grinned ruefully and shrugged his shoulders and went on. If his return was blocked, he would worry about it when he started back. Meanwhile the thing he had followed was on ahead.

The ledge, just here, was a foot in width. But sometimes it narrowed to inches. Sometimes it slanted up, and sometimes it slanted down with the foldings of the rock strata in the cliffside. Once it vanished altogether, but then it was a hollow place and handholds remained.

Rock Lizard managed to pass it. The passage of that particular place would have been hair-raising to an untrained eye. To an informed observer it would have been an impressive display of competence in the very rare accomplishment of cliff-climbing.

THE ledge reappeared and grew wider. It became a foot and a half wide. Rock Lizard stood still and breathed. He grinned with relief. He turned about and regarded the view from where he stood. Tumbled rocks and eroded precipices in glaring colors filled his eyes.

He was a speck, a mote, in an infinity of arid hillsides. Had there been a human being within view, it is unlikely that he could have picked out Rock Lizard against the mesa. But there was none. There would be none. Rock Lizard had come twenty miles, alone, to this place and there was nobody who had the least idea where he was. Nobody would even wonder.

He grinned ruefully to himself, thinking of the rock-fall he had heard a little while since. He made sure the wire-looped stick was in his belt. He felt the hot sun upon him. If every way off of this ledge was carried away, presently the sun would drive him mad, and he would leap or fall into the enormous vacancy before him. That was doubtless the intention of the mesa. Again he grinned ruefully.

He went on. The cliffside curved yet again, hiding what might be beyond. From below or from a distance, this swelling would appear to be one of the mighty buttresses which supported the mesa's table-top. But the ledge went around that buttress; now narrower, now almost practicable—and on it was wind-blown dust, and in the dust was a wavering, serpentine trail, like the scratching of a stick drawn by a small boy. But it was the trail of *crotalus terrificus*.

Rock Lizard followed that trail. The ledge was ten inches wide. It was six. It was three. Flat against the wall, Rock Lizard could not have passed the narrowest part but for the fact that here the cliff leaned inward.

It was, apparently, sardonic humor on the part of the mesa. A trick to lure him ever onward in the quest of red velvet slippers for Lily Red Fawn. Rock Lizard saw and could almost appreciate the jest.

Presently he saw a new section of the wall. Another buttress joined the one to which he clung. Where they joined there was a crack, an indentation like a groove in the vertical rock. Down it, possibly, came a stream on those rare occasions when there was more moisture on the mesa-top than the vegetation could absorb.

A boulder interrupted the ledge. It was probably stone of a harder sort than the stratum in which it was lodged. It stuck out nearly a yard above the dizzy drop beneath the ledge. Rock Lizard reached it. Carefully, methodically, he rested his weight on it while he searched for new handholds and crossed it. It was not until he was in the act of stepping off it that the boulder stirred a little. A very little. It moved perhaps

a twentieth of an inch. But Rock Lizard felt it.

He moved on—carefully, now, spread-eagled against the cliff. Presently he heard a tiny whispering noise. Then a very faint sound, like a roaring so far away it was barely audible. He looked back. He was in time to see pebbles falling from under the edge of the boulder he had just crossed. A minor dust-cloud appeared, arching down and splashing like a water-fall. A rock as big as his fist. One as big as his head detached itself and went growling and bouncing toward the ground.

Then, with a vast deliberation, the flat boulder tilted and slid and suddenly went down with a rush and a roar. There was a thunderous sound of rock-fragments torn loose by its passage following it into the chasm below. And above its socket rotted rock caved in, and other rock followed, and there was a deep growling and a continuous roaring, and then the detonations of things splintering themselves to atoms on the heap of detritus at the foot of the cliff.

It seemed to last for minutes. Actually, it was a briefer time. But when the swirling dust cleared away, there was a deep niche in the rounded buttress of the mesa where Rock Lizard had just passed. For thirty feet across, and two man-heights above his head and quite two yards in depth, the side of the mesa had caved in and dropped. Certainly he could never return across this!

ROCK LIZARD swung his head. He saw where the ledge ended finally, a hundred feet farther on. It pinched away to nothing; absolutely nothing, half a dozen feet short of the junction of the two buttresses. And the part of the ledge to which he was now confined was nowhere more than six inches wide.

Now the mesa was amused. Rock Lizard felt a sort of bitter triumph in the rock and the space about him. The mesa. No man had ever before climbed even this far. Now the mesa amused itself in contemplation of the man who clung fly-like to its side, without foothold to support him should he loose his hands.

The sun beat down fiercely. The rock absorbed the heat and gave it off again. Man and mesa alike envisioned unending hours, days, in which the man would cling terribly to that cliff while the sun dried out the juices of his body and the sanity from his brain. Until he fought sleep because his fingers would relax and let him fall dizzily through space. Until he longed for sleep because it would ease his torment. Until at the end he was crazed by visions of running streams and soft couches and tumbled clumsily to endless oblivion.

Man and mesa envisioned that much alike. But the man was called Rock Lizard, and he had climbed to this place for a pair of red velvet slippers for Lily Red Fawn. With but the slightest of effort, he could picture her in his mind. Cooking his breakfasts.

The wavering trail in the dust on the ledge went on. He shrugged deprecatingly and still followed that trail. The black thing could surely go no farther than he could follow. And besides, he could see where the two giant buttresses came together. But he was aware of the mesa's enmity now, and he must outwit it. He grinned more deprecatingly still. The feeling of sardonic spite about him was very plain to Rock Lizard.

The crack where the buttresses joined was a sort of vertical flue, a broken tube, a recess with nearly parallel walls which began far below and vanished far overhead. The ledge on the buttress did not reach it. It grew narrower and narrower as it neared the flue. Six feet away it ended.

Rock Lizard saw the flue. On the instant he had absorbed its meaning and all its dimensions. But since it ran vertically, its superiority to the ledge was not marked, save to Rock Lizard. He shrugged, to mislead the mesa, and turned his eyes down to the ledge. He still saw the trail he had followed. It swerved into a vertical crack perhaps an inch and a half across. It ended there.

THE very air seemed to quiver with sardonic laughter. Rock Lizard had climbed the mesa, or nearly had done so, and no man had ever climbed it before.

His purpose had been the capture of a melanistic tropism of *crotalus terrificus*. Not an albino, which are well-known, though rare. A melanistic one. A black one. He could exchange such a specimen for twenty dollars, and the twenty dollars for red velvet slippers for Lily Red Fawn.

Now the mesa presented him with just what he quested. But it was when he was imprisoned on a shelf or rock no more than a hundred feet long, nowhere more than half a foot wide, and a ghastly height above sharp rocks on which he must presently fall. Rock Lizard felt that the mesa considered it high, spiteful humor. He joined in the amusement, ruefully.

He held fast with one hand while he wriggled his stick from his belt. He held it between his teeth while he edged his way past the crack in which his quarry had taken refuge. He was then between it and the tapering-away of the ledge to nothingness.

He perched himself for an extra risk, clinging more firmly with his left hand. He took the stick from his mouth, holding it firmly in the middle. He bent, and thrust the butt end in the crack at which the wriggling trail ended.

The stick bumped against stone. He moved it and thrust again. And again. It touched something tough and resilient. An angry hiss came out. Rock Lizard nodded cheerfully. He thrust firmly; once, twice, three times. Then he slid his hand to the end of the stick and waited expectantly.

Something came pouring out and went writhing swiftly along the ledge away from him. It was long, nearly seven feet. There was a dry, rustling noise as it fled. It had many rattles. But it was dark, much darker than the norm for its species. It was practically black.

It vanished swiftly in the direction of the rock-slide. Rock Lizard grinned after it and began to follow. His progress was not as secure, now, because he held the wire-looped stick in his hand. But he moved steadily and he remembered each handhold. He moved fast.

He saw the snake at the edge of the recess the rock-slide had left—at the spot where the ledge was broken off sharply and the rock was actually undercut. Nothing could cross that place, not even a snake, not with that terrific fall below. The snake was still trying to find a way, but already knew it to be hopeless.

As Rock Lizard swung along the ledge, holding fast with one hand only, the snake swung its head about to look at him. It hissed. Rock Lizard came on, easily. The snake made more desperate attempts to escape, but there was literally no place for it to move to. It darted its head here and there, while the man drew closer. Then it flowed about to face him, cornered.

There was a dry, crackling noise—the snake's rattles. Rock Lizard reached down with the wire-looped stick. He held it before him. He clung to handholds with his left hand, and leaned his body in against the cliff, and shifted his fingers in swift, cautious jerks. The snake hissed and rattled, half panicky and half enraged. It tried to coil, but there was no space. It hissed more loudly and more angrily. The man still advanced.

The snake struck at the stick. It struck again. It suddenly darted forward for the man's legs. It would strike and wriggle on through—

But Rock Lizard struck in his turn. The wire loop encircled the snake's head. It tightened. It lifted, and Rock Lizard grinned triumphantly as the black thing fought desperately and rather horribly against the strangling noose.

But in his triumph he realized that the mesa and all the horizon seemed to shake with scornful laughter. The whole world of harshly-colored, harshly-carved stone appeared to quiver in a soundless cachinnation. Perhaps the quivering was actually heat waves in the air, but Rock Lizard felt it as mockery and derision.

A long time later the snake was still. Rock Lizard rested its weight on the ledge while he worked his fingers along the stick to the loop. The snake was quite dead. Rock Lizard forced its jaws wide. He reached in. The fangs sprang stiffly erect. He pressed something. A yellow liquid spurted against the cliff. He pressed again and again. The poison sacs were empty.

He tucked the stick in his belt again.

Once more he had both hands free. Then, spread-eagled against the rock in the broiling sunlight, he moved along the ledge once more. This time a monstrous tail trailed down from his body—the dead snake, nearly seven feet long. It trailed and bumped and scraped as he moved toward the place where the ledge ceased to exist.

HE STOPPED once, however. Where the ledge was widest—a good seven inches—he made sure of a foothold and swung himself about so that he faced sheer emptiness. He leaned back against the stone and brought his stick and the extraordinarily dark rattlesnake before him. He loosened the wire loop. Then he was busy for a matter of minutes. His face wore an almost apologetic expression as he saw yet more clearly that all the stones of all the cliffs wavered visibly in what might have been heat-waves, or might have been a hard, deriding laughter. His manner was still more nearly apologetic as he worked on. He seemed to be protesting wryly that in spite of certain defeat he must play the game to the end.

He played it. He took the wire loop off the stick. He wrapped some inches of the now flaccid snake about the middle of the stick, and fastened it firmly with the wire. His balance, as he worked, was so precarious that he did not dare lean his head forward to look down at his fingers. There was vacancy before him and sheer emptiness beneath.

He reached up and clawed for a foothold, and swung himself about again. Once more he was spread-eagled against the stone. He held the stick, now, between his teeth. And now he went as briskly as the handholds would permit, to the place where the ledge ended short of the rock-flue. Before he reached that place he paused briefly to gather half a handful of rotted rock-fragments of the consistency of grit. His face still wore a deprecatory grin.

He reached the ultimate end of the ledge. He fumbled a long time for a sufficiently firm hand-hold for his right hand. The ledge was a bare inch and a half beneath his feet. Half his weight, at least, was entrusted to the finger-grip of his right hand.

He fumbled along the length of the snake-carcass with his carefully gritted left. He held it by the end. And then, leaning outward to the limit of his reach, he swung the weird implement he had made out of a stick and a piece of wire and a melanistic tropism of *crotalus terrficus*.

He swung it toward the rock-flue where two buttresses of the mesa came together. It clattered against stone and fell away. He swung again. Again a clattering and failure.

He was trying something which should have been impossible. The flue was a vertical recess, a deep groove in the side of the mesa. Two of its sides faced each other like the two sides of a trough without ends. Rock Lizard was trying to throw the short stick so that it would catch and jam at an angle between those two opposing sides. Once it caught, added weight would but wedge it more securely. But while he strove to make that cast, Rock Lizard's foothold was none too secure.

He cast and cast and cast. The feeling of derision ceased, as if the mesa were puzzled by his action. At the tenth try the stick did catch. But he tugged at it, and it came away again. Rock Lizard sweated, then, because the mesa could have found out his purpose. It was not until the eighteenth try that the stick wedged firmly.

Then Rock Lizard was stretched out painfully, one hand clinging fiercely to a handhold in the rock, one hand holding fast to a melanistic tropism of *crotalus terrificus*, and his feet braced on an inch and a half of crumbly stone.

He stayed in that pose for what seemed minutes. But it was not fear or irresolution. As a matter of fact, he suddenly began to grin again. The hand holding the snake's body was bonded to the sleek scales with gritty rock. The other hand was sweated and slippery. But Rock Lizard worked that hand back and forth about its handhold to grind it dry of sweat and, if possible, to coat it with rock-powder which would not slide. He began to grin when he knew he had succeeded.

Then, quite suddenly, his muscles knotted and he sprang.

He swung across empty space below the jammed short stick. His legs shot out to guide him. He could not possibly have made the leap without his implement. Perhaps that unusual combination of materials would not have supported his weight indefinitely. But it swung him into the flue, and then he forced his body against one wall and braced his legs against the other, and was secure against falling in the same way that the jammed stick was secure.

He rested, grinning again. Presently he reached up. Partly hauling, partly climbing, he reached the stick. He braced his legs once more and carefully loosened the snake. He looped it through his belt. Then, legs and arms and back muscles working, he used the stick to help worm his way upward.

IT TOOK him an hour to climb the hundred feet to the mesa's top. At no time was there anything but sheer emptiness below him. At no time was he supported by anything but the fact that he made of the stick, or else of his body and legs, a wedge so that before he could fall the rocky walls must separate.

He climbed to the top. Once he was in the flue he had no trouble until he reached the very rim of the mesa's upper level. Then, as he crawled the last few feet, a boulder half the size of his body stirred, and Rock Lizard leaped upward and made his final jump to safety from the stirring, starting stone. It rolled down the very chute he had climbed, making a noise as of disappointed fury in the reverberating tube before it shot out and crashed at the cliff-base.

Rock Lizard sat down and rested himself. He walked about and inspected the surprisingly full growth upon the mesa-top. He saw a jackrabbit and grinned at it. The rabbit was timorous, but not alarmed like rabbits on level ground. Then he began to look for a way of descent. And now he felt a throbbing hatred in the air and knew that the enmity of the mesa was by no means ended.

Because of that feeling he went down very carefully indeed. Much more carefully than he had ascended. More than once he pretended that he was about to take one route past a certain level, and at the last moment took another one instead. After each such bit of trickery he grinned apologetically, as if to make the mesa understand that it was part of the game. But he did not relax his caution in the least.

The last hundred feet were worst of all. Now the feeling of hatred was so fierce that it was strangling. Perhaps it was heat and the suffocating feel of dry thin air in brazen sunlight. But Rock Lizard felt that the mesa was no longer derisive, but hated him with a virulent hatred and would shower down all its substance upon him if it could.

So he put his weight upon no stone without testing it; he trusted no handhold save after experiment. Three separate times he found that an apparently solid perch was flawed or rotted or loosened. Any of the three would have killed him had he been less suspicious.

Then he reached solid ground. He moved off some thirty yards—making sure he was not below any slope from which a rolling stone could reach him—and then turned and looked at the mesa. He felt its rage and its hatred. He grinned more widely. He was apologetic no longer. He was amused. He had beaten the mesa. In fact—

He went back and struck the mesa's monstrous stony base with his fist. His ancestors had counted coup upon defeated enemies by just such blows, which entitled them to wear extra coup-feathers in their head-dresses. Rock Lizard grinned as he counted coup upon the mesa.

Then he went back to town and sold the melanistic tropism of *crotalus terrificus* for twenty dollars and bought the red velvet slippers for Lily Red Fawn. Being a man as well as an Indian, he told her all about it. And she was so proud of him that she wanted to go and spit on the mesa for a share in his triumph.

But he did not let her. There are limits to the chances one can take. And Rock Lizard wanted Lily Red Fawn to cook his breakfasts.

THE CAMP-FIRE

Where readers, writers and adventurers meet

CAMP-FIRE comrades are familiar, through many stories, with the ability and military background of Ared White's stories.

With this issue we begin his new serial.

Because we look to a story for its value as a story, we have naturally satisfied ourselves that this one proceeds with drama and adequate plausibility and stands on its feet as fiction.

But no writer can deal with such a startling theme as this, or in any way with national defense, without an underlying effect of propaganda. It is bound to emerge in the situations themselves, and does not need direct expression or opinion.

Having satisfied ourselves of the story, the word propaganda doesn't trouble us, nor does any form of grinding the American axe.

But we asked Ared White to speak out at Camp-Fire with all the freedom he wants.

He says:

It may not be a very flattering thing to us to look coldly in the face the facts of just how helpless we would be in the initial phases of an invasion.

How vulnerable are we to attack?

In the event of a serious threat against both coasts, would we be able to prevent a successful invasion of the Pacific Coast?

Does our Panama Canal offer a quick route of transfer of navy strength from the Pacific to the Atlantic, or is it vulnerable?

How long would it take us to get an army together?

The story "Attack on America" in its characters and background, gives the answers to those questions and to many others relating to our unreadiness. I have gone to a great deal of effort to guard against inaccuracy or any overdrawing of word pictures. Of course, "Attack on America" is fiction, and we all like to believe that nothing of the sort will ever happen in this country.

The point, however, is that it could happen. Our land forces have gotten into obsolete condition so far as prompt use in a major emergency is concerned. In fact, field use contemplates 300 days after mobilization before we can have even our present armed forces equipped, ready, and trained at war strength.

As we demonstrated in the World War, given time enough and help enough we can get together a magnificent army.

In the course of gathering and verifying materials to be used in the story, I made various trips by train and airplane up and down the country and found particular interest in a visit to Fort Sam Houston, Texas, where our provisional infantry division is shaping up new tables of organization preliminary to a long-overdue reorganization of the Army and National Guard. The provisional division, comprising some 12,000 selected regular troops, was a streamlined thunderbolt that utilized modern teachings in mobility and hitting power. It was able to travel 150 miles a day and fight.

In one test it traveled more than 300 miles in a day, carrying the men and supplies in new cargo trucks and hauling the artillery with fast new prime movers. It furthermore embodied radical changes, in that the brigade formation was abolished in favor of a combat team of three regiments of infantry and two of artillery, which were not brigaded. Those ponderous old World War trains were disposed of and regiments, with their ample supply of trucks, went direct to the railhead for supply. Marching was reduced to the relatively short distances in developing for attack.

But that streamlined division stood practically alone in the country. There are two other Regular Army divisions in the United

States, widely scattered, uncoordinated, built on ancient tables of organization. They still have the old brigade formation and all the ponderosity of World War days. Their peace strength is around 7500 officers and men, this to be expanded to 20,000 in event of war.

The same organization applies to the eighteen infantry divisions of the National Guard of the United States. Although the country is experimenting with new Garand semi-automatic rifles, only a few regiments have these. The great bulk of our infantry is armed with the 1903 model Springfield. Artillery continues to be mostly war vintage.

Three hundred days would appear to be little enough time to convert these obsolete types of organization to the new warfare. The fact need not cause anyone uneasiness if we can be sure of allies who will hold any future enemies of the country in check for the major part of a year, until we get ready.

When we were forced into the World War, it took the country more than a year to fire its first shot in anger, and then only after we had been loaned basic fighting equipment by our allies, everything from artillery to gas masks, from infantry rifles to steel helmets, not to mention military instructors to teach us to fight.

Fortunately, so far as trained officer personnel is concerned, we are in top shape today. Our Regular Army officers are graduates of the principal service schools today, whereas in 1917 graduates of the school of the line were very few. We also have a well-trained officers' reserve of over 100,000 officers. Reserve and National Guard officers keep themselves as well abreast of the profession of arms as their time will permit.

They gave an unbelievable amount of their time and energy to the Army correspondence courses, and as many as possible attend the Army service schools each year, but that does not change the fact that, on our own, it would take the major part of a year to get an army together, equipped and trained. The best coast artillery officer in the world can't add an inch of range to outmoded coast guns. Tactical experts, gifted with the highest military genius, can not fight a battle without soldiers and equipment.

Our Army service schools preach modern tactics, based on the latest developments in warfare, taking full cognizance of motorization and mechanization, the new maneuverability, and the new weapons. But our actual units, with few exceptions, are still organized on those old tables of more than twenty years ago.

It is a whimsical fact that ours, the most powerful nation in the world, is likewise the most undefended against attack. Our army is a seventeenth-place army among the nations of the world, and for the most past is scattered to the four winds of the country in small garrisons, where it has no opportunity to gain training in that team play of larger units which is necessary for field operations against a trained enemy.

If, in the story, we are able immediately to mobilize only a single combat division to meet an invader, the same is true to fact. It appears the only reason at the present time we have a single division organized and trained is that the War Department is using it to test out new divisional tables of organization to replace the antiquated tables that now exist throughout the service, and have so existed for the past two decades.

In the event of a major invasion of our shores from the east and west we would face a serious problem with our one-coast navy and our ready-after-300 days army. Few will argue that the Panama Canal is invulnerable.

A somewhat stiffer policy has been enunciated towards foreign agents, but the breed continues to be amply represented and active within the United States. A common conception of a spy is that he is a skulker after information. That is only one phase of espionage. These agents are particularly active in putting out peace propaganda and implanting mechanics in arsenals and factories where war supplies will be manufactured in event of war. At the outbreak of war, when this country would have to depend upon its own resources for war materials, a serious condition might readily arise.

None of us ever doubts the invincibility of this country. The country has the resources, character, and man power to meet any emergency, but by reason of its vast wealth and important place in the world it might one day face attack. If that attack should come during the current state of our military and naval unreadiness for major operations, only the vengeance of our massed valor would save us, after long, expensive months.

There has been much argument of late to the effect that we must have nothing to do with entangling foreign alliances. This point was urged in Congress particularly during the current year against new armament for the country's land forces. Yet anyone pausing to think will see at once that the country's military policy as it now exists must be based upon a belief that we will have strong allies when and if we go to war again. How else will we account for the fact that we require 300 days after mobilization to have even our existing forces ready for field service?

The background of the story "Attack on America" may shock some, but I wish to emphasize that the pictures therein are all within the limits of actuality and fact. In fact, they lean quite a bit to the conservative side.

WE welcome two new men into the Writers' Brigade. We hope to see them again soon, because in each case we feel we detected a fresh and vigorous handling of stories.

Lew Dietz, "Bound for Jucaro," tells us about his story and himself:

The curious thing is that looking back as far as I can into the family, I haven't been able to unearth one bona fide sailor. My predilection for the sea doesn't seem to have any root in tradition at all but the bug is there and always has been. My temperament and appearance have led some of my best enemies to suggest that way back somewhere a Portugese sailor slipped stealthily into the family and that, for all I know, may account for it.

In any case since I was fifteen I've been going places on ships, any ship, any place. Naturally that interfered somewhat with my education so there wasn't much I could do when the time came to do something respectable, except be a writer.

And naturally again when I started writing, six or seven years ago, I found myself writing about the sea. Since, I've written every conceivable type of yarn but every once in a while if I'm not very careful, my mind starts fooling around with my first love.

"Bound For Jucaro" was like that. The idea had been a vague thing in my mind for a long time. The germ, I suppose, was a Friendship sloop I spotted rotting in the sun in Cap Haitien a long, long way from home. I felt there was a story there and perhaps "Bound For Jucaro" is it.

HERE is an introduction to Pat Frank, who wrote "Overdue."

Pat Frank is 32, has been a newspaper reporter since he was 20, and knows—from personal experience as well as from pilots—how it feels to be marooned in the skies.

For some of the background of this story, he is indebted to two great pilots now in the heaven of airmen, Wiley Post and Jimmy Wedell, who were his friends.

He was the only newspaperman on the first test of the air track system of blind landing, in a flight through a blizzard from Washington to Pittsburgh on January 26, 1938.

Pat Frank was born in Chicago, began newspaper work in Jacksonville, Fla., and has worked since in New York, Chicago, and finally Washington. He has covered Florida hurricanes, Virginia murders, and Washington inaugurations, and disasters on the sea and in the sky from one end of the Atlantic seaboard to the other.

One of his jobs for *The Washington Herald* is reporting the doings of the Civil Aeronautics Authority. His pet hobbies are sticking his nose into murders long unsolved, and digging through the lower stacks in the Library of Congress in search of data on American duels fought a hundred and more years ago.

He has been too busy writing news to write much fiction. But like most reporters, he says he's going to quit the newspaper business one of these days—and just write.

COLONEL George Chase Lewis, of the Overseas Discharge and Replacement Bureau, Brooklyn, N. Y., sends Camp-Fire an excellent discussion of frontier shooting and the speed of human reflexes in an emergency, and takes exception to some marksmanship we recently published. We publish his letter with thanks.

I have read with much interest Mr. Frank Gruber's "Peace Marshal," as my father was a personal acquaintance of Wild Bill Hickok when my father was mayor of a small Kansas town in the early 1870's. He always spoke of Hickok as being a courteous gentleman. Later, at Nevada, Missouri, I went to school with the son of Frank James, and used often to see and talk with Frank James, after he had been pardoned, in the 1880's. James had the respect of most of the townspeople and the admiration of all small boys, as he went about his work in the normal civilian town life. I have heard Frank James talk very entertainingly about the Civil War and the guerrilla exploits but I never heard him discuss any of the alleged train and bank robberies in the presence of us small boys. I have seen him shoot with a revolver at tin cans or improvised paper targets and he was a very good shot hut certainly not in the same class with the best grade expert pistol shots to be seen at a national pistol match at Camp Perry in the last ten years, so far as target scores were concerned. However, it must be remembered that pistol practice is an athletic exercise dependent on youth and physical condition like tennis or boxing, and a man's eye and hand fall off in skill after his prime. Frank James when I knew him at Nevada must have been close to fifty years of age and had had years of the severest physical strain plus several years in prison.

I have known personally a score of rangers and border peace officers in their prime of activity and have talked with intimate friends who knew closely such celebrities as Ben Thompson, Bat Masterson, King Fisher, Pat Garrett, etc., etc., and there is general agree-

ment that these famous gun fighters' reputations did not rest upon ability to hit a miraculously small target like the pip in a playing card or shooting the pistol out of an enemy's hand 300 yards away, but upon their cold nerve which made them shoot no worse in a fracas than at a tin can. The leading characteristic of these men was their extremely short "reaction time," that is, the time it required their muscles to start to respond to their brains or eye impulses. Driver tests prove that the average driver requires ¾ second after he sees a test red light before he can get his muscles to slam on the brakes. About one driver in 10,000 will have such nerve speed and muscular coordination that he can cut down his reaction time to ⅜ second and a very very few will go as low as ¼ second between seeing a red light and starting the brake action.

All these gunmen had this quality of quick decision, and almost instantaneous reflex action to a very high degree. The lightning draw and the rapid accurate fire at a reasonably large target was their ideal rather than hitting a target the size of a card pip. Most pistol fights were settled inside of a room at five to ten yards and outdoor fight distances were the width of the street up to 50 or 75 yards, and only very rarely over 100 yards. The physical shock of a pistol bullet in the body anywhere between ankle and hat brim would disturb an enemy's aim and enable the fighter to safely aim one more accurate and possibly finishing shot. It was far more important to hit the enemy solidly anywhere in the body 1/100 of a second before he fired than to get an exact aim on his heart or eye, which aim might never be completed under the shock of an enemy's bullet hitting first.

I have many times seen frontiersmen who could pick a fly off the wall with finger and thumb, so quick were their hands and nerves.

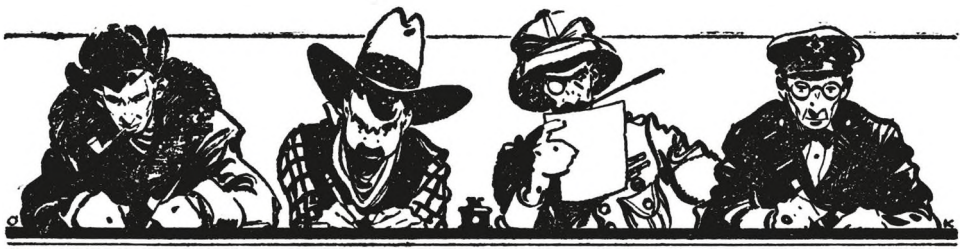
The plain facts are that a man in a pistol fight is exposed to a nervous tension which makes him shoot wild or pull trigger before his gun is on the target in his furious anxiety to get in the first shot and to protect himself by knocking out the other fellow's aim. It is a sort of "Buck Fever," very much magnified. The remarkable characteristic of the hundreds of western gun fighters and peace officers was their ability to shoot with accuracy at an enemy who was shooting or trying to shoot at them. Their problem was to hit the target the size of a man's body, and to hit it without a trace of "Buck Fever" or "Pistol Fever" in the smallest fraction of a second.

The author's statement about Hickok hitting a six-inch hull's eye at 400 yards with a .44 Frontier Model Colt is simply fantastically beyond the ballistic capacity of the weapon—aside from the human element. This is a black powder cartridge using 40 grains of powder and a 200 grain blunt nosed lead bullet and is fired in a 7½ inch barrel revolver. I have fired thousands of these cartridges and seen many more thousands of the .44 and the heavier .45 caliber pistol cartridges fired on the target range and at camp or ranch. There are no ballistic tables for pistols for this cartridge but the same cartridge was used in both the .44 Winchester and the Frontier Colt to avoid mixing ammunition and there are tables for it when fired in a rifle.

The 7½ inch pistol barrel gives much lower muzzle velocity, and much less accuracy than the 24 inch Winchester barrel and the blunt nosed bullet loses velocity very, very rapidly. The slower pistol bullet is much more deflected by side winds than the same bullet from a rifle. And in a revolver, part of the powder gas escapes between the cylinder and the barrel which further reduces the comparative muzzle velocity of revolver and rifle for the same cartridge and increases pistol windage error. Variations occur in the same revolver in the width of this gap at the front of the cylinder as powder deposit is accummulated on the front of the cylinder. The factory-made pistol ammunition of 1870 was very inaccurate as compared with present day standards. The net result of these ballistic variations may be stated that if a frontier model Colt were fired in a machine rest at 400 yards range, the bullets might be expected to spread over a circle about 40 inches in diameter for the group. Hitting a 6 inch bull's eye in that circle would be a sheer accident.

Seventy-five yards is the greatest reliable range of a modern pistol and the longest range used in regular matches. The author's alleged score of 7 bull's eyes for Jesse James, 9 bull's eyes for Mr. Bonniwell on a 6 inch bull at 150 yards are within the ballistic possibilities of the modern target revolver or auto pistol but exceed any modern match score I have heard of. Such score with the .44 black powder Frontier Colt might occur with a machine rest once in several strings but when fired from a pistol held in the hand they can only be described as physically possible but miraculously improbable, no matter how skilled the marksman.

If the best target trained experts of today attempted to buck Hickok, Masterson or Billy the Kid at their own deadly close range snap shooting, there could be no doubt as to the Frontiersmen winning. Not infrequently the western gun-slinger filed off his sights entirely, to speed his pistol from the holster.



ASK ADVENTURE

Information you can't get elsewhere

THEY'VE been getting their men for sixty-six years.

Request:—I'd like to know when the Royal Canadian Mounted Police force was organized. What are the enlistment regulations?

—J. Davies,
Los Angeles, Calif.

Reply by Mr. Alec Cavadas:—The force was organized in 1873, under the leadership of Commissioner French. The organization of a Mounted Constabulary came under consideration immediately after the annexation of Rupert's land to Canada. It may be doubted, however, whether the need would have been met so promptly had not the public conscience been shocked by a shameful series of crimes which threatened to involve Canadian Indians and whites in mutual reprisals and wars of extermination.

The enlistment rules are as follows:—

1. Applicants must be between the ages of twenty-two and forty, active able-bodied men, of thoroughly sound constitution, and must produce certificate of exemplary character.

2. The term of engagement is 3 years.

3. Married men will not be engaged.

4. Members of the force will receive free rations, a free kit on joining, and periodical issues during the term of service.

5. The minimum height is 5 feet, 8 inches, and the minimum chest measurement is 35 inches, minimum weight 175 pounds.

6. Application to join the force must be made to the Commissioner, Ottawa, Canada.

7. Only British subjects are eligible to join the ranks of the R.C.M.P.

A FOOTBALL center isn't an immovable body—he has use for speed.

Request:—I should like to know what the center does in football. Is it necessary that he he a fast runner and what must be his ability to resist the pressure that may be put against him?

Does he remain anchored to his holding ground when he has successfully beaten off the opposition?

I am about two hundred pounds in weight. Too much for anything but a center but I am pretty fast on my feet. I want to make our varsity in the Fall.

—B. R. Ruesart,
Beaverton, N. C.

Reply by Mr. John B. Foster:—You are a good weight for center. It is necessary that you develop as much speed as you can.

A center must be the kind of player who can dig in and hold his vantage against pressure on either side and against pressure from the front. His power of resistance must be very great.

It is not necessary that he retain his old position all the time. In fact the roving center, which is just what that name implies, has come to be a very important man in modern football. If you are fast enough to follow the ball, you are just as valuable a man to your team as a fast tackler, or fast guard.

THE cause of great unrest in these editorial offices. This sounds like fishing!

Request:—We have for some time considered making a canoe trip into the western Ontario region from somewhere along the Minnesota border and are wondering if you could give us some advice as to the best point to head in at. We are particularly interested in the Lake of the Woods section, also the Quetico, especially because there is muskellunge fishing to be found in those places. While we do not care to take record fish, still we would like to meet up with a few of the big fellows. Therefore, what point would you head in at if going into the Quetico, and what point if going into Lake of the Woods

and the region about it? What fish would we be likely to find aside from muskellunge? Also what time of the year would you consider best for a trip of this sort? Any other information you might give will be kindly received.

—C. Leighton,
Minneapolis, Minn.

Reply by Mr. Robert Page Lincoln:—You have touched here on a subject that is very much in the eyes of the outing public, simply because the Minnesota-Ontario border region is now annually the nucleus for the start of a great number of canoe trips, some of them headed as far north as Hudson's Bay. Both the Quetico Provincial Reserve and the Lake of the Woods region have received a great deal of attention in this respect. Permit me to state, however, that you are wrong with reference to the existence of the muskellunge in the Quetico. It does not occur there. In fact the muskellunge, if found at all, is very rare as between Fort Frances, Ontario (which is across the river from International Falls, Minnesota), and the Nipigon River to the eastward. Going north from Fort Frances and following up the Manitou River you will find some muskies in the lakes east of the Manitou, but not a great number. Of course, some of these lakes have not been any too well explored or fished as yet.

Last summer we made a considerable trip by canoe through this region. Several lakes, such as Meggisi and Eagle Rock, are said to have muskies, and large ones, to their credit. Chiefly, however, your muskies are in the Manitou itself and from there on more or less freely west to, and including, Lake of the Woods. Therefore, if you want muskellunge you will have to centralize your canoe trip in the Manitou region, and in the Lake of the Woods section.

There are two logical places to enter these two sections, namely, the Manitou and Lake of the Woods, on any projected canoe trip. You can outfit at Fort Frances through Norman Isberg. Isberg has the only fishing camp or lodge on the Manitou. It has not been fished much as yet. Radiating out from the Isberg lodge is a most amazing series of fishing waters, the most beautiful in Canada. Excellent bass and lake trout fishing is to be had, and, as stated, fair to excellent muskellunge fishing depending upon the section of the Manitou region you go into. For further instructions address Norman Isberg, Manitou Camp, Fort Frances, Ontario.

So far as Lake of the Woods is concerned, it is a tremendous body of water and one could spend a summer canoeing around among its 16,000 islands and still would only have scraped the surface. For outfitting for a trip on Lake of the Woods, or for trips by various canoe routes out of Lake of the Woods, I would suggest going by auto from Fort Frances to Nestor Falls, the highway you follow being the comparatively new Fort Frances-Kenora highway. Complete canoe trip outfits, with guides, if desired, can be had at Green's Camps, Nestor Falls. When at this outfitting point you can decide whether you would care to spend your time on Lake of the Woods or head out on any one of several routes east or north. A very excellent trip from Nestor Falls goes in via Height of Land and Pipestone, thence east to the Manitou, if desired, or north from Pipestone in a veritable network of waters, many of them quite virgin and unnamed.

So far as the fishing in Lake of the Woods is concerned, besides having a few lake trout, as localized in Whitefish Bay of that lake, it has the muskellunge for which it is world-famous. Also it has probably the finest small mouth bass fishing in North America. This is saying a great deal, and yet it is a fact that can be substantiated very easily. It has great northerns, and excellent wall-eyed pike fishing. In many ways this is one of the choice fishing lakes of Canada and has so ranked for well over a quarter-century.

In the Pipestone and Manitou region you will find lake trout in abundance, both small mouth), lake trout, wall-eyes and great north- and some lakes, such as Kalarskons, having the most unusual wall-eyes in the country. Two wall-eyes weighing seventeen and eighteen pounds respectively were taken in this latter lake several years ago.

With reference to the Quetico. Canoe trips in number head into this famous Ontario reserve. It has large mouth bass (no small mouth), lake trout, wall-eyes and great northerns. No muskellunge, as previously stated. For a mighty fine all-around canoe trip, gorgeous scenery and just about everything the wilderness offers, you will find the Quetico a very good bet. Your outfitting point here would be the Borderlakes Outfitting Company. For further and detailed information regarding this trip write Mr. Sig Olson, Borderlakes Outfitting Company, Ely, Minnesota.

If you are not afraid of meeting up with and fighting the winged pests to the last ditch I would suggest that you go in in June. However, if you are fishing bent, I may mention that the season on bass and muskies does not open in western Ontario until the first of July. Any time in early July is a good time to go in. Some prefer the month of September to all others. For one thing the insect hordes have then pulled out for parts unknown.

I would suggest, by all means, that if you are speculating on making a trip into any of these above three sections as detailed, you should obtain airplane maps of the region. If going into the Quetico, obtain Quetico Map No. 52-B. If going into the Manitou region or any of the region north of Fort Frances, obtain Map No. 52-F (Dryden). If going into the Lake of the Woods section, obtain Lake of the Woods map. These are obtainable from the office of the Surveyor General and Chief, Hydrographic Service, Ottawa, Canada. The cost of an ordinary plain map of either of the above is 25c; folder form, 35c; linen-backed, 50c. These maps are all drawn after aerial photos taken by the Royal Canadian Air Force, and the writer has found them to be almost flawlessly accurate.

AND this is how to mount the whoppers.

Request:—I have a couple of fish I want to mount and I'd like a few pointers on the process.

I skinned the fish when I caught them and packed them in salt, I cut the skin from the tail to the gills on the poorest side and took all the flesh off of the skin and out of the head. One is a nineteen pound Great Northern Pike, and one a seventeen pound Brown trout.

—Lynn H. Hoff,
Plattsburg, N. Y.

Reply by Mr. Edward B. Lang:—The simplest way to mount the two skins you have on hand would be to prepare them as medallions—that is a half-mount against a finished board. After soaking the skins well to remove the salt and to relax them cut away the poorest half of the skin to within a short distance of the middle of back and abdomen. On a flat board, cut a little smaller than the outline of the body, build up the body with clay containing a little dextrine. Over this fit the skin and nail the edges to the back of the board. The preservative used is white arsenic and alum, half and half, applied to the inside of the skin. With the skin in place, insert the eyes which can be secured at a taxidermist's supply house, clean off all dirt, and varnish. When dry, the fish is painted and attached to the board plaque to be used.

You will find a simple description of this method of mounting fish in Hornaday's "Taxidermy and Zoological Collecting". The more up-to-date methods that employ casts to secure the exact shapes of fish, but which require more materials, are described in Rowley's "Taxidermy and Museum Exhibition".

THE wormwood and the gall.

Request:—I just purchased a little farm in Lancaster County, Pa. On the ground is a small orchard consisting of apple and cherry trees. I discovered a growth on my sour cherry trees of which I am sending a sample. Upon examination of one of these growths I found a small insect that looks like a worm in it.

I would like to know if this growth is caused by a disease or an insect and the procedure I must follow in order to clean up this condition.

—J. A. Witmer,
Phildelphia, Pa.

Reply by Dr. S. W. Frost:—Your letter and specimens were received. The injury is caused by a disease known as Plowrightia morbosa. It is common on plum and cherry and usually appears only in orchards that have been neglected. It is seldom an ailment in orchards that are properly sprayed.

The disease is known by the common name: black knot. These knots should be cut and burned preferably before January. After January spores form which infest new branches. I would have the knots removed so as to prevent further trouble during the coming summer.

The insects which you found in these knots are only secondary. They do not cause or produce the knots. They simply use the knot as convenient places to hide and feed. They are found in many different types of galls or knots on numerous trees.

C. S. M. C.: The Confederate States Marine Corps.

Request:—I'd be very grateful for any information you could give me on the Confederate States Marine Corps.

I do not remember seeing any mention of this organization except in Roberts' "Semmes of the *Alabama*," recently published.

He mentions Burkett K. Howell, a brother-in-law of Jefferson Davis, and an officer in the C. S. M. C., joining the *C. S. S. Sumpter* at New Orleans in 1861.

He is again mentioned as being aboard the *Alabama* at the time of the battle between her and the *Kearsarge* off Cherbourg.

Roberts also states, I think, that neither ship carried a Marine Detachment.

Thanking you for any information you may have on this subject.

—Sgt. C. Mudget, U.S.M.C.
Pearl Harbor, T. H.

Reply by Major F. W. Hopkins:—I must

confess that it was necessary for me to make further reference to Headquarters U.S. Marine Corps, as although I had on occasion encountered a reference to an officer of the C.S.M.C., had never found anything definite about them. However Colonel Shearer has sent me a copy of *The Marine Corps Gazette* for September 1928, which contains an article on the subject by Major Van Hoose. Possibly there is a file of the *Gazette* in the post library, or one of the officers may keep a file and you can read up about the subject.

Briefly, however, by act of March 16, 1861 the Confederate States Congress created a Navy and Marine Corps, and in May of that year increased the Marines to include one Colonel, other officers and N.C.O.'s, and eight hundred and forty privates, also some fifers and drummers. In September 1862, a small further increase was made. The nucleus of officers, of course, were officers of the U.S. Marine Corps, who had resigned for political reasons, which group included a second lieutenant of the U.S.M.C. named Baker K. Howell, who was commissioned a first lieutenant and later a captain of the C.S.M.C.

During 1862 the Corps remained about Richmond, and then some were sent to sea on the very small C.S. Navy vessels. Detachments served aboard the following ships of the C.S. Navy. *Sumpter, Alabama, Merrimac, Jamestown, Atlanta, Tallahassee, Chicamaugua, Savannah, Sampson, Tennessee, Morgan, Gaines, Arctic, Raleigh, Baltic, Georgia, McRae, North Caroline,* and *Stonewall.*

Some of these were cruisers, several rams and many were blockade runners. Several were armed tugs or gunboats.

C.S. Marines ashore manned Fort Johnson, Battery Simpkins, and had a contingent at Fort Fisher. They garrisoned the forts at Drewery's Bluff in the defense of Richmond and in 1864 formed the rear guard for Ewell in his retreat, fought the battle of Sailor's Creek, and were the last troops under Ewell to be surrendered. It appears from all records and the reports of senior Navy and Army commanders whose forces included C.S. Marines, that they upheld fully the traditions, etc., of our Corps and made for themselves a gallant record.

You might be interested to know that in 1864 the pay of the Colonel Commandant was $195 per month, captains received $130, first sergeants received $24, sergeants $21, corporals $17, musics $16, and privates $15. The commandant, staff and field officers also received $24 per month for forage for horses and $9 per month as "additional service pay". All enlisted men received a navy ration per day, which in 1861 is given as 25c. At first enlistment was for four years, but later changed to three, or the duration of the war, being the same as in the C.S. Army.

RIDING comes high, particularly in the East.

Request:—I live in the country, and I have been thinking of buying a saddle horse. I have several acres of good pasture at my disposal, but I only make a small salary, and so I would like your advice.

I want a husky, strong animal. I don't care so much about speed. I haven't much free time, but I'd take good care of it, and give it the same affection and care I give my dog.

What would I have to pay for a good healthy horse? How much feed would he need? Where could I buy him?

—G. Lewis.
Darien, Conn.

Reply by Major R. Ernest Dupuy:—I have read your letter with a good deal of interest. I know exactly how you feel about it, and am sure that if you did have a horse you would give it the same affection and care that you would a dog.

Unfortunately, horses cost a great deal of money, and their feed also costs a great deal. You could not buy any sort of riding animal here in the east for less than $100, and probably not for twice that, unless you hung around some race track and made a cash offer at the end of the season, when owners usually have a number of animals which, while good horses, are not fast enough for the track, and they want to get rid of them to avoid feeding them over the winter.

Pasture would help your feed bills, but if you were riding your horse daily you would have to give him grain in addition. In your section of the country feed would run you at least $15 a month, and shoeing, which would have to be done at least every two months, would cost about $5. And, of course, you would have to have some shelter for him. Your horse would have to be groomed once a day anyway, and every time you came in from riding. His stall would have to be cleaned out once a day, he would have to be fed twice a day (once if out on pasture), and watered twice a day. Saddle equipment would cost you about $25 at least—if you could pick up some second-hand tack.

Now, if you can swing it, I'll guarantee that you'll get more fun out of your horse than you will out of any other sort of amusement, and certainly a great deal of the very best kind of outdoor exercise.

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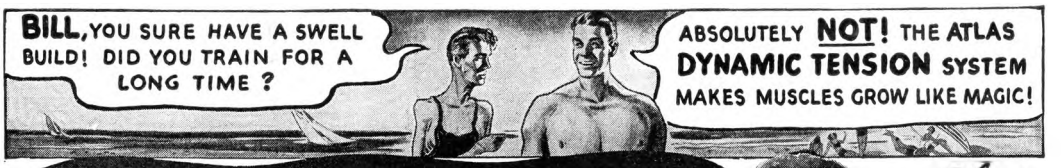

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