

FIVE-NOVELS

OCTOBER

20c

MONTHLY

CONVOY GUNS

BY

DAVID ALLAN ROSS

PENNANT CHASERS

BY BEN PETER FREEMAN

DEATH STALKS THE JURY

BY JEAN FRANCIS WEBB

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Tints Hair

JET BLACK!

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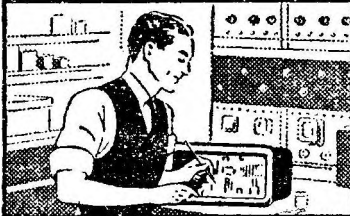
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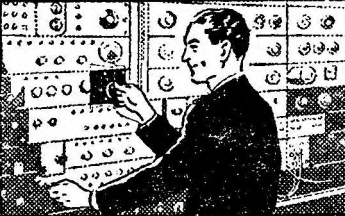
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FIVE-NOVELS MONTHLY

F. A. McCHESNEY, Editor

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Volume 53

OCTOBER, 1940

Number 1

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Where Readers Write
Their Own Stories

FORECAST

FROM David Allan Ross comes *Squadron of Death*, the magnificent story of the evacuation of Dunkerque, one of the greatest war stories in the world. It's so vivid, so powerful and moving a novel, you will feel that, along with Books, Gil Brent and Sir Josiah, you were with that peril-ridden, desperate expedition of civilians and service men alike who labored with tireless hearts and matchless courage to rescue the trapped army of Flanders from the hell of the French coast under the Nazis' raging guns.

Gridiron battle rages in *Goal-Line Gambler*. Stewart Sterling's colorful saga of pro football. It's the story of Ox Kraymer, the big guy who went from the college grid to the faster, tougher, even more bone-and-nerve-jarring field of the pro game. Ox, regarded as a ten-ton tank, a line crasher, determined to make 'em see that, behind every power play, his wits were working overtime, figuring the way to victory. A swell sport story.

Peter Brumbaugh! The hated name was flung into Phil Baltimore's face again and again. And then, with Brumbaugh's murder, the law tried to get Phil. Because of his past, because of *The Unforgotten Brand*, the law labeled him "Killer!" Edward S. Williams' thrilling novel.

Terrorism swept the range—but only those who had stripped the B over B of land and cattle knew the terrible nights; the burning of crops, of buildings, the stampeding of blooded herds. For the B over B, from its owner down to its grub-slinger, was out to get back its own. A powerful Western—Philip Ketchum's *Where Vengeance Rides!*

Thrilling, chilling, baffling and completely fascinating is D. L. Ames' *The Man on the Balcony*—the adventures of an American caught in a baffling web of murder, espionage, and deadly peril, spun by the big-shots of war. Exceptionally fine adventure!

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Profits Typical of
the Young, Growing Industry

Going into this business is not like selling something offered in every grocery, drug or department store. For instance, when you take a \$7.50 order, \$5.83 can be your share. On \$1,500 worth of business, your share can be \$1,167.00. The very least you get as your part of every dollar's worth of business you do is 67 cents—on ten dollars' worth \$6.70, on a hundred dollars' worth \$67.00—in other words two thirds of every order you get is yours. Not only on the first order—but on repeat orders—and you have the opportunity of earning an even larger percentage.

This Business Has
Nothing to Do With
House to House Canvassing

Nor do you have to know anything about high-pressure selling. "Selling" is unnecessary in the ordinary sense of the word. Instead of hammering away at the customer and trying to "force" a sale, you make a dignified, business-like call, leave the installation—whatever size the customer says he will accept—at our risk, let the customer sell himself after the device is in and working. This does away with the need for pressure on the customer—it eliminates the handicap of trying to get the money before the customer has really convinced himself 100%. You simply tell what you offer, showing proof of success in that customer's particular line of business. Then leave the invention without a dollar down. It starts working at once. In a few short days, the installation should actually produce enough cash money to pay for the deal, with profits above the investment coming in at the same time. You then call back, collect your money. Nothing is so convincing as our offer to let results speak for themselves without risk to the customer! While others fail to get even a hearing, our men are making sales running into the hundreds. They have received the attention of the largest firms in the country, and sold to the smallest businesses by the thousands.

EARNINGS

One man in California earned over \$1,600 per month for three months—close to \$5,000 in 90 days' time. Another writes from Delaware—"Since I have been operating (just a little less than a month of actual selling) and not the full day at that, because I have been getting organized and had to spend at least half the day in the office; counting what I have sold outright and on trial, I have made just a little in excess of one thousand dollars profit for one month." A man working small city in N. Y. State made \$10,805 in 9 months. Texas man nets over \$300 in less than a week's time. Space does not permit mentioning here more than these few random cases. However, they are sufficient to indicate that the worthwhile future in this business is coupled with immediate earnings for the right kind of man. One man with us has already made over a thousand sales on which his earnings ran from \$5 to \$60 per sale and more. A great deal of this business was repeat business. Yet he had never done anything like this before coming with us. That is the kind of opportunity this business offers. The fact that this business has attracted to it such business men as former bankers, executives of businesses—men who demand only the highest type of opportunity and income—gives a fairly good picture of the kind of business this is. Our door is open, however, to the young man looking for the right field in which to make his start and develop his future.

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The Storm Pearl

By
C. W. Harbaugh

BART LAMAR did not know he held a fortune in his hands. The heat of a tropic afternoon had left him indisposed to continue his work. In the company of two others, he sat on the after deck of his pearling schooner *Puma* as she nodded to the evening breeze that rippled the purple lagoon. One of the men with him was brown, the other a mixture of brown and white.

The brown man, Maro, was busily opening one after another of the oysters that lay in a heap on the deck. His fingers roved through the insides of each pair of shells, searching hopefully for the pearl that might be there, then he cut out the muscle and tossed the shells into a basket.

The third man was Jorge Vendayo, another pearler who had come aboard from his own schooner to pass the time of day and smoke one of Bart's cigars. He was doing this at the moment, lolling at ease in a canvas chair.

Bart had been working with Maro, opening the day's catch of oysters, until Vendayo arrived. Then he had leaned back to talk with the pearler, forgetful that he still held an oyster in one hand, unopened.

"This damn pretty shell, boss," Maro remarked, holding up the oyster he had just opened and inspecting it in the light of the setting sun.

Bart and Maro had had the good luck to strike a new bed that day, and the shell they had taken from it was heavily coated with black nacre. It would bring a high price in Papeete, for black shell was in demand for making buttons and knife handles in more civilized countries.

Bart glanced idly at the shell in his



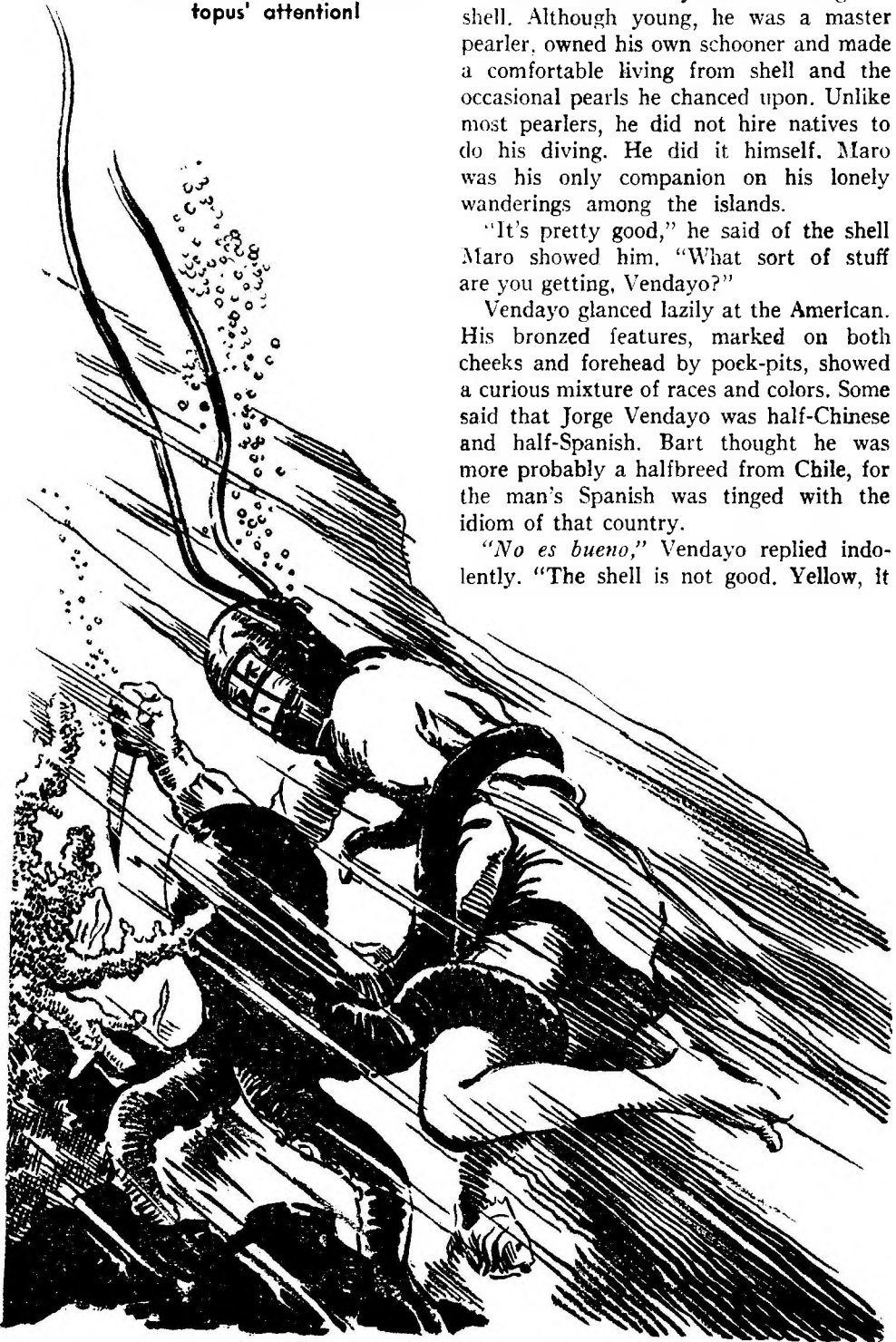
That diver was Jane Thompson
—and she had caught the oc-
topus' attention!

friend's hands. Bart was an American, tall and lean from his years of diving for shell. Although young, he was a master pearler, owned his own schooner and made a comfortable living from shell and the occasional pearls he chanced upon. Unlike most pearlers, he did not hire natives to do his diving. He did it himself. Maro was his only companion on his lonely wanderings among the islands.

"It's pretty good," he said of the shell Maro showed him. "What sort of stuff are you getting, Vendayo?"

Vendayo glanced lazily at the American. His bronzed features, marked on both cheeks and forehead by poek-pits, showed a curious mixture of races and colors. Some said that Jorge Vendayo was half-Chinese and half-Spanish. Bart thought he was more probably a halfbreed from Chile, for the man's Spanish was tinged with the idiom of that country.

"*No es bueno,*" Vendayo replied indolently. "The shell is not good. Yellow, it



is, and dirty. Maybe tomorrow I bring my divers to your place, eh, Bart? I'd like to get my hands on some of that black shell."

Bart laughed shortly. "You'd better keep away," he remarked with good nature. "You'll get in trouble."

Vendayo laughed loudly.

"That is good!" he said. "Everyone knows you are no fighting man, Bart."

Bart flushed, but said nothing. He glanced across the lagoon at the low-lying island of Fanahiva.

Fanahiva was the last of a thousand-mile chain of islands that reached from midway between the Societies and Marquesas in a southeasterly direction toward Pitcairn. They were called the Paumotus, or Low Archipelago, a strange and lonely group, yet vaster in area than any other in the South Seas. Unlike most other islands, they consisted of mere strands of sun-bleached sand, none of them elevated more than twenty feet above the water. A typical example, Fanahiva was made up of two small islets surrounded by a circular barrier reef, within which lapped the quiet waters of the lagoon and beyond which lay the vast stretches of the Pacific.

"My word!" Maro exclaimed suddenly. "It too dark to work more."

Maro spoke his own brand of English. Sometimes when he got excited he mixed in a little French or Marquesan, but in the main he was very proud of his ability to speak the language of his boss.

"You're right, Maro," Bart agreed. He thrust his oyster knife between the tightly clamped shells of the oyster in his hand. "This'll be the last for tonight."

His expert fingers pried the shells apart, cutting the muscle inside. Outwardly, this oyster looked exactly like all the others he had opened that afternoon and his fingers were hurried and careless as they groped about. But they closed on something hard buried beneath the surface of the oyster's muscle.

"We're in luck, Maro," he said. "There's a pearl here." With his knife, he made a quick incision in the bivalve and plucked out a black lump.

FOR a moment no one spoke. Then Vendayo swore in Spanish as his cigar, which he had dropped, landed on his bare foot and burned him. Maro rose to his feet, slowly, his eyes gleaming.

The pearl was a giant. Perfectly round, it lay in Bart's cupped hand like a drop of freshly fallen rain. Or, rather, like a sphere of ebony, for it was jet black. And yet as Bart held it up to the faint light that yet remained in the skies, it gave forth subtle flashes of a sombre green. Green and black, the two colors intermixed in the pearl as they are sometimes partnered in the ugly, ominous colorings of a storm-torn sky. It was hard to say, in fact, whether the pearl was the loveliest thing imaginable—or the ugliest.

"*Madre de Dios!*" Vendayo muttered. "Such a pearl have I never seen before!"

One of his clawlike hands sought his throat, as if to make his breathing easier.

Maro was delighted after he recovered from his first surprise.

"*Aue!*" he said gleefully. "That one big fella pearl, boss!"

Bart nodded and turned the sea gem slowly, his eyes shining with deep admiration. "Once in a lifetime," he murmured slowly, "once in a hundred lifetimes you find a pearl like this. And when you do—" He caught his breath. "Boy, it's hard to believe!"

Vendayo bent closer, eager to examine the monster, but the dusk was now too thick.

"Let's go below, Bart," he begged. "I must have one look at it."

In the lamplit cabin, Maro and Vendayo huddled close to Bart. He found a patch of white velvet and laid the pearl on it. They all bent their heads over it.

Lying there, so supremely beautiful, the pearl robbed them of their desire to breathe, lest they disturb its serenity and cause it to vanish as miraculously as it had come.

They could look deep *into* it—that is the test of the true pearl—and study the whorls of deep green and black in its heart and the convolutions the two colors made, darted here and there with flecks

of gold, as if the pearl had been born in agony, born in swirling turmoil, and all that remained of its tragic career was this placid, beautiful ghost.

BART straightened suddenly and stepped back. He glanced about the *Puma's* cabin with amusement. "Here we are," he remarked, "at Fanahiva Island, the jumping off place to nowhere. We've picked up an oyster from the bottom of the sea, where it has lain for Lord knows how many years worrying over a grain of sand that scratched its tender parts. It covered the grain with nacre and made this black pearl. A simple thing, yet when we get back to civilization it will be worth a small fortune."

"A million dollars, Bart!" Vendayo gasped. His voice had become hoarse. He could not take his eyes from the black pearl on the white patch of velvet. "It's worth a million dollars!"

Bart glanced at him sharply. Something in the Chilean's tone irritated him. Vendayo was a lazy fellow. Instead of searching for his own pearling grounds, he poached from those discovered by other divers. Right now, as he stared at the pearl, cupidity and avarice were obvious in his eyes.

"Hardly that much, Jorge," Bart replied shortly. "It might bring a hundred thousand, though, if I strike the market hot. It's the largest pearl I've ever seen, and it seems to be perfect."

Maro was puzzled.

"It look pretty," he admitted. "Yet, also, not pretty. I don't know whether I like it or not, boss. I see colors like that once long time past. Big storm come and blow people off island into sea. When I look up at sky, I see same colors in storm as in pearl. Ugly color. Gracious! Damn ugly!"

Bart laughed. "A 'storm pearl,' eh, Maro? I'm afraid not. This is good luck, not bad. But we'll not let it turn our heads. We'll stay on at Fanahiva and get a full load of shell before we go back to Papeete and sell the pearl."

He reached for the pearl, but Vendayo

was ahead of him. The halfbreed took it between thumb and forefinger and stared at it. Then he hefted it slightly, as if to judge its weight.

"One hundred fifty grains," he estimated. "Maybe more. It's a big one all right, Bart."

Again Bart noticed the gloating expression in the man's eyes. It was not the frank admiration of a fellow pearler, but a mounting desire to possess it for himself. For a moment Bart wondered if Vendayo would try to steal the pearl. He dismissed the thought immediately, however, for Vendayo was a poor sort of creature, without even so much courage as a thief required in the pursuit of his trade.

"I'll take the pearl, Vendayo," he said quietly.

Reluctantly, the man handed it over. His eyes stared hungrily as Bart placed it in a small tobacco pouch, along with a few seed pearls and one small pink pearl which, up to the discovery of the black giant, had constituted his entire harvest.

Bart tightened the string about the neck of the pouch and swung it inside his shirt on the end of a lanyard that went around his neck. Then he turned to the Chilean.

"I'm afraid we'll have to say good night, Jorge," he remarked pleasantly. "Maro and I have been diving all day. We're going to turn in."

Vendayo went out slowly. Neither Bart nor Maro said a word until they heard the splash of the Chilean's paddle in the lagoon. Then Bart gave voice to a rousing cheer and clapped Maro enthusiastically on the shoulder.

"We're rich, old boy!" he crowed.

IN spite of their suddenly acquired wealth, Bart and Maro rose early the next morning and set to work as they had every day since their arrival at Fanahiva a month before. The bed from which they had taken the black pearl lay outside the reef, marked by a red can buoy. They made for this marker with their two canoes and diving equipment.

Working leisurely in the cool of the

morning, they lashed one canoe to another and set up a small rotary hand pump. Bart donned the diving suit. It was not a complete suit, such as are used for salvage operations in great depths, but a simpler outfit, consisting of the usual brass helmet and breast plate, and an open-bottomed canvas shirt reaching halfway to the knees.

In this scaphander suit, as it was called, Bart went down, Maro pumping him air and tending his life line. It was a sixty-foot descent to the oyster bed; an easy dive for Bart, who had spent much of his working life beneath the sea.

Opening his exhaust valve, he sank to the bottom. When his feet touched, he pulled strongly on the life line—once—to let Maro know he was on the bottom. He adjusted the exhaust valve so the air pressure kept the water level down just below his arm-pits. Then he glanced out through the barred glass window of the helmet.

THE morning sunlight slanted down through the ocean in long lances, driving away the sub-sea gloom and replacing it with a wonderful translucent green. The sand on which Bart stood was bone white. It fell in a long, gradual slope from the coral reef of Fanahiva westward, sinking deeper and deeper beneath the lonely, landless stretch of ocean that reached unbroken to New Zealand.

There was more than just sand about him. Castles, spires, branched trees and great shapeless mounds of coral spotted the sea floor. He could never look at such formations without experiencing a sense of wonder that they could be built of the skeletons of creatures too small to be seen by the unaided eye.

Around Bart's neck hung a net of native weave. It was the container he expected to fill with oysters. Guarding his air hose and life line carefully, he set off through the jungle of coral. He paused once and reached out to break off an encrusted, brownish growth about the size of two fists. A novice might well have passed it without suspecting that it was a live oyster.

Then he came to the black shell, birth-

place of his big pearl. It was an extensive bed, situated so the running tides scooped it hollow and gave the hundreds of oysters in it refuge from disturbances. It was not long before Bart's net was full and he pulled four times on his life line to signal Maro he was ready to come up. He closed the exhaust valve slightly, allowing the air pressure to build up and drive the water down through the open bottom of his suit. Soon he was buoyant enough to rise.

At the surface, he handed Maro the net of shell and clambered up the Jacob's ladder into the canoe. Maro helped him out of the helmet and breast plate.

"Is there more shell, boss?" he asked.

"Plenty," Bart replied. "We'll be here a month."

He lolled back in one of the canoes while Maro emptied the net into the other. Lighting a stubby pipe he always carried, Bart allowed his muscles to slack and the rising sun to play warmly on his face. Closing his eyes, he puffed at his pipe, and his thoughts wandered back over the years to the town where he was born.

He remembered the little schoolhouse and the dusty play yard. He remembered shrill, childish voices shouting "Coward!" at him when he refused to fight another boy. The scorn he earned then had plagued him throughout his boyhood. One night he ran away, to realize a long-cherished dream to see the South Seas. San Francisco and the docks and the dingy tramp steamer that took him to Tahiti. Then Maro, and the *Puma*, and the islands.

Bart's fingers brushed lightly over the tobacco sack and paused to press the hard shape of the pearl within it. He shifted comfortably. Whatever his past had been, the great pearl insured his future. When he and Maro returned to Papeete, they could sell it and buy a fleet of schooners. They could send crews of native divers out to scour the sea bottoms for shell.

"Boss!" Maro called.

Bart's eyes opened, his daydreams gone.

Maro was staring at the northern horizon, one hand shading his eyes from the early sun. Bart looked in the same direction, but saw nothing.

"What is it, Maro?" he asked.

"I hear motor." Maro's features were screwed up tightly, as if to help his hearing.

"A motor!" Bart echoed, scrambling to his knees. "The only motors hereabouts are on the *Puma* and Vendayo's schooner."

"This not ship motor," Maro explained. "Bird motor."

Then Bart saw it—a dark speck low over the northern horizon.

"An airplane!" he said wonderingly. "What in heaven's name is it doing here at Fanahiva?"

AS they watched, the spot grew larger and took shape as a cabin monoplane, painted a brilliant red with silver pontoons. Both watchers knew instinctively that something was wrong. The whine of the motor was nervous and unsteady. The pilot seemed to be fighting to keep the plane in the sky.

As it neared the island, the motor spluttered and cut out entirely. Immediately the plane's nose dropped. Wind shrieked in the wire stays.

"He come down in lagoon," Maro said.

Bart nodded, still regarding the seaplane with amazement. It was incredible that it should appear here in a corner of the world untouched by civilization!

Suddenly Bart realized the plane's predicament. It was sinking faster than he had realized. It would be a tight squeeze to hop over the barrier reef and land in the protected waters of the lagoon. The pilot was stretching his glide and trying not to lose flying speed at the same time.

Bart was not sure until the plane was almost down that it could not make it. It was sure to strike the reef.

"Maro!" he shouted. "Cast off the shell canoe!"

The brown man sprang into action, slashing through the thongs that bound the two canoes together. Bart knifed those in the stern and picked up a paddle. Both he and Maro bent to their task, and the lean craft raced over the ocean toward the reef.

In desperation, seeing he could not

make the lagoon, the pilot pulled back on his stick and gave hard right rudder. He wanted to come around and pancake on the ocean, but one wing-tip dipped perilously close to the foaming surf, wavered, then sliced into a tumbling comber. Already half-stalled, the plane nosed over and squashed into the sea. It cradled into the water, both pontoons smashed. The surf lifted it and dashed it on the face of the coral reef. It clung there a moment, then its tail tilted skyward and it slid out of sight, drawn down by the receding undertow.

The canoe dashed into the foaming surf a moment later, driving forward under the impetus of two strongly manned paddles.

"The pilot's still in the plane!" Bart shouted. "Let's go down!"

As if at a prearranged signal, both men rose and dived over the side. They fought through the welter of white, boiling surf into the quiet depths.

MIRACULOUSLY, the seaplane had not plunged the full distance to the floor of the sea. Halfway down, in five fathoms of water, it lodged in a wedge-shaped crevice of coral, and there it clung. Bart swam to the cabin door and yanked on it. There was still air in the cabin, however, and it acted as a weighty lock, with the water pressing to get in. Maro reached his side and attacked the wood and canvas with his shark knife. Bart glanced inside and saw the pilot hunched over the controls.

Shoving Maro away, he gave the door a mighty pull. It opened and the penned-up air wobbled surfaceward in a great bubble. Bart shoved himself inside. Seizing the inert pilot by the belt, he dragged him out and shot for the surface, aching to feed his lungs the air they demanded. While he treaded water in the surf, Maro swam after the canoe, which was battering on the face of the coral. It took both of them to heave the pilot into the canoe, for they were exhausted from the under-sea labor.

Their first worry was to get clear of

the waves, which urged them to destruction on the sharp spines of the reef. When they had pushed out to sea, Bart dropped his paddle and turned his attention to the pilot he had rescued.

The aviator was wearing a leather jacket and flying helmet. Bart yanked the helmet off and, to his infinite surprise, a mass of red-gold hair tumbled about the pilot's shoulders.

"Maro!" he cried. "It's a girl!"

The Marquesan turned, paddle poised in the air, to stare at the limp figure in the bottom of the canoe. His jaw fell as Bart turned her gently over on her back.

"Damn pretty girl, I say!" he replied.

Clothed as she was in wet, masculine clothes, her hair falling about her cheeks, she somehow managed to justify Maro's description.

His first astonishment abated, Bart bent over her and was glad to detect a faint but regular heartbeat.

"We got her up before she swallowed too much of the Pacific," he said. "But we'd better get her on board the *Puma* as soon as we can."

Manning the canoe once more, they drove across the surf and through the westerly pass into the quiet lagoon. Swinging up to the schooner, they placed the girl on deck. Maro went ashore to fetch the only white resident of the island, the missionary, Pere LeVaque, a tall, spare man of infinite kindness.

LeVaque came immediately. Bart placed the girl on a mattress on the after-deck, under the shade of a tarpaulin stretched over the main boom.

"She hasn't regained consciousness yet," Bart said, when the missionary joined him at her side. "I think this is the trouble." He pointed to an ugly, purpled blotch on the girl's white forehead.

Pere LeVaque's gentle fingers touched the bruise. He shook his head.

"*C'est mauvais!*" he muttered. "With such a hurt, she should not be unconscious still."

"Do you think she received internal injuries?" Bart asked, suddenly anxious.

The priest rose, still staring at the girl. "*Non, mon ami.* I 'ave the fear she suffers from what you call shock, my friend, and one can never tell about that. She 'as come a long way in the airplane and she is fatigued. Then she crash." He shrugged eloquently. "If there is no fever, she will be all right soon again."

BART did some quick thinking. The nearest possible help was on the island of Mangareva, one hundred and fifty miles away. Maybe there was a doctor there—maybe not. If there wasn't, then the nearest doctor was one thousand miles further on, at Tahiti. He shook his head. Tahiti might as well have been on the moon!

"We'll just have to hope she doesn't get any fever," he said grimly.

Pere LeVaque sent ashore for two native women from the mission. Bart carried the girl below and laid her in one of the bunks in the main cabin. There was nothing else they could do for her.

The women kept constant watch over her the rest of the day. They bathed her forehead to take the swelling out of the bruise. But nothing seemed to allay the ill effects of what Pere LeVaque had called "shock." Gradually, the girl's breath became louder and harsher. Late in the afternoon the missionary took her temperature.

"*Sacre nom!*" he gasped. "One hundred and three degrees!"

Maro's usually cheerful countenance sobered. He didn't know anything about temperature indications, but he knew sickness when he saw it.

"My word, what shame!" he mourned. "Poor lady!"

"We'd better dose her up with some quinine, Father," Bart said. "Can I send Maro ashore to get some of yours? I used the last of mine a month ago and haven't replaced it since."

"Quinine!" LeVaque repeated. "My friend, I am desolate! I, too, 'ave used the last of mine. I meant to ask you to bring me more when you return from Papeete."



Bart and Maro dove deep, away from the canoe. Vendayo shot wildly, trying to keep them under

"Haven't you any at all?" Bart demanded.

Maro interrupted. "Maybe Vendayo have some."

"Good boy, Maro!" Bart said with relief. "Hop over and borrow some!"

Maro went up the companionway like a monkey, but he no sooner reached the

deck than a shout came from his lips.

"Vendayo gone, boss!"

Bart glanced at LeVaque in surprise.

"Did you know Vendayo had pulled out?" he asked.

The missionary shook his head. "He was still at his moorings this morning. He must have gone during the day."

Bart leaped up the companionway. The lagoon was empty of any ship other than the *Puma*. There was not a sail in sight.

"Wonder what got into Vendayo?" he muttered, half to himself. "He was going to operate here the rest of the month."

"Monsieur!" the missionary called from the cabin. "Come quickly!"

BART returned to LeVaque's side. The missionary bent over the bunk on which the fevered girl lay. No longer quiet, she twisted and turned beneath the blanket that covered her. Her eyes wide open, she stared unseeing at the oarlines above her.

"She raves!" LeVaque said, casting an anxious look at the pearer. "I 'ave the fear she is one very sick girl now."

"What's her temperature?"

LeVaque slipped the thermometer under the girl's tongue. When he took it out, he read, "One hundred and five degrees."

Bart swore to himself. "With quinine, we could kill that fever," he said. "She won't live without it."

"We can only pray," the tall missionary said, clasping his hands over the tortured girl.

Bart leaped for the companionway steps. Over his shoulder, he called back, "You go ahead and pray, Father. I'm going after Vendayo."

On deck, he found night blacking out the island in the sudden way of the tropics.

It spread like quicksilver over the sea, roughly elbowing the last rays of the sun over the western horizon.

"Feel like going for a canoe ride, Maro?" Bart asked.

The brown man's eyes glittered. "You mean we follow Vendayo, boss? We don't know which way he go."

"I don't give a damn!" Bart cried. "We've got to find him and get that quinine. He must have headed for Mangareva. It's the only way to go from Fanahiva. There's not much wind. He can't be far."

"Maybe we see his lights," Maro agreed doubtfully.

Without further preparation, they dropped into the canoe. Bart took the stern paddle and Maro the bow. They settled themselves for work and started out. They sped across the star-spattered lagoon, through the western entrance, and then the bow of the canoe rose to meet the sea swells. They swung north. Navigation was simple, with the heavens glittering with stars.

For half an hour they paddled silently. Suddenly Maro stopped and held up a warning hand. Bart gave way.

"What is it?" he asked.

"I hear one fella ship."

Bart could hear nothing but the smart slapping of the sea against the sides of the canoe. Then he heard something else; a mysterious, uncertain noise, familiar only to those who have sailed in wind-driven ships. It was the soft talking of ropes and blocks, the gentle straining of hemp and canvas that speaks of a sailing ship on her way.

"Where is it?" Bart said. "I can't see a thing!"

Maro pointed.

A block of darkness loomed in front of the stars low over the eastern horizon, blotting them out. It was a sail. They swung the lithe canoe about and headed for the lightless ship. When they were near abeam, they gave way again.

"It's Vendayo's lugger, all right," Bart whispered.

"Something funny," Maro muttered.

"Ahoy!" Bart called loudly. "Vendayo! Are you on board?"

A startled exclamation that was abruptly muffled answered their hail. There was a sound of bare feet scraping on canvased decks, and then a lantern blinked into life.

"Who's that?" came the answer.

"Me. Bart Lamar. What the hell are you doing out here without lights?"

They drove the canoe alongside the schooner and leaped aboard.

Vendayo held the lantern high and stared into their faces as if he suspected they might be ghosts rising from Davy Jones' locker.

"Hello, Bart," he said lamely. "I forgot to put out runnin' lights. Ain't no use to, anyway. There ain't any ships on these seas."

Bart did not bother with his own suspicions.

"Do you have any quinine?" he demanded. "We picked up a sick girl. She crashed in a seaplane this morning and now she's down with fever."

Vendayo hesitated.

"Si!" he said finally. "I get it for you."

HE went below slowly. Bart took the opportunity to glance about the schooner. Vendayo's native crew stood in a knot around the helm. No one uttered a word of greeting. A swift glance aloft showed that the ship was not sailing. For some reason, she was hove to at sea.

Vendayo returned with the quinine, wrapped in brown paper and oilskin.

"Here it is," he said.

"Thanks, Jorge," Bart said, taking it. "We're in a hurry to get back, otherwise we'd stop and chin awhile. Lucky thing we caught you so close to the island."

Vendayo nodded, and his teeth flashed in a quick white smile.

"Bart," he said softly, "do you have the pearl with you—the big one?"

An alarm bell rang in Bart's brain. From the corner of his eye he saw the Kanakas lounge forward. Maro doubled his fists apprehensively.

"Why, no, Jorge," Bart drawled. "Matter of fact, I left it on the *Puma*. Want another look at it?" He hoped the lie sounded convincing.

Vendayo's face fell. He looked evil, with the lantern light shading his pocked features. He didn't know whether to believe Bart or not.

"Yeah," he hesitated. "Yeah, I want another look at that pearl."

"Maybe I'll see you in Papeete before I sell it," Bart said. He stepped toward the rail. "We have to be going. *Hasta la vista!*"

Before anyone could make a move to stop them, he and Maro leaped into the canoe and whipped loose the painter. They

shoved off, paddles ready. Vendayo stood at the rail, still undecided.

"So long!" Bart called cheerfully.

Vendayo lifted one hand in response. "You say right, Bart," he called. "*Hasta la vista!* Until we see each other again. Maybe that is sooner than you think, my friend!"

Bart and Maro disappeared into the night as Vendayo concluded his speech. They said nothing to each other, for both knew why the Chilean was lying hove to at sea. He was waiting for Bart to sail for Papeete with the black pearl. Then, with his crew and his guns, he could board the *Puma*—with no one around to see what happened.

Back aboard the *Puma*, Bart promptly forgot Vendayo. He gave the quinine to Father LeVaque, who dissolved it in warm water and administered it to the sick girl. She drank, gulping like a baby. Bart winced as he saw her swallow it. He knew how bitter raw quinine can be.

For a while she continued tossing and moaning, and they began to fear the quinine had come too late. But an hour later, after a second dose had been given her, she broke into a heavy sweat. The heat of the quinine had begun to combat the unhealthy heat of the fever. Joyfully, the island women bundled her in blankets and bathed her forehead with lukewarm water.

Soon she fell asleep. Pere LeVaque took her temperature.

"Going down," he said quietly. "She will live."

TWO days later, the girl with the red-gold hair had recovered sufficiently to be carried ashore and installed in one of the open-sided, healthy native houses. Bart and Maro went back to their work outside the reef. Bart reflected, as he did so, that in spite of limited facilities, the strange girl had been cared for as well on Fanahiva Island as if she had been in a modern hospital.

That evening Bart donned white drill trousers and a clean shirt and went ashore to visit the sick girl. He found her re-

covered to comparative comfort and able to carry on conversation.

"Hello," he smiled, bending over the mats on which she lay. "I'm Bart Lamar. Glad to see you perking up."

She smiled faintly. Now that her eyes were open, Bart noticed they were blue, with a haughty look to them.

"I understand you saved my life," she remarked matter-of-factly.

Bart grinned uncomfortably. "Pere LeVaque's been talking too much. All I did was dig you out of the sea and dose you with quinine."

"Thank you," she said crisply. "I'll see that you're well rewarded. But please tell me where the nearest cable office is. I understand there is none on this island."

"Cable office? I'll say there isn't! Why, miss, you're on Fanahiva Island. There's plenty of time to think of cable offices when you're well enough to leave for Papeete."

She said quickly, "How can I get there?"

"Well," Bart mused, "Cap'n Waite sometimes comes down here in his trading schooner. Twice a year."

"Twice a year!" The girl's tone was indignant. "Oh, but that's impossible! I must leave immediately. It's imperative that I be in San Francisco in three weeks."

In the South Seas, people never are in a hurry to do things. Bart smiled tolerantly, but her angry stare put an end to his humor.

"Tell you what," he offered. "I'll take you there in my schooner, just as soon as I get a load of shell aboard. That won't be more'n a month, and it'll take you all of that to get back on your feet."

"Nonsense!" she snapped, sitting up. "I refuse to be babied this way! I insist that you take me to Papeete tomorrow."

Bart flushed. "I'm no taxi driver, lady," he growled. "Why didn't you fly to Papeete in that airplane of yours, instead of coming way to heck down here?"

It was her turn to show embarrassment. "I was going to Tahiti," she stammered. "Sort of a stunt. Non-stop Hawaii to Tahiti. I failed. Must have lost my course."

"You sure did, lady—with a lot to spare! You were headed in the general direction of the South Pole when your motor conked. Lucky thing you fell where there was somebody to pick you out of the brine."

"My compass went haywire," she said stiffly.

"Yeah. Sure! It couldn't be you bit off more than you could chew," Bart said, rising. "By the way, what is your name?"

"Jane Thompson," she said. Suddenly she became eager. "I'll pay you well, if you take me to Papeete tomorrow."

Bart laughed. "I'm a pearler, lady. I make my living from the sea, not carting lady aviators around."

"But this is absurd! I can't wait here on this forsaken island for months while you make up your mind to go home!"

"I *am* home," Bart said quietly.

HE turned on his heel and left the house. The anger her obstinacy had churned up within him vanished quickly, however, and he stopped at the mission to see LeVaque and drink a glass of white wine with him before returning to the *Puma*.

"'Ave you spoken with the American girl, Bart?" the old man asked, his eyes twinkling whimsically.

"Yeah," Bart growled. "She's the original spoiled brat, isn't she?"

"You know who she is, of course?"

"She said her name was Jane Thompson."

The missionary laughed. "Perhaps you 'ave been lost among these islands too long, my friend, to know who is this Jane Thompson."

Bart shook his head.

"I will tell you. She is one of the richest girls in America, rich with money she 'as inherit from her father. Now she is alone in the world, all she can think of is trying foolish ways to break her neck. Always, she flies aeroplanes to impossible places, or climbs peaks never attempted before."

"Can't think of anything better to do with her money!" Bart sneered.

The missionary shook his head. "Don't be harsh with her, my friend. She is young, and alone. Everyone she meets thinks only of her money. She may be rich, but she is unhappy, believe me."

"That so?" Bart mused. "I suppose I ought to run her up to Papeete, before she dies of boredom here." He lit his stubby pipe thoughtfully. "Hell, no!" he said explosively. "I don't care what she is, she needs a lesson in good manners!"

FOR a week and a half, Bart was as good as his word. He went nowhere near the American girl. Instead, he and Maro continued their leisurely work off the reef, stripping black shell from the valuable bed. Occasionally Bart went ashore in the cool of the evening to chat with the missionary and take a glass of wine with him. On one of those evenings, he showed the old man the black pearl.

"*Mon Dieu!*" exclaimed LeVaque. "You have had great luck this trip, my friend. That is superb!"

He studied the pearl carefully before returning it. When it was back in Bart's hands again, he drew a deep breath and shook his head.

"If I were not a good Christian, Bart, I would say the devils had got into your pearl. That coloring! Never 'ave I seen its like."

Bart laughed. "Maro calls it the Storm Pearl."

The priest did not join in the laughter. His face was serious.

"'As anyone seen this pearl?" he asked.

Bart shook his head. "Only you and Maro, besides myself. Oh, yes—and Jorge Vendayo."

"Ah!" the priest cried. "I was afraid of that! That explains why he left the island. He thought the temptation to steal it too great to remain."

Bart nodded, but he thought Vendayo had not left for so honorable reason. He remembered the night he and Maro had gone after the pock-marked Chilean for quinine.

"One must be careful," LeVaque warned. "When I gazed at your pearl, I felt

strange desires rise within me. I wanted to possess it for myself, but I am a good Christian, I put aside the desire. Vendayo, however, is not a good Christian."

"Your advice is good, Father," Bart said. "Don't worry. I'll take care of the pearl."

It was on this night, returning to the beach, that Bart saw the American girl again. He had just come out of the mission, lighting his everlasting pipe, when she came up to him. At first he took her for a native woman, for she wore a flowered *pareu*, a simple, one-piece garment that covered her from arm-pits to knees.

"Bart Lamar!" she called softly.

"Who is it?" Bart demanded. Then "Oh!" as she stepped out of the shadow of the palm fronds and he recognized her. The moon was quartered that night, yet its light was strong enough to bathe her luxurious hair in silver beauty.

"I have something to tell you. Something important," she said. Her voice was low and hurried.

"Yes?"

"Not here," she parried quickly. "Take me with you tomorrow, when you go after shell."

Bart hesitated, wondering what she was up to.

"All right," he agreed. "Be on the beach at sunup."

She nodded.

The sun was just following the dawn over the horizon when Bart came on deck and saw the scarlet flash of her *pareu* on the white beach. He took her with him in one canoe, while Maro went ahead with the equipment in the other. When they reached the red can buoy, they lashed the canoes together.

BART turned to the girl. In the morning light she was very beautiful. Now that the last traces of the fever were gone, her cheeks were healthily flushed. He gave her an old shirt to put over her shoulders so the sun would not burn them. The buttons of the shirt were mother-of-pearl, large and round.

"I couldn't talk to you last night because I thought we might be overheard," she explained, as she slipped into the shirt.

"By whom?"

"Do you know a man named Vendayo?" she countered.

"Sure. What about him?"

"He was on the island two nights ago. One of the women told me about him. It seems he came ashore from his schooner to see why you hadn't left for Papeete."

Bart chewed his lip thoughtfully. "Did you see him?" he asked.

"Yes. I asked him to take me to Papeete," Jane Thompson said, smiling guiltily. "I guess I didn't like the way you treated me."

Bart grinned. "I don't blame you," he remarked. "I was pretty sore. But what did Vendayo say?"

"I offered him a thousand dollars if he would take me to Papeete on his schooner. He refused. I couldn't understand this, because a man of his sort doesn't find a chance to make that much money every day. Then I heard about your pearl. One of his men mentioned it to the islanders. It seems Vendayo is going to try to take it from you. In fact, he's almost insane with the idea. The island people are shaking their heads over him. They can't understand such greed."

Bart nodded. "Yeah," he grunted. "I know about Vendayo. He took it between the eyes when he saw the Storm Pearl. I hardly know that I can blame him. To a pearler, this big black baby can take the place of food and drink."

He rolled the pearl out of the tobacco sack.

"It's the coloring," he pointed out. "You can't be sure whether it's beautiful or the ugliest damn thing you've ever seen. It mixes you up inside, and if you aren't too particular about the things you do, first think you know you're sharpening up a knife to stick in the back of the fellow who owns it. I've seen just that happen, too."

"It's lovely!" Jane breathed, gazing at the pearl. "I begin to understand

Vendayo's madness now. But," she interrupted herself, "what do you intend doing about it?"

"Do?" Bart repeated. "Why—nothing. If Vendayo wants the pearl, let him try to take it."

Jane Thompson stared at him as if she had not heard correctly.

"You mean you'd let him take the pearl away from you?"

"I didn't say that," Bart corrected her. "But I certainly can't stop him from trying."

She shook her head slowly, eyes wide with amazement.

"They told me that you—that you were a strange person," she said slowly.

Bart's lips tightened. So *that* was cropping up again!

"You mean they told you I was a coward?" he said grimly. "A man who never fights?"

"Yes—that was what they said." Her eyes became suddenly inquiring. "Are you?" she asked bluntly.

"I suppose I am," he said.

"Well, I never!" Jane gasped. "All my life I've had a full-fledged contempt for men. I can fly better, hunt better, swim faster, run faster, and climb farther than most men I know. But even the worst of them never admitted he was a coward."

Bart's face reddened. He turned and started to pull on the scaphander diving suit.

"It's not that I'm a coward," he retorted. "Ever since I was a kid, I've hated to hurt people or see them hurt. I just don't believe fighting settles anything."

"How do you expect to live in a world where fighting is the only way of surviving?" she demanded. "Haven't you any self-respect?"

"I don't care what people think of me," he insisted stubbornly. "If you want to call me a coward, go ahead. I *still* think my way of living is best."

She answered him by withdrawing to the far end of the canoe, where Maro was preparing the rotary pump and life line.

Bart leaped angrily over the side and hung there, his feet on the steps of a

short Jacob's ladder, while Maro set the brass helmet over his head. He tightened the thumb screws, fiddled experimentally with the exhaust valve, and sank below the surface.

FOR half an hour he worked in the oyster bed, stripping hoary shells from the rock outcroppings and stuffing them in his net bag. As he walked about, his thoughts dwelt persistently on what Jane Thompson had said to him. Many people had branded him a coward before, because of his contempt for fighting, but never before had the word rankled so.

When he had filled his net, he lifted a hand to the life line to signal for the ascent. As he did so, he saw, through the barred glass window of his helmet, something that caused him to freeze.

Before him, stretching on the white sand with languorous ease, were several snakelike tentacles. They led into the dark recesses of a coral cave. Without thinking twice, Bart knew they were the tentacles of an octopus, and a large one at that.

He lowered his arm slowly and began backing away from the coral cliff. Any sharp, noticeable gesture on his part might attract the creature's attention. Bart knew only too well what would be the result; driving through the water at incredible speed with its rocket-like siphon, the octopus would be on him, wrapping him about like a mummy, using its eight writhing tentacles, each one equipped with a double row of vacuum suckers.

He had tangled with the baggy, shapeless things before and had no desire to repeat the experience. His only thought was to back far enough away so that he would not be noticed when he ascended to the surface.

As he backed, he noticed a moray eel slide off the coral cliff and stir up a cloud of sand. Without realizing the nearness of danger, the eel wriggled over one of the outstretched tentacles. Instantly it was caught in a vise-strong grip. It responded with its sole weapon of defense, an instant and vicious discharge of electricity, strong enough to stun a horse. The ten-

tacle relaxed its grip and the eel slipped away. A moment later the octopus came out of its lair, white eyes glaring about for the offender who had all but electrocuted him. Spying the eel, he shot down on it.

Sucker-plated arms wrapped around the eel's body, crushing it. Vainly the eel discharged its electric shock. It seemed too weak to affect the octopus. In a few short moments, the eel writhed in its death struggle as the octopus drew it under its bulbous bag and ripped it to shreds with a parrotlike beak.

Bart watched this struggle fearfully, until he saw the octopus start back to its cave with the eel. It had not seen him. In a moment it would be safe to signal Maro that he wanted to ascend.

Suddenly the octopus stopped. Wondering why the beast did not finish its eel, Bart glanced around. Then he saw what had caught the creature's attention. A misty figure was descending—another diver!

Bart caught his breath, horror washing over him. That diver could be none other than Jane Thompson. Evidently she had coaxed Maro into letting her use the spare suit. . . .

HELPLESS and unable to warn the girl, Bart watched her reach the bottom and struggle to get her balance. Beneath the diving suit, her *pareu* floated about bare legs.

She could not have come down in a worse place. The octopus was not ten feet from her. Bart glanced at the monster. It had released the shredded eel. That meant it saw a larger, more succulent prey.

The girl had evidently not seen the octopus, for she raised one hand in greeting to Bart and started toward him. He dared not move even to return the greeting, for fear the monster would charge. The one chance he had was to get near enough to her to pull an emergency signal on her life line. Then Maro could pull her out of danger.

He edged toward her. He was close

enough to see the pallor of her face and the trickle of blood from her nostrils. She was unused to the pressure, even at this moderate depth.

The octopus had remained as immobile as granite since releasing the body of the eel. Now it turned its coloring a deep, mottled purple that blended perfectly with the background. Bart knew it was about to make a swift charge on the unsuspecting girl. He prayed that he might get his hands on her life line before that happened. In spite of the cold water around him, his forehead dripped with sweat. He saw the octopus arrange its tentacles behind it, the way a cat gets into position to swoop down on a mouse.

Jane was close now. Desperately, Bart risked everything by lunging for her. He caught her life line and yanked four times.

For just one long, agonizing second nothing happened. Then Maro began pulling the girl up. Just as her feet swung past Bart's head, the sea turned into a black cloud. The octopus had charged, spitting out its sepia to veil its actions. Powerful tentacles wrapped around Bart's legs and body. He could feel the suction of the vacuum cups draw the blood through his skin.

Bart managed to keep his right arm free by holding it high. With it, he hacked fiercely at the tentacles with his shark knife. Although he could see nothing because of the sepia, he felt one of the tentacles relax and knew he had cut it through.

Once the monster had secured a grip on him, it struggled no more. Instead, it exerted all its strength in an effort to squeeze the life out of Bart. His ribs bent under the strain, and he knew he would have to act quickly or be crushed like the moray eel.

Maro must, by now, have got Jane to the surface. Bart raised his hand to the life line to signal for his own ascent. The octopus sensed the move and jerked him violently by the legs, almost upsetting him.

When he regained his balance once more, Bart tried again, this time more cautiously. He grasped the line and yanked four times. Maro pulled at once.

But the octopus had fastened as many tentacles to the sea floor as it had on Bart and the two were securely anchored. Maro pulled again, but he could not break the hold. The octopus tightened its grip and squeezed convulsively. Bart groaned with the pain of straining ligaments and bones near to cracking.

A slight tidal current set in and washed away the sepia. Bart found himself staring full into a pair of bloodshot, baleful eyes. Shuddering at their closeness, he drove the shark knife deep between them. The creature jerked violently and clouded the waters with more sepia. Bart, sick with the nearness of the disgusting thing, jerked wildly at his life line, and Maro pulled again. Jane Thompson was evidently helping him, for the pull was stronger now.

They pulled in timed jerks, as if counting "one, two, three, four" and yanking at each count. This was a plan Bart and Maro had laid long before for just such an emergency. Timing his move with one of the powerful jerks, Bart twisted suddenly and slashed at the anchoring tentacles with the shark knife.

It worked. Two of the arms were cut through, and Maro's heave broke two others loose from the bedrock. Man and creature skyrocketed for the surface.

THE octopus lashed wildly as they shot up, wrapping all its remaining arms around Bart in an effort to crush him to a pulp in a final, punishing embrace. The sharp, parrotlike beak raked deep into his chest through the stout canvas diving suit. Pain seared his side like a branding iron.

They broke surface in a welter of foam. Bart caught a momentary glimpse of the canoe and Maro, puzzled, standing in the stern. When the brown man spied the octopus he shouted and, catching up a fishing lance from the bottom of the canoe, leaped into the sea.

Coming up under the octopus, he drove the spear deep into its bag. The monster released Bart and turned on this new menace, its eyes brimming with red-veined malevolence.

Bart slashed again and again into the bag and tentacles of the creature. The sharp knife glittered in the sunlight, then became clouded with murky blood. Stricken and paralyzed, the octopus sank below the surface.

Jane Thompson leaned over the side of the canoe and helped Maro drag Bart in. They removed the heavy helmet and awkward diving suit and then turned their attention to the wound inflicted by the octopus' beak.

It was a jagged slash across his chest, laying two ribs bare to the cruel salt air. Jane's face went white.

"Oh!" she gasped. "That's horrible!"

Bart's jaws were tightly clamped together. He managed to open them long enough to mutter, "Guess I needed a little ventilation."

His legs were covered with red splotches where the vacuum plates had sucked his blood.

"Take me back to the *Puma*, Maro," he mumbled. "I need a shot of whiskey."

JANE helped the brown man unlash the two canoes. Taking one in tow, they paddled toward the pass through the reef. Bart lay flat on his back in the bottom of the narrow craft, his eyes closed. Jane sat in the stern. Once Bart opened his eyes and saw her staring at him.

"Thanks for saving my life—the second time," she said simply. "I argued Maro into letting me use the spare suit. I wanted to see what diving was like. Picked a fine time to try, didn't I?"

"That's all right," he replied gruffly.

Her eyes did not leave his face. "You're the bravest coward I ever met," she said huskily.

They got Bart aboard the *Puma* and stretched him on the after deck. Pere LeVaque came out immediately upon Maro's summons.

"Thank God!" he exclaimed, when he

heard of the fight with the sea monster. "You are one lucky chap, Bart."

He inspected the wound carefully.

"Not too bad," he decided. "It 'urts because the flesh was torn, and it will 'urt more when I clean it."

"Go ahead," Bart ordered.

LeVaque poured a generous application of iodine into the cut, after bathing it thoroughly. Bart winced as the antiseptic bit into his flesh. LeVaque stitched the lips of the gash together with boiled sail twine from the *Puma's* repair kit.

"There!" he announced with satisfaction. "Keep on drinking whiskey until the pain is gone. You'll be all right."

Bart nodded and helped himself from the bottle Maro nudged toward him.

"Thanks, Father," he said. "I'll be fit for work in a day or two. I want to finish cleaning out that bed of black shell."

"What?" Jane cried. "You can't go back there again! That creature may still be alive!"

"He's pretty sick, if he is," Bart retorted. "Besides, I want that shell."

The missionary's features suddenly contracted in sober lines.

"I think it would be best if you leave that bed for another time, *mon ami*," he said.

Bart glanced inquiringly at him. LeVaque said:

"The natives ashore are talking. They say Vendayo did not leave the island. He is waiting to take the black pearl from you and he is growing impatient."

Bart's hand closed over the tobacco sack and its precious contents.

"This pearl seems to be causing a hell of a lot of trouble," he observed drily.

Jane's eyes, troubled and disturbed, sought his.

"Is the pearl *really* valuable?" she asked.

"Valuable!" Bart said. "I'll tell the world it is! I guess you don't know much about pearls. Just look at it!" He swung the tobacco sack out of his shirt and dumped the pearl into her hands. "It's the biggest one you'll ever see. But that isn't as important as the fact that it's

perfect. Its shape is a perfect sphere, and its coloring is entirely new. Why, you could go mad looking at that black and green devil! Maro was right when he called it the Storm Pearl."

Bart's voice was rich with enthusiasm as he pointed out the pearl's good features. But Jane did not look at the pearl. Instead, she stared unhappily at Bart.

"I'm—I'm afraid I have something awful to confess," she said.

Bart glanced at her sharply, and she turned her face away.

"I promised Vendayo I would take the pearl from you and give it to him." Her voice was low and trembling.

"What?" Bart cried, leaping to his feet.

"You wouldn't take me to Papeete," Jane said, her voice almost inaudible. "Vendayo said he would—if I got the pearl for him."

Bart's face was white with rage. "Why, you sneaking little snob!" he grated. He stepped toward her, but Pere LeVaque intervened.

"One minute, my friend," the missionary warned. "Let us hear what the young lady has to say for herself."

"Talk fast!" Bart snapped.

JANE faced them eagerly, her twining and untwining fingers betraying her anxiety. "If I had known the pearl was so valuable, I never would have agreed to the idea," she said. "I wanted to pay Vendayo to take me to Papeete. When he refused, I thought I could give him the pearl and pay Bart for it."

"You did, eh!" Bart grated. "I suppose you can afford to pay one hundred thousand dollars for a jaunt to Papeete! That's what the pearl's worth!"

Her eyes widened. She brushed back the red-gold lock of hair that had fallen over her eyes.

"One hundred thousand!" she repeated dumbly. "I thought—I thought perhaps one thousand dollars would be enough. Things are so much cheaper here in the islands."

Bart snorted. "One thousand dollars for the Storm Pearl?" he said. "The buyers in Paris will go mad bidding against each other when they see it. The final price might well be five hundred thousand. Robbery's still robbery, Miss Thompson—even in the islands. You sure must have been in a hurry to get back to the States!"

"I am!" she cried. "I'm in a dreadful hurry. But I know that doesn't excuse what I've done. I'm so sorry, Bart—"

"It's a good thing you didn't go through with it," Bart told her. "Vendayo has five in his crew, and plenty of guns for them."

"Bart!" Jane cried, her eyes wide. "I forgot! Vendayo's coming—"

A noise in the forward cabin caused them all to turn. Vendayo stepped through the bulkhead, an automatic in one hand.

"You talk too much, *señorita*," he growled. "I should have known better than to trust a woman."

"Bart!" Jane screamed. "Bart, believe me, I—"

"Shut up!" Bart interrupted her roughly. "You're sorry—so what? Vendayo gets the pearl and you can go with him to Papeete. That's what you wanted."

The Chilean grinned. "That's right, Bart. I get the pearl. No hard feelin's between you and me, but I get the pearl. Not the woman, though. I don't trust her."

BART smiled grimly and yanked the tobacco sack out of his shirt and held it out to Vendayo. Then he remembered he had given the pearl to Jane.

"She has it," he growled, waving at the girl.

"Give her the pouch," Vendayo commanded. "She can put the pearl in it for safe keeping. I don't want to lose it, now that I've got it, do I?"

Bart did not reply. He tossed the sack to Jane. She caught at it, but missed and stooped to pick it up. Fumbling, she put the pearl in and gave it to Vendayo.

Maro and Bart made no move to interfere, but their eyes never left Ven-

dayo's gun. They hoped it might waver slightly, just enough for one of them to leap on the Chilean. But luck was against them. Vendayo's lips curled. He knew what they were thinking.

"Too late, *amigos mios*," he boasted. "Once the pearl is in my hands, it never leaves."

"You are a brutal man, Vendayo," Pere LeVaque said quietly. "You are heaping sins upon your head."

"Save the sermon for Bart," Vendayo snapped. "He will need religion!"

The Chilean stepped past them and went up the companionway. They heard him slip the painter from one of the canoes and paddle away.

Unmindful of his recent wound, Bart cursed feelingly and went up the companionway two steps at a time. A bullet sang dangerously near his scalp, but he ducked low and scrambled aft, where the second canoe trailed in the breeze. Maro followed him.

"We'll have to nab him before he can get ashore!" Bart shouted.

Jane Thompson hurried after him. "Wait, Bart!" she cried. "I must tell you something."

"You've had your say!" Bart snarled. "Get below, or you'll stop a bullet!"

As if to emphasize his remark, a slug crashed into the deck not two feet from where she stood. Pere LeVaque dragged her back into the protection of the cabin.

Paying no attention to the fusillade Vendayo loosed at them, Bart and Maro dropped into the second canoe. Although the two of them could easily overtake the single paddler, hampered as he was by pausing to fire at them, Bart checked their speed. He had noticed that Vendayo's gun was a German Luger and he was counting the shots. When the eighth one whined past, he leaned on his paddle.

"Come on, Maro!" he cried. "It's now or never! He'll have to stop paddling to load again."

The canoe surged forward, splitting the tranquil lagoon with the sharp furrow of its wake. They could see Vendayo drop his gun and paddle desperately in

an effort to reach the white strand of beach first. He soon saw the pursuing canoe would overtake him long before he could reach his goal. Frantically, he laid aside his paddle and started jamming fresh cartridges into the clip of his automatic.

Bart knew that half seconds counted. If Vendayo managed to get his gun loaded first, he could blast them at close range. He tightened his lips and thrust his paddle deep into the lagoon, pitting the strength of his muscles against Vendayo's nimble fingers.

They were almost beside Vendayo when the Chilean gave a triumphant shout and sprang up, brandishing the reloaded gun.

"You asked for it, Bart!" he cried, aiming at the American's head.

"Over we go, Maro!" Bart roared, and gripped the gunwales with both hands. As if one brain controlled their actions, both men threw their weight heavily to one side. The canoe was long and narrow and had no outrigger to steady it. Unbalanced by their weight, it rolled crazily and capsized, carrying them beneath the surface. Vendayo's shot crashed into the upturned bottom.

Bart and Maro dove deep, away from the overturned canoe. Something hurtled past them through the water, leaving a slanting trail of bubbles behind. Another followed. Vendayo was shooting wildly into the water, trying to keep them under until they drowned.

BART gripped Maro's shoulder and pointed up at the dark shape of Vendayo's canoe. They rose silently through the crystal-clear water until they were directly beneath it. Ranging themselves together on one side, they reached above the surface and gripped the gunwale. This canoe, the one they used as the shell canoe, was equipped with an outrigger to steady it. They heaved mightily.

The outrigger flashed through the air. A dark shape plunged into the water, lashing wildly. Bart flung himself on Vendayo and ripped the gun out of his hands.

Maro righted the canoe and helped Bart load Vendayo back into it. The Chilean was spluttering and coughing, for he was not at home in the water, as most pearl divers are.

In the canoe, Bart's first move was to search the man's pockets. In one he found the tobacco sack. A quick pressure assuring him the giant pearl was still in it, he slung it about his neck once more.

"So no one could take the pearl from you, once you had it, eh, Vendayo?" he taunted.

The Chilean sat up, still gasping for breath. His face was dark with anger.

"By heaven, Bart Lamar," he cried, "I'll get that pearl if I have to cut it out of your belly!"

"That's what *you* think," Bart retorted. To Maro he said, "Let's take him ashore and dump him on the beach. I don't like the smell of him."

"Me not like it, too," Maro said, screwing his features into a comical expression of disgust. "He the baddest smelling fish I ever catch!"

THEIR race had brought them close to the beach, and several strokes of their paddles grounded the canoe. Bart lifted Vendayo in his arms and dropped him unceremoniously on the sand.

"One word of advice, Vendayo," he warned. "Don't come near the *Puma* again. We won't feel like playing, next time."

"Boss! Look!" Maro howled.

Bart whirled. A whaleboat had appeared from behind the second islet enclosed in the reef of Fanahiva. It was manned by five Kanakas—Vendayo's crew.

"Hell!" Bart said.

Vendayo hopped to his feet. "See? You shot off your mouth too soon, Bart!" he crowed. "Those boys have rifles!"

Bart sized up the situation. The whaleboat could intercept him if he tried to make for the *Puma*. They had no guns with them, for Vendayo's automatic had been lost in the struggle.

"We aren't licked yet," he cried suddenly. "Come on, Vendayo, shake the lead out of your pants!"

"Where you takin' me?"

"Into the jungle," Bart said. "You're our hostage. If you try anything I don't like, I'll do some of that belly-slitting you were yapping about."

Vendayo sneered. "That's fine talk. Bart, but you're bluffing. You're a coward. You never fight."

Bart grinned, but there was no humor in the grin. "I might learn how all of a sudden," he retorted.

Driving Vendayo like a cow, Bart and Maro ran for the cover of broad pandanus and palm trees. Behind them, the Kanakas beached their whaleboat and plunged into the undergrowth. They were clever. They fanned out, shouting to each other constantly to keep together, and began flanking their quarry.

"Those *muchachos* are smart," Vendayo said. "You can't lose them."

"Maybe not," Bart said shortly. "Meantime, you keep moving!"

Finally the shouts of the pursuers came from all sides. There was no way to go. Bart turned to Vendayo.

"Tell them to go away!" he ordered. "If they come any closer, I'll kill you."

"You wouldn't kill anyone," Vendayo sneered. "You're a coward."

Bart's fingers closed around the Chilean's scrawny throat. Vendayo's face turned black and his eyes bulged. He clawed at Bart's arms like a drowning cat. Then Bart released his grip.

"Tell them!" he commanded.

There was no doubt about who was a coward. Vendayo's high-pitched voice screamed out something in Hawaiian. Answering shouts came from the Kanakas. Vendayo spoke again, rapidly.

"What did he say, Maro?" Bart asked.

Maro looked puzzled. "I think he tell them to go to whaleboat and wait. I not sure, though. Kanaka tongue different from Marquesan."

"I told them to go back, all right," Vendayo whimpered. "But I'll get you, Bart, and I'll get that black pearl, too."

Bart said nothing in reply. He yanked the Chilean to his feet.

"We'll head east, to the native village,"

he said to Maro. "Pere LeVaque's house-boy can take us out to the *Puma*."

They plunged into the jungle again. There were no more shouts around them from pursuing Kanakas. Bart had just begun to feel that they would make it safely to the village, when the leaves about him stirred and he found himself surrounded by a ring of rifle muzzles.

"What the hell is this?" he roared, leaping back.

"No move!" one of the Kanakas warned him.

Vendayo laughed. "Thought it would be easy, did you?" He ripped the tobacco sack from Bart's neck. "My boys are really smart!"

"You never told them to go back," Bart blazed.

"Sure I did," Vendayo said. "They were bright enough to disobey orders."

Bart and Maro glanced around. The situation was hopeless. They were outnumbered badly. Bart bit his lip as he watched Vendayo pocket the tobacco sack.

"Now that's how I like to do my pearl in'," Vendayo said, winking at his crew. "No diving. No sweating. Just like gatherin' flowers."

The Kanakas grinned. Maro muttered under his breath and started to raise his arms, but the quick alertness of the riflemen discouraged him.

"You win this time," Bart said without emotion.

"*Si, señor,*" Vendayo assured him. "And there won't be any next time."

BART turned away, Maro following. They trudged silently through the few yards that separated them from the village. Taking one of the canoes drawn up on the beach, they returned to the schooner.

Jane Thompson and LeVaque were waiting for them. They did not have to ask the outcome of the fight. Bart's tense face told them Vendayo now owned the pearl.

"I'm sorry, Bart," Jane said.

"Let's not talk about it," he snapped.

"But Bart—"

He whirled suddenly and caught her around the waist, dragging her over one knee. In spite of her angry protests, he brought his flat hand down sharply. She struggled away from him, her face red and angry.

"You—you—" she cried.

"Shut up!" Bart said. "I had that whack at you coming to me. I paid a pretty high price for it—one hundred thousand dollars."

"You shouldn't have done that, my friend," LeVaque said.

"Think not, Father? I disagree. She had it coming to her. If I ever saw a spoiled, pampered brat who thought her money could buy anything, she's it!"

"But Miss Thompson has something to tell you."

"Nothing she could tell me would be of interest," Bart said. "Moreover, I don't care how or when she gets back to Pa-peete."

"If I give you the pearl, will you take me back?" Jane asked quickly, forgetting her anger.

Bart's gaze was disdainful. "I suppose you'll steal it from Vendayo," he jeered.

"I don't have to," she said. "Look!" She held out her hand. In it lay the black pearl.

Bart stared at it as if bewitched. Then he took it between his fingers and pressed it to make sure it was real.

"How?" he muttered stupidly.

"Remember when Vendayo told me to put the pearl in the tobacco sack?" she asked. "I dropped the sack when you tossed it to me, and when I stooped to pick it up I hid the pearl under my foot."

"But I felt the pearl in the tobacco pouch when I gave it to Vendayo!"

She shook her head. "You felt one of your shirt buttons," she laughed. "Look!" She pointed to the shirt Bart had given her that morning to keep the sun from her shoulders. One of the fat, mother-of-pearl buttons was missing.

"I yanked it off and put it in the sack," she said. "Golly, I was scared! I thought sure Vendayo would notice, but he was too busy keeping you covered."

BART'S jaw sagged. He glanced first at the pearl in his hand, then at the girl, then at Pere LeVaque, who was laughing.

"I'll be damned!" Bart said blankly.

"Me also," Maro chimed in.

"Now will you take me to Papeete?" Jane cried.

A grin stole over Bart's face.

"Lady," he said, "I'll take you to the moon, if that's where you want to go. I could kiss you!"

Jane reddened and backed away. "Never mind the kiss," she protested. "Just take me to Papeete, and I'll never bother you again."

"Bother me!" Bart roared. "Anybody who can outwit Vendayo, as you did, couldn't bother me. Lord! I'll bet he swears in seven languages when he opens that tobacco pouch!"

They all laughed, thinking of Vendayo's discomfiture. But Jane's eyes fell to Bart's shirt and her laughter died.

"Your chest!" she cried. "It's bleeding!"

The shirt was smudged with blood. Bart glanced at it.

"I clean forgot about that octopus," he said. "The salt water must have opened the cut. But it doesn't hurt."

"Just the same, we'd better look at it," Jane insisted.

Bart stripped off the shirt. The cut was already covered with a new scab and the stitches were secure.

"Nothing to worry about," Bart assured the girl.

"You must 'ave those stitches removed in Papeete," LeVaque cautioned.

"All the more reason for leaving immediately," Jane said.

Bart rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Vendayo's going to be mighty sore when he finds we still have the pearl. He'll try to waylay us."

"Puma faster ship than his," Maro grinned.

"Yeah, I know. But speed won't do us any good if he squats down on our course and waits for us."

"It will be dark tonight," LeVaque said.

"You can leave the lagoon without being seen."

Bart glanced at the sky. Long fingers of clouds reached down from the northwest. They radiated in all directions, like spokes from the hub of a wheel.

"That looks like weather making," he muttered. "But it will help us get past Vendayo."

"We sail for Papeete, then?" Jane asked eagerly.

Bart nodded. "Tonight."

Maro grinned, content.

The rest of the day was spent in taking supplies aboard and filling water casks. The natives came out from Fanahiva with farewell gifts of oranges and fish and coconuts. They piled these on deck in great heaps. Bart knew better than to offer payment. They were the gifts of a generous, unspoiled people. They expected nothing in return, although what they had given was valuable in terms of island wealth.

Night fell without the usual tropic abruptness, for the massing clouds blotted out the day softly and gradually. The thin crescent of the waning moon was lost above the blanket, and only a few stars managed to glimmer through the occasional openings.

Their farewells made, those aboard the *Puma* hoisted anchor and slipped through the west passage in the reef and into the dark, forbidding sea. Taking their cue from Vendayo, they showed no running lights.

"We have to make sure we get past Vendayo tonight," Bart told Jane. "Our course to Papeete takes us against the wind, and if he manages to keep the windward gauge of us, he'll have the advantage in maneuvering."

He and Maro hoisted the *Puma's* sails. They had been creeping through the reef under jib and foresail. Now they broke out the complete rig, and white sails rose up the masts, filling almost mysteriously with the fresh night breeze. Even the leg-o-mutton topsails were set, for they wanted to be far from Fanahiva before day broke.

BART kept the *Puma* on the port tack until midnight, reaching far out to the west of the island chain. Then he came about and started back to the northeast.

Toward morning the wind began to pick up and the schooner heeled smartly to her work. Dawn revealed a sky obscured by heavily matted cloud layers. Bart shook his head, frowning.

"I don't like it," he muttered. "Those clouds mean heavy weather."

"What's the barometer say?" Jane asked.

Bart turned the helm over to Maro and went below. His face was sober when he came back.

"The barometer's dropping fast," he said.

"Gosh!" Jane said. "I've always wanted to be in a storm at sea!"

Bart glanced at her pityingly. "Down here," he said gently, "we call our storms hurricanes."

"Do you think it will be *that* bad?"

"Can't tell yet. We may only hit the edge, if it is."

Late that afternoon they raised Mangareva. Bart ran close in on the starboard tack before coming about and standing out to sea again. He wanted plenty of sea room to clear the next island, Fangataufa, in the dark.

WHILE he was below checking his navigation with the new departure taken from Mangareva, Maro sang out "Sail-O!" Bart went on deck immediately, with his binoculars. Another schooner had appeared from behind Mangareva and was bearing down on them from the northeast. He inspected her through the glasses.

"Damn!" he muttered. "That's Vendayo! How did *he* get up there?"

"Someone on Fanahiva tell him when we leave," Maro grumbled.

"Looks as if he still wants the pearl," Bart said. "Which puts us in a pretty kettle of fish!"

Jane glanced at him in alarm.

"Will he try to board us?"

Bart nodded. "He has plenty of guns and ammunition, and his crew outnumber us two to one."

"Don't you have any guns?" she asked.

"I don't believe in shooting people," Bart said shortly.

"You mean to say you left Fanahiva without arming yourself? You *knew* you might have to fight Vendayo!"

"Maybe not," Bart shrugged. "Fighting is no way of solving any difficulty."

Her glance was scornful. "You forgot about that yesterday when Vendayo took the pearl!" she pointed out.

"That was different. I didn't want to hurt Vendayo. I just wanted the pearl."

"A lot of good it did you to get it! He'll take it away now. I should have given it to him and saved all this trouble!"

Bart turned away. Vendayo was coming down fast, the wind abaft his beam. He could easily cross the *Puma's* bows and outmaneuver her as long as both ships held to their present courses. Bart glanced at Maro, who was still at the helm.

"Pay off," he ordered. "Let her head come around."

In response to Maro's guidance, the *Puma's* bowsprit pivoted with the wind until it pointed due west. The wind was now on the schooner's beam, her fastest course. Bart glanced over the quarter at Vendayo. The other schooner was forced to alter her course too, for it dared not lose the advantage of the wind. The race was drawn out now, for the ships were sailing nearly parallel courses.

Still Vendayo came closer. Then Maro noticed a tiny plume of black smoke rising beneath the counter of the other ship.

"Boss!" he shouted. "Vendayo using motor!"

"So that's the answer!" Bart said. "Well, two can play at that game."

He went below and kicked over the Diesel auxiliary. It was cold and stubborn from a month's idleness, but finally one cylinder warmed. Two more caught, and the motor rocked off-balance until the fourth cut in.

"You're running away?" Jane said when he came on deck.

"I sure am!" he retorted.

A tenseness gripped the three on the *Puma*. No one spoke. Maro held the spokes of the helm lightly in his thick-fingered hands. The Diesel shoved rumbling clouds of exhaust out of the stern, snarling whenever the tail pipe dipped under the surface.

"One inch to windward will be worth a mile to leeward," Bart said to Maro.

Jane looked at him, a puzzled expression in her eyes. She seemed to be trying to understand this strange man who refused to fight, who even turned tail and ran, and yet who fought magnificently when there was no other alternative.

THE schooners were nearing each other now. Bart could see Vendayo standing knee-deep in the steering well of his ship. The Chilean waved at them wildly, gesturing for them to heave to. No one paid any attention to him.

"Pay off a little more, Maro," Bart ordered.

The brown man obeyed silently. Bart leaned over the taff-rail and gazed speculatively at the wake, judging the *Puma's* speed. Then he pulled out his pipe, packed it, and leaned back to enjoy a smoke.

"We'll get too close!" Jane cried. "We'll be within firing range!"

"Maybe you better go below, then," Bart said mildly.

Again that expression in her eyes. Was he a coward? Perhaps the coward's way would have been to sail directly for Vendayo and challenge him to a fight, even though the outcome was assured by the odds. It took a strange iron nerve, an odd wisdom, to sit calmly puffing at a pipe while disaster rode so near at hand.

As the other schooner approached, it became apparent that the *Puma's* fleetness had given her the advantage. She would come across the other's bows—but by a slim margin.

The two vessels were a scant one hundred yards apart when Bart rose and took over the wheel.

The *Puma* had barely crossed the other schooner's bows when Bart shouted "Alee!" and whirled the helm hard over. The *Puma's* masts rose vertical as she came into the wind. Canvas slatted and booms danced. Then she settled down on the starboard tack, her course almost the exact opposite of Vendayo's.

The ships passed within two hundred feet of each other, the *Puma* to windward. Vendayo had not expected the daring maneuver. His jaw hung loose as he watched them glide by.

"Bart!" he howled. "Heave to! I want that pearl!"

"Some other time!" Bart jeered.

He waved both hands in a mocking gesture. Then they had passed Vendayo and the *Puma* footed swiftly to the north-east.

"Jane!" Bart said. "Get below! Hurry!"

The abrupt sternness of the order caused her to obey without question. She slipped down the companionway. Mere seconds later a rifle slug whined over the stern and nicked a five-inch splinter out of the mainmast.

Vendayo had recovered his wits. . . .

MARO and Bart ducked below the deck level into the protection of the steering cockpit. Bart stretched out at full length, gripping the bottom spokes of the helm and pointing the *Puma* into the wind. Vendayo, he knew, would waste no time in coming about and following them. But sooner or later the *Puma*, being the faster, would outdistance him.

As if in rage at having missed his chance, Vendayo pumped shot after shot into the leading ship. Slugs whammed into planking, scored the decks and nicked the rails. Even those that whizzed harmlessly through the rigging seemed laden with the vengeance of the halfbreed.

"Vendayo never could shoot worth a damn when he was mad," Bart remarked.

Maro grinned.

When the firing finally stopped, Bart raised himself above the deck and glanced astern. Vendayo was half a mile behind, hopelessly outdistanced.

"War's over!" Bart called cheerfully, turning the helm over to Maro.

Jane came up from below.

"You win again, mister," she said with a crooked smile.

Bart paid no attention to her. Something was happening up on the northern horizon. The increasing wind had torn through the solid blanket of clouds, lacing them into filaments and stringing them down close to the sea.

"Looks as if Old Man Weather wants a crack at the Storm Pearl now," Bart commented.

At mention of the Storm Pearl, they instinctively glanced upward. Mottled with the gray of the sky was a peculiar ominous green, warning of the impending storm. It was the same strange color that made the black pearl distinctive. Had they been superstitious, they might have read rage and vengeance in that lowering sky. The rage of the black pearl.

Just before nightfall Bart gave the helm over to Jane while he and Maro went aloft to take in topsails.

The wind, already high, was mounting. Taut lifts and halyards came to life, stropping protestingly against the masts. Blocks creaked and the *Puma's* hull murmured against the increasing strain. The waves that rolled down from the north took on a long, ugly aspect. They shouldered the schooner sullenly and rolled on to the south. Seabirds scudded low over the water, wailing of the storm they fled.

"This will be no picnic," Bart muttered to his companions.

Blackness swept the ocean, blotting out Vendayo's schooner and the dim outline of Mangareva Island. The barometer continued to fall alarmingly. Bart knew what they were in for. This was no ordinary squall.

"Clear the decks, Maro," he said. "Bend extra lashings on the canoes and cover the skylights with tarps."

Jane glanced at him anxiously. "Will it be bad?"

"My guess was right," Bart said. "We're in for a hurricane."

They ate a hurried but substantial meal. Bart insisted that they eat well. He had weathered hurricanes before.

"It may be a long time before we can cook again," he explained.

The wind screamed and tore at the rigging like a madman rending his prison bars. It seemed utterly impossible that it could blow harder, yet its howl became constantly louder.

"Have you ever sailed before?" Bart asked the girl.

"Only in twelve-meter yachts on San Francisco Bay," she replied.

He tossed her a fathom length of half-inch line.

"Tie this around your waist," he instructed. "And tie the other end onto something that won't wash overboard."

When she had done so, he told her to take the helm.

"Maro and I are going to take in sail. We'll have to haul down the jib and mainsail before the wind saves us the trouble, and we'll double-reef foresail and staysail."

EVEN though the real violence of the hurricane had not yet struck, handling sail was difficult. The moment the *Puma's* head was in the wind, the canvas went wild. Bart and Maro fought it down the poles and beat it into hurried furls, reefing what they wanted to keep flying.

With Vendayo hopeless outdistanced, they had no further need for speed. Bart throttled down the auxiliary and put the ship on the port tack.

"We'll pass Vendayo again during the night, but he won't see us. He'll think we kept on the starboard tack, heading for the refuge of Fangataufa," he said.

"But the port tack will take us west—away from the islands!" Jane protested. "We'll be far at sea when the hurricane strikes!"

Maro answered her. "In islands, lady, it best to have plenty sea room, otherwise might find lee shore. That no good."

"But if we could get to Fangataufa—or back to Mangareva—we could run through the reef and anchor before the

wind gets too high," she said, bewildered.

"It's not so easy as that," Bart told her. "The sea has no respect for the Low Archipelago. The islands are only ten feet above the water, and when the sea rises, it washes over them—land, reef, lagoon and all."

"But what of the people on the islands?" Jane said in astonishment.

"They hang on as best they can. Maro's brother was washed off one of the islands to the north of here five years ago. He was a member of the crew of an island trading schooner, and the captain put in for shelter when the barometer started dropping. The seas picked up the schooner as if it were a toothpick and dropped it on the reef. Every soul on board was lost."

Jane offered no more objections. Instead, she looked to the life line Bart had given her and gave the knot an additional tug.

Without warning, the Diesel auxiliary cut out.

"Hell!" Bart muttered and hurried below.

WHEN he came back, a few moments later, his face was serious. "One of Vendayo's shots was lucky," he said. "It came in through the stern and punctured the fuel tank. The oil leaked out in the bilge."

"What does that mean?" Jane asked.

Bart shrugged. "We don't really need the motor, now that we've shaken off Vendayo. But it would have been a handy thing to be able to heave to under power."

Her way slackened, the *Puma* rolled sluggishly, slopping through the seas that marched on her like moving mountains. Bart and Maro took in the staysail, and they continued with only the double-reefed foresail spread.

Morning came in gray agony, unwilling to reveal how turbulent the ocean had become overnight. Clouds, heavy and leaden, rolled over the surface of the sea. The water reflected their drab color and became ominous in turn.

Daylight revealed more than the brew-

ing hurricane. It showed them Vendayo's schooner, a scant two miles astern, under reefed fore and mainsail, and reefed staysail.

"Vendayo wasn't as dumb as I thought he was," Bart said.

"He can come pretty damn quick, boss," Maro pointed. "He got motor!"

"But he can't board us in this weather!" Jane protested.

"He'll try," Bart said. "He sure enough wants that pearl!"

"It looks as if, this time, you'll have to give up," she retorted. "You aren't clever enough to get out of *this*."

Vendayo came on fast, anticipating a quick kill. His schooner was driven crazily into the waves, plunging and laboring through them, shipping white water in sheets over the bow. At times, the whole forepeak disappeared in a smother of foam.

The Chilean wasn't taking any chances this time. The moment he was within range, he opened fire with his rifle. Even though his aim was bad, there was the danger of a lucky shot that might nick a vital stay or halyard.

Bart racked his brain as he watched Vendayo maneuver. This time it looked as if even fighting, if he wanted to fight, would do no good. Somehow, all he could think of was how Jane Thompson would look at him if he were defeated.

Struggling through the tumult of his thoughts came a half-remembered conversation he had once had with a shipwright at Papeete. One phrase persisted: "Maximum hull speed." The fellow had said that each ship had a speed beyond which normal endeavor could not drive it. Suppose he hoisted full sail now? Surely the force of the mounting hurricane would drive the *Puma* at her maximum hull speed and keep her away from Vendayo, even though the man used both sail and power. Neither ship would be able to go faster.

The objection to that plan was obvious: no ship could withstand the weight of a hurricane on her sails, she would be dismasted. Yet there was the bare chance that the *Puma*, being the sturdier ship,

would outlast Vendayo's schooner. A slim chance—yet it was the only one.

"Maro!" Bart called suddenly. "Put up the helm!"

"You're giving up the pearl without a fight?" Jane cried.

"Hang on, lady!" he said roughly. "We're going places!"

Maro watched Bart begin shaking the sails out of their stops, and the skipper's daring plan dawned on him.

"No do that, boss!" he begged. "One fella wind come 'long, blow away sail. Blow away mast, too. No do it!"

"It's our only chance!" Bart shouted. "Vendayo wouldn't let us get away alive if he caught us. We might as well take the chance."

Maro made no attempt to conceal the fear in his eyes.

"*Puma* not like," he said somberly.

Bart glanced affectionately at the deck beneath his feet. "Yeah, I know she won't like it. But if any ship can do it, she can."

THE wind worked itself into an almost human frenzy as the canvas crept up the *Puma's* bare poles. It lashed at the rags, trying to sweep them away before they could be belayed.

Jane's face was white when Bart came aft to take over the helm.

"You're mad!" she shouted. "We'll be killed!"

He shoved her aside and grasped the spokes of the wheel.

"Hang on!" he thundered, and put down the helm.

Gingerly, the *Puma* edged out of stays. The wind caught in the bellies of the sails and drove them down. Masts raked off toward the horizon and the decks became vertical. For a moment the schooner lay knocked down, her rigging singing dangerously. Then the nose lifted and came about. Maro paid off the sheets desperately. A jibe would mean instant dymasting.

Cold sweat beaded Bart's brow as he fought the wheel. The schooner's stern lifted out of the water by the forward

drive. Booms stood broad off, sails made into steel by the blast of the wind.

As the ship gained way, Bart breathed more easily. She had withstood the first furious onslaught. She would be safe for a few moments. But the masts bent as if made of willow. Backstays became taut bars of iron, strained to the limit of their capacity.

"She'll do it!" Bart yelled exultantly.

According to the rules, the *Puma* ought never to have risen from that first knock-down. She should never have been able to gather way. But she did. It was a miracle of hemp and wood and canvas.

Vendayo's greed was great. He put his helm over, shook out his furls, and came in pursuit. Bart watched him anxiously awhile, but the pursuing vessel neither gained nor lost an inch. He had been right. Vendayo's auxiliary would not make him go faster. It was no longer a race in which speed mattered. Endurance was all that counted; endurance of masts and stays and sails.

Maro took over the helm. His solid muscles became bronzed and glistening with sweat. He glanced fearfully at Bart.

"S'pose we do last longest, boss—even so, we never come around in this wind!"

Bart said nothing. He knew that Maro was right. Even if the *Puma* outlasted Vendayo's ship, she would never be able to get her nose back into the wind. To do so, she would have to come around broadside to the waves, and she could not do that without broaching to.

"We'll have to risk it," was all he could say.

THE increasing wind wailed out of the north upon the coursing ships. Behind it bulged the hurricane. Waves took on monster proportions. They no longer passed sullenly beneath the *Puma's* keel—they pooped her, washed her decks, and thrust her from one side to another, in spite of Maro's valiant efforts at the helm. Frightened, the *Puma* ran like a deer escaping the beaters.

Vendayo followed grimly. The *Puma* could no longer see him, unless both ships

happened to rise to the tops of the waves at the same moment. He followed, but he could not overtake them.

For an hour they sailed with the hurricane, and still the wind grew. Its shrill note had risen so high as to be no longer audible. The sheets and halyards fell silent. Their screams of protest were stilled in the silent agony of their task.

Jane caught Bart's eye.

"This can't last!" she cried. "We must heave to!"

"Not till Vendayo does," Bart said grimly.

She turned away from him with a frightened sob. He glanced after her with compassion, but made no move that would indicate any weakening in his resolution. He would outsail Vendayo, or go to hell with his halyards belayed and every sail set!

The wind reached full hurricane strength. Although the human beings who clung to the schooner could no longer feel such changes, the sails could. The jib blew out with the report of a cannon and quickly tore into a confusion of lashing ribbons.

"Boss!" Maro gasped. "I cannot hold out!"

Bart glanced at the seas. There would be no point in giving in now. It would be no easier to heave to.

"A little longer, Maro!" he shouted.

Then Jane's voice, hopeful and thrilled, broke through the storm-howl.

"Bart!" she cried. "Look!"

She pointed astern. When they rose to the crest of the next wave, Bart saw the cause of her joy. Vendayo's schooner wallowed in a confusion of cordage and fallen spars. Both his masts had carried away.

"We've won!" Bart shouted, but the wind caught his words and slammed them back down his throat.

"Stand by to come around!" he said.

Struggling forward along the handrail, he reached the bowsprit and, using his shark knife, cut through the halyards and sheets that held the blown-out jib. It disappeared as if by magic.

He came aft again on his hands and knees, not daring to look at the poop-ers rolling under the stern. The schooner was insane in its desire to come around, now that its headsail was gone. It was just what they needed. When they hove to, they had to do it fast—before the blast of the wind could capsize them.

"Ready, Maro?" Bart asked.

Maro's face was like a mask. Every vein and corded muscle stood out in sharp relief. He nodded briefly.

Bart waited for the proper moment—just the barest second after the *Puma* started down the crest of a wave toward the windless trough that followed. Then:

"Hard over!" he yelled.

MARO spun the wheel like a madman. Like a giant, unconscious of what he does, the hurricane drove down the sails, levelled the masts of the valiant ship. Her bow rose in a cloud of spume. Booms dipped deep into salt water. Scud lashed over the decks, stinging like small shot.

The *Puma* lay over in despair. It was more than she could bear after the past hour of travail.

Then came relief. Down into the deep trough she sank. The wind was not strong there, and the masts righted themselves uncertainly.

Bart seized the opportunity of respite to leap for the shrouds and cut through the halyards. Gaffs and sails came down on the run, jumbling on deck. Jane Thompson, fear in her heart, joined him in his frantic struggle to lash the gaffs over the booms.

Then the *Puma* rose on the swelling bosom of the sea, rose into the howling force of the hurricane. She lay with her head four points on the wind and took her beating. Sluggishly she angled over the crest and sank into the next trough.

Bart finished lashing the sails, using halyard ends, stops, gaskets—anything he could find at hand. When they rose into the wind once more, the bow assumed a good angle, hove to under the windage on the main rigging.

"She'll do now!" Bart cried hoarsely, wiping the salt water from his face.

His words released a full-felt prayer of thanksgiving within him. It rose to his lips, crying for words to utter it. He turned, saw the hope reborn in the faces of his friends.

"We'll do, too," he added.

Maro grinned suddenly, his old familiar, cocky grin.

"We still alive, boss!" he yelled jubilantly.

Jane laughed hysterically. Tears flowed unchecked from her eyes and mixed with the salt spray on her cheeks. Bart gripped her shoulders.

"Easy there!" he warned.

Maro glanced at her quickly. The ship's long battle against doom had been a terrific strain for a woman to endure.

"Come below, lady," he advised. "I make soup. Taste good, betcha."

Alone on deck, Bart lashed the helm and set to work constructing a simple drogue, or sea anchor. He found a small keg to which he lashed a pair of oars with canvas laced between them. He carried the anchor forward and shackled it to the chain. When he tossed it overboard, it disappeared in the flying spray. Minutes later, the chain tautened. It would serve to keep the *Puma* in position.

CRAWLING aft, Bart noticed that the rigging hung slack. He grasped the starboard main backstay and shook it easily. Things were badly stretched from the wild ride before the hurricane, but there was no time to repair them now.

He crouched beside the lashed helm and waited for Maro to come up with food. Inside his shirt, wrapped in a chamois bag, lay the black pearl. He pulled it out and looked at it.

Whether it was his imagination or not, he did not know, but it seemed to him that the hurricane screamed with fury and tried to snatch the strange dark gem.

He stared at the pearl cupped in his hand. It glowed at him with mysterious vitality, pulsing with dynamic existence. He shook his head, wondering what strange

allure it possessed, that he should challenge a hurricane for it, or that Jorge Vendayo should attempt piracy for it and pay for that uncommitted crime somewhere in the seas behind.

He turned it over in his palm. Men would always fight for it. It was the character of the pearl to be the center of hatred and strife. It was flawless. Perfect. That was its peculiar curse.

Sighing, he returned the pearl to its place of safekeeping.

The rest of the day, the *Puma* plunged through battalion after battalion that marched down on her, bent on her destruction, but never quite succeeding. In the comparative quiet of the intervening troughs, she girded herself for the shock of cresting the next ruthless onslaught. In spite of her courage, Bart wondered why she did not founder each time she rose into the plank-rending wall of water and cutting fury of hail that lashed flatly over the waves.

As the wind gradually shifted, boxing the compass, Bart was able to plot the course of the hurricane and locate its center. He found that the *Puma* would come within eighty miles of it, and he searched about for some means of securing her against drifting into the center.

But he could do nothing more to help the ship than by heaving to on the port tack, since they were in the left—the dangerous—semi-circle.

Throughout that night and the next day, the wind raged with unremitting strength. Noon found the ship's company haggard and discouraged. They could think of no existence beyond the lashing tempest and the struggling ship that bore them through it.

Bart went to the thermometer at noon and stared at it through gritty, aching eyelids. He tapped it gently. The mercury hesitated, then moved up slightly in the glass tube. A cry leaped from his lips. He turned to Jane and Maro.

"Twenty-eight point three!" he cried. "It's going up!"

Before the others could utter the glad cries that rose in their throats, the sea

struck. As if galvanizing its strength for one final effort to subdue the stubborn *Puma*, it sent a giant wave, a ninth wave of nine, and toppled it onto the laboring schooner's decks. The dead weight of tons landed squarely on the strained deck-planking and drove the schooner shuddering below the surface. Wood groaned, and riven metal screeched in mortal agony. Green water was everywhere, thundering on the deck, dashing in the main skylight and forward hatch, pouring into the cabin in a cascade. In a moment the bilge was knee-deep above the floorboards.

Bart saw Jane slump down, despair on her face. There was nothing he could do. The *Puma* lay over on her beam's ends, a stricken, helpless, weary thing. Above the anger of the storm, the standing rigging vibrated rackingly, like the rattle in a dying man's throat. The mainmast twisted in its step, splintering.

"This is the end!" Bart thought. His mind remained oddly clear.

THE *Puma* rolled still further. Logy with the sea she had shipped, she seemed unwilling to continue any longer her unequal struggle against her adversary, the hurricane. Deep into the trough that followed the giant wave she sank, not trying to meet the next one.

Then Bart snapped out of it. Throwing himself across the cabin, he floundered about in search of the girl. By chance, his fingers brushed her hair, wrapped in it, and he pulled her up. She was gasping and breathless.

"Let me go!" she pleaded. "It's no use!"

"Get on deck!" he snapped sternly. "Life rings in the starboard shrouds."

She nodded dumbly. Maro appeared from somewhere, stolidly awaiting what seemed to him a certain fate. They struggled through the companionway.

The scene on deck was discouraging. Hull down in the welter of the trough, only the *Puma's* masts and deck house were visible. And, like an ugly sea monster, the next wave reared its head to strike.

When it crashed, it would fill the *Puma's*

cabins, complete the job of its big predecessor, and send the ship twisting down to the ocean's floor.

"Hang on!" Bart shouted desperately, and shoved Jane toward the pinrail.

Ducking back into the cabin, he snatched up a spare tarpaulin and a length of line. Recklessly, careless because of death's nearness, he ran forward along the deck to the shattered skylight. It was a gaping wound, inviting the entrance of the onrushing wave. Bart threw the canvas over it and lashed it down. He had just time enough to fling himself against the foremast and wrap his arms and legs around it before the next wave struck.

This time the schooner made no attempt to rise. The wave decked her from stem to stern in one clean sweep. Bart could see nothing but white, angry water boiling around him. He could scarcely breathe for the needle-sharp spray in the air. A tremendous liquid force tried to pluck him from his desperate grip on the foremast and carry him over the stern.

Beneath his feet, the *Puma* trembled. The heart of her had been broken by her long struggle. And yet Bart sensed a desire within her to rise and float once more. But something black and ominous crushed out that desire. . . .

CLINGING to the foremast, Bart felt something hard and round nudging his chest. It was the black pearl in the chamois bag.

The Storm Pearl!

Bart knew then what was holding the *Puma* down. It was the curse of the pearl. He could almost hear the wild laughter of its evil spirit gloating over the doomed ship.

Anger settled over Bart's brain, unreasonable, terrible anger that overflowed into his heart and washed throughout the whole of him. The sea was fighting to get back its treasure. The sea wanted ship, pearl and crew, all three. All because of that accursed gem out of the deep—

Without pausing to wonder if he had suddenly gone mad, he ripped the pearl out of his shirt. It glowed in his hand,

winking at him like a living eye. The sea raged against Bart and fought to tear the thing from his hand. It wanted its diadem. Knives of spray darted at the captive gem. The groaning *Puma* settled deeper into the sea.

"Take your accursed pearl!" Bart shouted and, in a moment's savage rage, cast the priceless jewel away from him.

The sea thundered eagerly, stretching out its waiting arms to receive it.

Weakly, Bart wrapped both arms about the foremast. He felt exhausted, as if he had just come out of a mortal, hand-to-hand combat.

And then he felt it. A vague trembling in the deck beneath his feet, an uncertain rumbling in the water surrounding the *Puma*. From somewhere, buoyancy was returning. Teak and oak groaned protestingly. The masts straightened with reluctance. The *Puma* was rising!

The bowsprit broke surface, steaming with spume. The rest of the ship followed. Rails, decks, deck house rose. The choked scuppers ran with fleeing water. Sluggish, and bewildered by her survival, the *Puma* once more took hope.

Bart relaxed his grip on the foremast and slid weakly to the deck. Below him, behind him, the Storm Pearl was twisting and dancing down to its home on the floor of the sea. Its curse was gone, and the sea was generous in victory. She spared those who had plundered her.

"Bart! Bart, are you safe?" The hail came faintly. Bart turned. She still clung to the pin-rail, drenched from the recent deluge, but safe. Maro's grin, bedraggled but still cheering, flashed from the shrouds, where he had lashed himself.

Bart crept aft to them. He was shaking and weak, as if what was left of him was half a corpse, almost killed, and slowly returning to life.

"Are you all right, Bart?" Jane asked again.

He nodded dumbly, trying to remember what had happened, trying to forget the unholy vision of the Storm Pearl, glowing like a living eye as it sped across the wind-born spray and plunged into the stormy,

relentless depths that had given it birth.

"I'm all right," he croaked.

"You save ship, boss!" Maro said thankfully. "If you no put cover over hole, one fella wave sink us quick!"

Bart stared at him. How could he tell Maro he had just thrown away a pearl worth a fortune?

"We aren't saved yet," he said. "The ship's logy—only half-afloat. We've got to pump her out."

The waves still attacked the schooner, but compared to those already gone by, they were like schoolboys. The sea had given over her struggle with the *Puma*. The only danger lay in the gaping wounds that remained from the conflict—the opened seams in the ship's hull.

Bart and Maro set up two pumps and manned them. The rest of that day and through the night they worked, resting only when their backs were near to breaking. With every stroke, they lifted the vessel from her near grave and put her in a better position to withstand the diminishing force of the hurricane.

IN THE grayness of the morning, Jane came to them and told them the bilge had retreated below the floorboards. Thankfully, they unshipped the pumps and lashed them to the deck. They knew that water still seeped through the opened seams and they would soon have to resume their labors, but they were thankful for respite, however brief.

Jane had prepared hot food over a kerosene stove. To the weary men it tasted like a banquet. The world improved immeasurably as they ate.

"Isn't it strange to be so wealthy, just possessing a life!" Jane laughed happily.

Maro agreed heartily. Bart said nothing. He wondered whether he should tell them about the pearl.

"I suppose you'll think I'm silly," Jane continued, "but I can't help feeling that something—well, something supernatural prevented us from sinking. It seemed to me the *Puma* had already started down, when a great force came under her and lifted her back to the surface."

Bart's head snapped up. "Did you feel it, too?" he cried.

His eagerness half-frightened her. She nodded.

"There *was* a force," Bart said fiercely. "It came and gripped our keel and threw us back when the curse we carried was gone."

"What curse?" Jane asked curiously.

Bart glanced appealingly at Maro. The pearl had been half Maro's.

"I threw the pearl into the sea," Bart said at last.

Maro said nothing. He was an islander, bred to the island superstitions and legends. It was not difficult for him to believe he owed his life to so strange a sacrifice.

He said, "I know that pearl no good when I first see it, boss."

Jane found it hard to believe. "A hundred thousand dollars—!" She struggled with disbelief. Finally she said, "I don't know. Perhaps you were right. There was something about that pearl—something creepy and sinister. Anyway, I'm glad it's gone. All I want is to be alive."

THE next morning the wind was light and the sea subdued to a moderate swell. Bart and Maro set to work making the schooner seaworthy again.

And so, just one week later, a fair breeze brought them Tahiti as a landfall. Green and lovely, the island rose out of the mist. Jane looked at it with sudden tears.

"Oh, I've never seen anything so beautiful!" she whispered.

All that day Maro piloted them around

(*The End.*)

the eastern skirt of the island. And after standing off and on all through the hours of darkness, he took them through the reef at daybreak, past the tiny islet of Motu Uta and so to a safe anchorage.

"Soon as we get ashore," Bart told Jane, "we'll see the consul and arrange to get you back to your people."

"I—Bart, I don't want to go back," she said with sudden fierceness. "I haven't any people, except an uncle. He lost all that my father left me, and I've nothing to go back to. You see, I had meant to enter a trans-continental air race—a race for prestige and a large stake—but now it's too late. Maybe I could go to England and fly—do some good—"

"And maybe," Bart said, "you could stay right here. Look, Jane. Sail back to Fanahiva with me. It's a hard life, and a dangerous one, but it's all I can offer my wife. If—"

"If—!" she said shakily. "*If*, Bart! I've been wanting you to say just that—hoping you—well, I want to be here with you." Impulsively she lifted her face to his, her red-gold hair brushing his cheek. Bart took her in his arms.

"Sure I'm not a coward?" he teased.

"Don't say that! No! You're the bravest man I've ever—"

And then Maro, who had come up unseen, spoke.

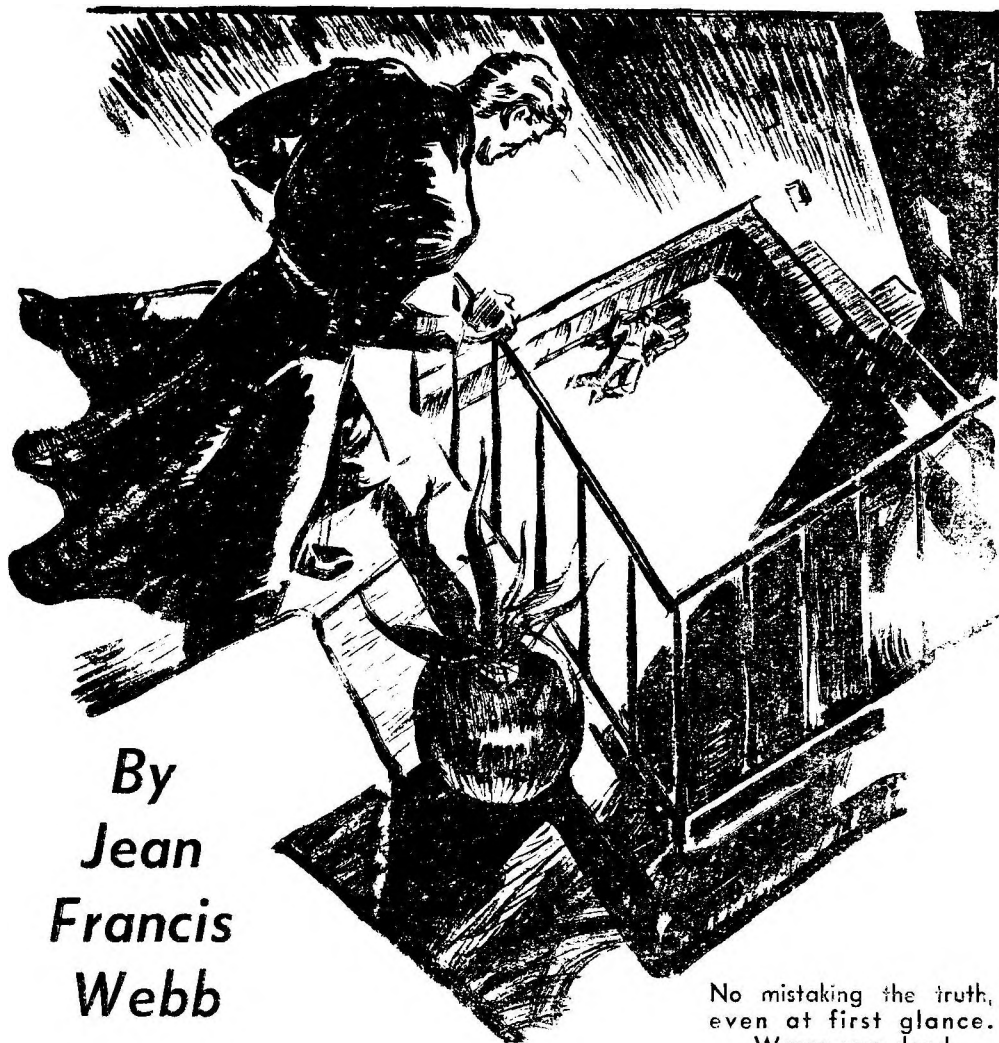
"Water taxi come to take ashore," he said. "Right away, boss?"

Bart waved him away.

"Tell him," he said, "to come back tomorrow. Or the middle of next week!"



Death Stalks the Jury



By
Jean
Francis
Webb

No mistaking the truth,
even at first glance.
Wanzo was dead

THE little foxes that gnaw at the vine. That phrase from the Bible kept running through Mike Barkley's head. Turbulent eddies of feeling washed over him as he watched the progress of those clock hands over the jury room door.

Not that either the District Attorney or the defense lawyer looked much like a fox. Big Tom Fugazzi, a governor's job his next political aim, was a suave, faintly

swarthy six-footer. His manner, in a different profession, might have been described as "bedside." And wily old Hadrian Dempsey, the veteran defense attorney, was an explosive, craggy-browed dynamo, despite his short, squat build.

And how that pair of law battlers could keep gnawing!

Fugazzi was still at bat, questioning Mike's jury qualifications. "You know

nothing of this case, then, except what you read in the papers at the time defendant was arrested and charged with Bertram Whitney's murder?"

"Nothing."

Twelve-thirty! Mike fidgeted uneasily. Faustine would be tearing the country club apart by now! She hated to be kept waiting. He was to have met her at ten, for golf before their lunch date.

"Has what you read at that time prejudiced your opinion?" Fugazzi asked.

The papers had landed hard on David Leyton, the accused man. As prosecutor, Fugazzi would be hoping for a jury prepared to convict.

"I've worked for newspapers long enough *not* to believe headlines," Mike said drily.

"I see." The flicker of dissatisfaction Mike had hoped to see did not ruffle Big Tom's bland face. "No prejudice, then. If proven facts conclusively indicate the guilt of the accused—"

Mike was getting sore. It had never occurred to him he wouldn't be able to get off jury duty within a half hour or so. After all, he had friends. The trouble was that those same friends—like Judge Iglehart, for instance—were all likely to turn up at the country club themselves later that day. If they found out that the "urgent business" demanding Mike's exemption from jury duty was a date with Faustine—no, it wouldn't do. But he'd been here three hours now!

"Mr. Fugazzi!" Mike said. "I—you didn't ask me if I believe in capital punishment."

"And do you, Mr. Barkley?" Fugazzi purred.

Mike tried to look severe, knowing the prosecution would never accept a juror who might acquit because of the mandatory death sentence. He said, "Has one human being ever the right to take the life of another?"

"Feeling as you do," Fugazzi said smoothly, "you certainly do not approve of leaving brutal, wilful murder unpunished. Your type of man will not permit such unbridled violence to go unchecked. The state passes Mr. Barkley for cause."

HADRIAN DEMPSEY, the defense attorney, began to fire questions as he jerked his spare, untidy little body forward. Had Mr. Barkley ever met the accused socially? In business, then? Had he ever dealt with the Whitney Airplane Corporation, until its recent sale under David Leyden's General Managership?

Twenty minutes to one! Mike could picture Tina storming up and down the club veranda: a slim, dark cyclone watching the driveway for his red sports roadster. He remembered, ruefully, what happened when he'd kept her waiting once before. That was the first time she'd threatened to marry Willie Laidlaw, the glamour boy. Willie, it seemed, knew how to treat a girl.

"I asked you a question, Mr. Barkley! I doubt if its answer is on the face of that clock you're watching so intently. Let me repeat. You are, I believe, a university graduate?"

"Yale. 1931."

The crooked twitch which passed as Dempsey's smile went into action. "The same year my client, David Leyden, was graduated from Princeton. You should consider his case with insight and sympathy."

"B-but Princeton!" It was a fool's remark, and Mike knew it. But Dempsey, too, was about to accept him! He had to do *something*! "You know about Yale and Princeton! I mean—"

For once, Dempsey sounded almost as bland as Big Tom Fugazzi. "Competition breeds a bond among men who share it, Mr. Barkley; a bond which should assure my client a fair hearing. We pass Mr. Barkley for cause."

A figure in a nightmare, Mike obeyed the Court's terse order to rise and lift his right hand. Twelve other men and women rose with him. Twelve. For the morning's crowning irony was the fact that he wasn't even a juror. He was the thirteenth man picked; the alternate, the spare tire, who saw active service only if one of his dozen predecessors came down with an emergency appendix.

On the veranda, by now, Tina would be in a white hot rage. But—the clerk of court was speaking his piece again.

"—accompany the Sergeant to your jury accommodations, where lunch will be served. You will communicate with no one on the outside. Personal effects will be collected at your residences and delivered to you. This way, please, ladies and gentlemen."

Sheeplike, the jury began to file past him. Three women and nine men. One of the women was young, pretty. Very pretty, in fact, although her blond coolness didn't register at first if you were used to dark, exotic Tina. Ellen Coburn. Mike recalled. Puzazzi had established her as somebody's secretary.

"You too, Mr. Barkley. This way."

THOSE jury room windows overlooked a parking space and a certain red roadster. But a discouragingly big revolver bulged at the sergeant's hip and he had the flat, expressionless face of one who'd know how to use it if a juror made trouble.

"Look, Mac, if I could get to a telephone for three minutes—" A neatly folded bill peeped out from Mike's left fist.

The sergeant looked through him. "Don't let the judge catch you tryin' to bribe an officer! This way, buddy!"

A long corridor back of the jury room led to side stairs ending at the side door of the courthouse. Mike knew the layout of old. Tramping glumly along beside his red-faced chaperone, he pictured Faustine as she called up Willie Laidlaw in sheer fury.

The passageway was dingy, lighted by glass panes in the ceiling overhead. Closed doors lined both walls, tossing back an echo to the shuffling jury. Their sombre plodding was like a death march. The death of all chance to square himself with Faustine—

That was as far as he had thought when it happened.

The scream was a woman's. It rose in the cramped confines of the corridor like a cry splitting through the ceiling of hell itself. Unbridled terror, raw and sudden, seemed to be striking at all of them.

And then the ghastly upsweep of panic turned into words, starkly clear.

"H-he's dead! Oh, my God, he's dead! Dead!"

Things happened fast then. Mike's own reaction was simple, curiously direct. He sprang forward, flung a protective arm about the shoulders of the Coburn girl and drew her back against him. He heard himself saying, "Don't look. It's not pretty."

The man who had plunged so suddenly from one of the doors along the left-hand wall hit the stone flooring of the passage with a ghastly thud. When he hit, he lay still. A tin pail bumped grotesquely across the floor ahead of him and brought up clattering a few yards away.

The sergeant and his two uniformed patrolmen were quicker on their feet than Mike had expected. Kneeling at the prone man's side, the burly officer lifted that slight weight against himself and stared down stonily.

"It's Murphy, the janitor from across the way." That was all the sergeant said, but you realized at once that he meant more.

A patrolman flung wide the door through which the emaciated little janitor had come staggering. Mike saw what was inside, glancing over Ellen Coburn's head. It was a closet—a broom closet, empty except for mops and brushes and brooms and scrub pails.

Murphy was dead. Somebody had pulled a knotted rope about his scrawny neck and jerked it tight—mercilessly tight.

The flesh of the janitor's skinny throat bulged out above and below the hemp line in hideous little swells. Agonized, staring eyes fairly popped in the man's twisted face. Mike turned the Coburn girl's head away. Horrible thing for her to see—!

"One of you boys get movin'," growled the sergeant. "The Cap'n will want to take over here." One of his satellites obeyed. "Keep your eye on these folks here." Bad temper seemed to be the sergeant's reaction to murder; he snarled, "*Rigor mortis*, huh? Must have been dead three, four hours. Somebody propped him up amongst the junk inside there. Stiffening up made him fall over."

The captain and his men appeared on

the stairs so rapidly that Mike blinked twice before he remembered Police Headquarters adjoined the court house. The discovery of Murphy was out of the sergeant's hands now. He turned over responsibility with the dead-pan efficiency of long routine.

"He's janitor for our jury quarters across the street at the Liberty, sir. Been on the city payroll twenty years," he said.

The captain was a direct man, shrewd-eyed and unemotional. "You'd better get your people over to their lunch, McCoy. This hasn't anything to do with the Leyden trial."

"Yes, sir." McCoy, in the very act of lowering the rigid little corpse to the floor, said sharply, "Hello! What's this? Something in Murphy's fist, sir. A bit of cloth, it looks like."

Not one of them there in the hallway missed seeing it, as the sergeant forced back fingers death itself had tightened. The fragment of silk was green, with a stripe of yellow running transversely across it. Almost beyond question, it was part of a man's necktie.

THE Liberty Hotel, directly across the street on which the courthouse sided, rose fifteen stories into the sky, topped with gargoyles and fancy trim, its architecture between Moorish and Gothic.

The jury was herded into an elevator and was actually on the way up before Mike realized his fingers still gripped Ellen Coburn's elbow. Embarrassed, he released his hold.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to bruise you."

The girl smiled; a nice smile, friendly, but reserved. "I don't bruise easily. Thanks for wanting to protect a total stranger. None of our other friends bothered to think of it."

"Where the devil are we going now?" a square-faced, bald man who had answered to the name of Meek, asked McCoy.

"Jury quarters, for lunch. Fifteenth floor here has been taken over for juries that get locked in for duration of trial. Used to be a penthouse." It was a long speech for McCoy. Now he looked straight

at Mike, saying. "Too high up for anybody to get in or out of. The switchboard doesn't accept jury folks' calls, either."

The direct taunt brought Faustine back into the foreground of Mike's consciousness, dulling the memory of that dead, distorted face of the janitor across the street. It even spoiled the pleasing effect of Miss Ellen Coburn's yellow hair, as the cage jolted to a stop.

The penthouse stood well above the roof of its tallest neighbor. A railed balcony-terrace hung over the busy intersection fifteen floors below.

"Pretty high up, aren't we?" The juror who made the observation, close to Mike's elbow, was—what was his name? Irving Miller. Thirtyish, buck-toothed, mild—his owliness further accentuated by round, horn-rimmed glasses—Miller had a sleepy look, but not a stupid one.

"You couldn't count to twenty before you splashed," Mike said, and he spoke bitterly, for he himself had been staring out those windows, wondering.

"Lunch," McCoy said departing, "is out yonder on the table."

"Could any of us swallow a mouthful?" That was a Mrs. MacRea, a woman with billowing outlines. "That *dreadful* janitor at the courthouse! Enough to paralyze a person!"

"Doubtless, madam, he did it on purpose," sneered the foreman of their jury. His name was George Eberlin, agent for some small apartment houses.

"You needn't be rude! If Mr. MacRea were here, you'd never address me in that fashion!"

A soft voice at Mike's elbow murmured, "Just one happy family, we're going to be! All for one, and one for all!"

Grinning, he glanced down into Ellen Coburn's attractive face. The stronger light of the penthouse seemed to illumine it, underscoring its freshness. Mike thought of it in terms of advertising. One of these English toilet soap concerns could have made money on Ellen Coburn. Her picture, in color, over copy about white May in Devon and the scent of lavender and blue skies. Her eyes were so blue—

"At least you and I can eat," he said. "Tell you what; I'll fill a couple of plates from the table. We can try out the terrace."

ELLEN was waiting for him, relaxed in the vivid sunlight, when he came with food. They settled down, in white iron chairs, and smiled at each other.

"I wonder how long we'll be shut up here?" she ventured. "Will it be one of those marathon trials, do you think?"

"No telling. We won't lack excitement, will we? They were lining up inside, some for MacRea, some for Eberlin, when I came out. That Glickman woman was egging everybody on."

"She told me this trial was a boon to her." Ellen nibbled a pickle. "A positive boon, she put it. Seems she writes hair-raising mysteries."

"It was Mrs. MacRea who screamed over poor Murphy," said Mike. "For a while there, I thought it might be that blond willow—that Nottage chap, Walter Nottage."

Ellen smiled. "Walter decorates. He even confided in me, coming up in the elevator, that he'd once done this penthouse over a dance star who struck it rich."

"What do you think of that red-headed young truck driver who got picked just after Eberlin? Kearney, he called himself."

"What a memory for names you have!"

"Have to have, in the news racket. For instance, I spotted Howard Ross before Fugazzi called him by name this morning."

"Who is Ross?" Ellen asked.

"That slim, nervous chap, about thirty-five—the one who smokes so fast, one butt after another. He's a grounded transport flyer. We investigated a wreck he was responsible for around six months ago. Messy thing."

It was sheer accident that the faded sea green of her pillow made such a perfect background for Ellen's shining, smooth hair. Even Faustine might be proud of that effect; Faustine, who never left her effects to chance. With a guilty start, Mike realized he hadn't thought of Tina for fifteen minutes!

"We're lucky," he said. "We have the

Upper Crust on our jury. Mr. Emil Plimpton, the overbearing and paunchy one, is a big noise on every railroad in this state worth mentioning."

"He doesn't know quite how to take this jury stretch, does he? Indignant at the inconvenience, but—on the other hand—stuck with previous public utterances about 'every citizen's duty.'"

Mike laughed. "That about covers our fellow inmates, except those two I can't tell apart. One is blank and sandy-haired, the other blank and gray-haired. One is a bank teller, and one sells perfumes. One gave his name as Philip Wanzo, the other as Chester Heath. But don't ask me which is which, even at the end of the trial, because I'll never—*What's the matter?*"

The girl had put up her hands behind her head, while he was talking; a gesture of complete relaxation. But now her slim figure was no longer relaxed. That crumpled object she had drawn from back of the canvas cushion—

"What's the matter?" Mike heard himself asking again. But he was out of his chair, leaning forward, even as he spoke. He was staring down at the thing she was forcing herself to show him.

It was a man's necktie, roughly, almost savagely, rumpled. It was made of green silk, with a yellow stripe running transversely across it. One end was missing entirely, ripped off where a row of ravelings showed distinctly in the early afternoon sunlight. . . .

TIME seemed to drag interminably. What was going on here in the courtroom, Mike kept telling himself, should have interested him more than it did. He was here, after all, solely to judge David Leyden's guilt or innocence. It wasn't *his* job to prod the police regarding that torn necktie Ellen had found stuffed back of the cushion of her chair on the penthouse terrace!

Nobody had seriously questioned that the rest of that torn tie was the fragment of silk clenched in Murphy's death-stiffened fingers. But beyond that, Mike and the police disagreed. What annoyed him

was that they had logic on their side, whereas he had only the instinct a good newshound is born with; an instinct for something important even when it seems trivial.

As McCoy said, Murphy had been janitor of the penthouse, so what was peculiar about one of his neckties lying around? Maybe he'd been cleaning up, see? Maybe the tie had caught on something and ripped. Maybe Murphy had stuffed the smaller fragment into his pocket absent-mindedly. The tie would be turned over to the captain, of course—but McCoy wasn't making the mistake of attaching any importance to it.

By sheer will power, Mike dragged his attention back to the trial.

Tom Fugazzi, his organ-note voice balanced perfectly between quiet indignation and uplifting exhortation, paced up and down on long, graceful legs as he made his opening address, in which the jury was informed of "all known happenings" surrounding Bertram Whitney's violent death.

"I shall ask you, ladies and gentlemen, to go back with me to a certain autumn evening. Last October eleventh, to be exact. And we *must* be exact, for the life of a fellow man hangs on these details. Bertram Whitney was at home on October eleventh, ladies and gentlemen. He was a man who loved his home. So much so that—"

So much so that he had made up his mind to sell his airplane factories to outside interests. An aging man, he had no kin except one nephew, Gavin Whitney, and Gavin, dying in an Arizona sanatorium, could not be expected to survive his uncle; to recover and carry on the family business.

The elder Whitney had loved comfort, yet required few luxuries. Four servants and a chauffeur staffed his narrow old town house: Prescott, the butler who had discovered his body; a Chinese cook, and two maids.

"That last evening of his life, ladies and gentlemen, he had made and filed a new will. His dying nephew was cared for, even should he survive, through an adequate trust fund. There were decent bequests to the servants, and to charity.

"But the bulk of the Whitney estate was to pass to one man, a man much younger than Whitney—indeed, regarded almost as the old man's son. I speak now of David Leyden, the able, brilliant, handsome young general manager who would find himself jobless when its new owners absorbed the factory."

The accused. . . . Mike, along with the others, stared briefly at that dark, straight-backed young man sitting almost unconcernedly at Hadrian Dempsey's side. Leyden looked like an athlete. At Princeton, he might have played football. Mike tried to remember.

Leyden? David Leyden? For once, Mike found himself stumped by a name. He couldn't think back of those tabloids, last October. *Leyden Arrested as Benefactor's Slayer!*

"Bertram Whitney," intoned Fugazzi, "sat in his second-floor library on the evening of the eleventh. At exactly 11:37, Prescott heard a single sharp report. He attempted to reach his employer. Several knocks and calls were fruitless. Those double doors were locked—on the inside, ladies and gentlemen — Mr. Whitney's side!"

Mike felt a fingernail's sharp edge bite his knee. He glanced down, to discover a folded bit of paper poised there like a butterfly. Ellen Coburn's hand was in the act of retreating.

McCoy is an idiot, the scrawled note ran. That necktie could never have gotten so rumpled just by being pushed back of a cushion. And what janitor ever wore three-dollar ties? Whoever killed Murphy has been messing around in our penthouse!

NIGHT brought a fog in off the river, a fog damp and cottony, and freighted with the dreary moan of horns. The restless whiteness pressed flat to the penthouse windows. Inside the apartment, luxurious despite the way in which Walter Nottage had furnished it for its former owner, even mellow lamplight and a fairly good dinner could not dispel the gloom.

Irving Miller, producing a dog-eared pocket deck, made a somewhat lame bid

for cheer by performing card tricks. Hattie MacRea was weepy. Ross, the grounded flyer, paced the long living room like some wild thing in a cage, puffing endlessly on cigarettes.

It was after coffee, downed in complete silence, that Olivia Glickman said thoughtfully, "I've just been thinking. This *would* be perfect!"

"Eh?" Eberlin shot her a jaundiced glance. "What's perfect?"

"Why, this place! Us! Perhaps you didn't know, but I write mystery novels. I suppose I do see things in terms of plot, but honestly—"

"You didn't," quavered Mrs MacRea, "mean it was perfect for a *murder*, did you? Here, where we are now?"

Olivia Glickman laughed. But afterward it was not that laugh the rest of them were to remember. It was the dreadful accuracy with which she began to sketch in their position, their utter helplessness.

"Why not? We're entirely cut off, fifteen stories above the street, except when Sergeant McCoy comes to fetch us. There's no elevator bell, no telephone connection. If one of us were a killer, he might stage a regular carnival of bloodshed! Who could stop it?"

Mike felt Ellen Coburn nudge his elbow, in the ripple of uneasiness which followed. "What gruesome idiocy just before bedtime!" she whispered.

"Let's go where we can talk sense, then," he said, and led her out onto the terrace where they had eaten lunch together.

They avoided the chair where the green necktie had been concealed; stood, instead, close to the railing, staring out across the muffled town. Fog stirred against their faces, damp and uneasy and driftingly white.

"Mike—" (He hadn't even realized just when they had become Ellen and Mike. He seemed to have known her always.) "There is something evil about this place. I can feel it in my bones."

"Are you a gypsy, or the seventh child of a seventh child?"

Ellen moved restlessly. "All right, laugh! But I don't believe a word McCoy said

about the tie. I think something none of us knows about happened right here in this dreadful apartment."

Other thoughts which had tormented Mike for hours came to the surface, in a sudden rush. Thoughts about Tina. They had begun to foment while Mrs. Glickman was speaking. Now they became almost resolution, and he said:

"If nobody can get *out* of here, as our writer friend claims, then nobody's apt to come *in*, either. I'd have till breakfast time to get back, without being missed. If there were some way down to the windows a floor below us—"

"Mike!"

ALTHOUGH his leg had actually been flung across the railing, in a quick determination to try, Mike would have abandoned the plan even without Ellen's startled cry, for the drop below was sheer, down to the set-back ledge at floor ten. The smooth wall of the tower offered no toe-hold whatever. Mike was rash—but he was not crazy. He said:

"No. Couldn't do it even with a rope."

Ellen was watching him soberly. "Mike, you must be awfully anxious to break jail, even to consider a stunt like that!"

"Her name is Faustine Ashbrook," said Mike, "and she's had me dizzy for years. I have to square myself. She's impetuous enough to marry someone else before she knows I couldn't help standing her up. She does things like that."

"I've seen her pictures. She looks like a stormy night, dark and turbulent, and rather breathtaking. The papers says she rides like a dream, plays marvelous tennis and golf—"

"A girl like Tina does about everything well — except wait." Abruptly, Mike brightened. "Say! There must be a fire escape somewhere on the outside of this fool dungeon!"

"The door is back of the kitchen," Ellen said glumly. "It's locked. I've been doing a bit of prospecting myself, just in case."

The very quietness of her words seemed ominous.

"You're afraid, Ellen? Afraid something more's going to happen?" he asked.

She nodded jerkily. "But I don't know why, and I don't know what. Maybe—Mike, do you believe Leyden killed Bertram Whitney?"

"Too early to say. Fugazzi made out a pretty convincing case, if his witnesses uphold it. Leyden was Whitney's only caller on that last night, and he toted a gun. There could have been two strong motives; revenge for the loss of a job he'd slaved over, or fury at losing an inheritance."

"I think he's innocent," Ellen said firmly. "Were you watching him in court? He has iron control—but he's suffering terribly. Not from a bad conscience, either. He's being crucified."

"That's a lot to say, so soon. Until the evidence is in—"

She moved impatiently. "Evidence? What about character? Secretaries get to watch lots of men, under different kinds of strain. If ever I saw trapped honesty—Oh!"

Mike had whirled before the sharp exclamation, in that very instant he saw her eyes go wide. He glimpsed it, too. And then it was gone, that vague, dark shadow that had been almost like part of the swirling mist. The window where it had moved was empty.

Even when Mike crossed to it, jerked wide the slightly opened casement, and thrust his head into the gloom of an unlighted bedroom—even then there was no second glimpse of whoever had been crouched there, listening to their talk.

BEDTIME came early. Their bags had arrived and McCoy had assigned temporary quarters at the close of the afternoon session. And another of the city's reasons for taking over the roof apartment to house its juries had become evident. Just thirteen people—no more—could be decently quartered in the penthouse.

The three women shared the master chamber, which had twin beds and a divan. Three smaller bedrooms, facing a narrow hall, took care of two men apiece; Plimpton

was with Eberlin, Mike with Irving Miller, Kearney with Ross. Meek and Wanzo each had a narrow servant's cubbyhole to himself. Heath and Nottage used the pair of long couches flanking the living room fireplace.

The penthouse lay still and dark. No moonlight penetrated the fog which still hugged close about the tower. To Mike, lying in bed, the silence seemed like something alive and waiting to pounce. A screwy idea—but today had made anything seem possible.

Who, for instance, had been listening to his talk with Ellen? And why? Was the pitiless slayer of poor Murphy one of their own thirteen—one of the Leyden jurors? How else had that mauled green tie gotten where Ellen found it?

Might not any one of the dozen now sharing this dark apartment have strangled the frail little janitor and hidden his body? McCoy had placed the janitor's death at hours before the grim discovery. It might be possible—

Or wasn't it more likely that someone on the outside intended to murder one of the jury? Murphy might have been killed for the keys in his pocket; among them, doubtless, the key to that fire door, which was the penthouse's second entrance. Yes—that was it!

Was someone crouched out there now, waiting until everyone was asleep? Who—were that true—was on the killer's list? What deadly secret lay behind—behind *which* commonplace, dull face of these people of the jury?

What about Ellen? Could it be Ellen the killer wanted to harm? Could some secret knowledge of danger to herself have made her so certain the penthouse was a dangerous place? Was that why that formless shadow had spied on them out on the terrace? Was—

A sudden, shrill, insistent clamor had him on his feet before he could properly place it. Telephone! Mike lurched past the other bed, on which Irving Miller's dim form was struggling erect. That telephone wasn't supposed to be connected! McCoy had sworn it wouldn't ring!

In the drab blackness, he groped for the knob and threw the door wide. Behind him, Miller muttered a thickened query: "W-what—?"

"I don't know—but I'm going to find out."

Other rousing voices, jumbled and confused, lifted through the big apartment. Somewhere a bed lamp snapped on. Someone stumbled against a light chair and overturned it with crashing abruptness. Mike was well into the living room now. Even in the darkness, he could locate the phone.

"Hello?" He grabbed up the instrument in fumbling haste. "Hello?"

Nottage, his blond hair on end, had stumbled to a nearby lamp and yanked its chain. He swayed there, more willowy than ever in his sea-green silk pajamas, blinking distractedly across the sudden brilliance. But Mike was not watching him.

"I recognize your voice, Barkley." A low, curiously disembodied sequence of words came whispering out of the receiver. "You are the one I wanted. You wouldn't like harm to come to Miss Coburn. I advise you to change her opinion of David Leyden's innocence before your jury votes."

And then—the click of a connection breaking!

MIKE nested the receiver slowly, aware of the excited questions pouring at him from all corners of the suddenly crowded room. Like fragments of a dizzy kaleidoscope, faces eddied. The Glickman woman's, framed in metal curlers. Those oddly haunted eyes of Ross's, staring. Plimpton. MacRea, whimpering for her husband.

"What was it, Mike?" Ellen's voice carried above the others with a cool clarity which, as he alone could understand, hid a deadly fear. Her honest eyes never wavered from his, as she brushed sleep-fluffed yellow hair back from a face as colorless as a cameo.

There was no point in lying. "It was somebody warning me you'd better not

vote for Leyden's innocence, if you want to stay healthy. I gathered he meant all of us."

"He?"

"I thought it was a man, but I'm not sure. The voice was deliberately muffled, as if—Great Scott!"

He grabbed for the phone, jiggled wildly at the hook. He kept the receiver close to his ear, but there was no sound from the other end—no sound at all. The switchboard, through which the call must of necessity have passed, did not answer.

Kearney, the red-headed truck driver, gathered the significance of Mike's behavior. "Mother of heaven, the man's right! The sergeant himself told us there'd be no answer!"

"Somebody called *in*, though!" Mike said, between set teeth. "We didn't all just imagine it. And that call must have come through the board downstairs. Unless—unless—"

He was half across the room, shouldering past the milling group of wakened jurors, while the last word still trailed unfinished. Back along the narrow railway hall flanking the bedrooms he sprinted. The hall ended in a swinging door to the kitchen.

He had to grope along the side wall until his fingers found the light switch. Immaculate whiteness leaped at him out of the inky dark. The room was empty. His eyes sped about it, eager for any hint of recent occupancy, but still a trifle dimmed on account of the contrasting brightness.

HE HADN'T been wrong about that service extension telephone he'd half-remembered, in one corner near the stove! It hung there like a square black wart on the tiled wall. Mike dove for it, snatched up the receiver, and knew his sudden hunch was right.

A faint warmth of human contact still vivified the receiver's dull black surface. Sometime within the past two minutes, another hand had gripped this same receiver! Mike turned with a tight, mirthless grin to greet the babbling vanguard from the living room.

"My brainstorm happened to work. That call didn't come from outside. It was made right here in the penthouse, from this kitchen extension. But the phone couldn't ring—so where was the alarm clock ringing? Who turned it on and then off again?"

"You mean," Nottage squeaked, "that dreadful ringing wasn't the telephone at all?"

"It couldn't have been if the switchboard connection to these rooms is dead!"

Ellen was following the direction of his glance with widening eyes, and suddenly the incisive clarity of her voice rang across the silence.

"The fire door! Someone used Murphy's key!" She hurried forward, to twist and tug in vain at the brass handle. "It's locked fast now, but somebody must have come through it—and gone out again."

Since he had never quite sorted Heath and Wanzo out in his mind, Mike could not be certain which one spoke now. Anyway, it was the gray-haired one.

"You mean somebody got in here just to make that call to you?" he said. "B-but Miss Coburn just now tried the door!"

"There's at least one key, somewhere in the world," Mike answered softly. "Murphy must have had one—and someone killed him."

"So he could spy on us and threaten us, if we decided to vote for Leyden's acquittal? By the great horned spoon! Nobody ought to get away with such foul tactics! Unless the evidence proves he's guilty beyond the least little doubt, by golly, I'm fixing now to vote Leyden free!"

It didn't occur to any of them then—not even to Mike—that the puffing, indignant little bantam was pronouncing his own death sentence. . . .

THE State's first witness was a paunchy, over-manicured person named Halliday. There was assurance in the way he sat in the chair, brick efficiency in his responses to Big Tom Fugazzi's opening questions.

"Your present business connection, Mr. Halliday?"

"I am Chairman of the Board of Ajax

Aircraft, Inc., one of the largest manufacturing aircraft concerns in the country."

"Bertram Whitney, deceased, founded a similar concern?"

"Yes. Ajax bought out Whitney's plant early last October."

Fugazzi's smile was like something painted on porcelain. "I see, Mr. Halliday, will you tell the jury exactly what this sale would mean—in relation to employees of the Whitney plant?"

"It meant most of them were out of jobs," Halliday spoke unconcernedly. "A few of the technical experts were absorbed by our outfit, but the office force and executive staff were of no use to us."

"And Mr. David Leyden, sir—Mr. Whitney's general manager—was there an opening for him with your concern?"

"There was not. Our own man has been with us for a considerable period. We contemplated no change."

Staring at the grimy ceiling, Mike understood the reason for these questions. The District Attorney was out to prove that Leyden, robbed of a job he had worked years to achieve, had believed he had a serious grievance against the employer who wiped out that job.

Half Mike's mind listened to the outlay of technical details. The other half kept slipping back to the penthouse, to last night, and the shrilling of that buzzer which everyone had assumed to be a telephone bell.

Afterward, nobody had felt very much like sleeping. It had been well on toward morning before the apartment had settled back into its former quiet. The knowledge that someone had access to them as they slept—someone with a sinister and secret purpose—had not been exactly conducive to repose.

In the end, the men had taken hour-long sentry turns, two men a trick, sitting in the kitchen where that fire door opened. But even then, sleep had come to the others only in uneasy catnaps. They had been dazed with exhaustion, most of them, when McCoy's helpers came in with breakfast trays.

McCoy had been prone to ridicule their

anxiety. After all, no one had seen an intruder. A man going to such lengths merely to use the kitchen telephone extension—it was absurd on the face of it. The department would post a patrolman on the fire escape, of course, but if you asked McCoy, all this to-do was a lot of clap-trap.

Hadrian Dempsey waived cross-examination of Halliday, obviously intent on discounting the importance of Leyden's lost job. The State's next witness, Miss Jackman, took the stand. A trim, wren-like spinster, she had been Bertram Whitney's confidential secretary.

"And in his employ a long time?"

She nodded. "For fifteen years, last January."

"Therefore," Fugazzi smiled, "we can assume you were quite well acquainted with your employer's private affairs?"

"I doubt if poor Mr. Whitney ever made an important move of which I was ignorant." Miss Jackman sniffed delicately, dabbing at her eyes with a surprisingly feminine lace handkerchief.

"Think back to last autumn, please. What was the last important move of which you have any recollection?"

"You mean the sale of the plant to Ajax?"

"Later than that," Fugazzi prodded.

"His new will, then?" Jackman had a mind as orderly as one of her file cabinets. "Mr. Whitney dictated it to me, and had it properly signed, just a little before—before—I was one of the witnesses."

The District Attorney veered briefly toward the Bench. "We have here the original copy of that will. If the Court pleases, we will ask that it be received in evidence. Meanwhile, Miss Jackman, tell the jury what you remember of this document's contents."

"Objection!" Dempsey growled. "Hear-say evidence—"

"As the deceased's confidante, Your Honor," said that smooth oil that was Fugazzi's voice, "and as the employee who transcribed the will, Miss Jackman can hardly be called a mere repeater of rumors."

Before Dempsey lost his hot battle over that point, it was time for the court's noon recess. McCoy appeared from nowhere to lead the jurors back to the jury room.

MISS JACKMAN remounted the stand as the afternoon session opened. David Leyden, Mike noticed, watched the woman with a dark, still detachment which made you wonder if he really saw her at all. What was it Ellen had said? "He's being crucified."

"Miss Jackman, you were about to tell the jury—to the best of your ability—what provisions Bertram Whitney made in his new testament for the disposition of his wealth."

The secretary cleared her throat. "It was not a complicated will. A tubercular nephew, Gavin, was to receive the income from a trust fund for life. Upon his death, the trust was to pass to the private hospital in Arizona which was caring for him."

"Other bequests?"

"A chauffeur, a maid, a cook, all of them employees of long standing, inherited a thousand dollars each. I myself received certain bonds Mr. Whitney believed would assure me a modest income. His butler was left ten thousand. A like sum went to another maid, Mary Dolan."

"But your employer was a very wealthy man. What you have told us does not indicate the disposition of a major part of his fortune."

"I was coming to that. The bulk of the estate, fully seventy-five per cent, was left in one piece. To Mr. Whitney's manager, Mr. David Leyden."

"In your opinion," Fugazzi purred, "was that bequest not a strong, overwhelming reason for a newly jobless man to wish Whitney dead? Would not a man murder—?"

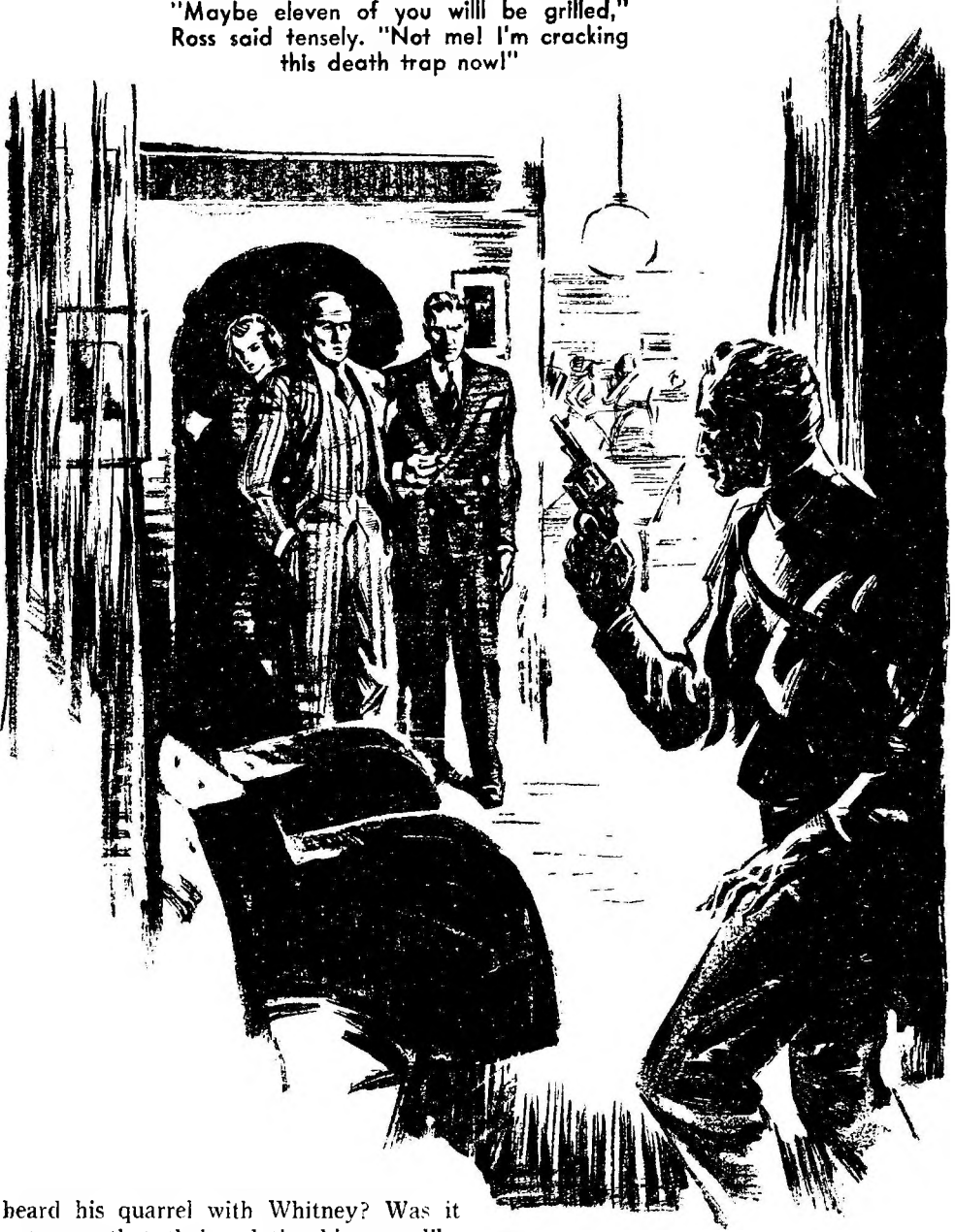
"Objection!" snarled Hadrian Dempsey.

This time, the protest was upheld.

Fugazzi had no further point to establish through Miss Jackman. But the defense swooped down on her for cross-examination like a hawk attacking a chicken run. Miss Jackman had known David Leyden over a period of years. Had she ever

DEATH STALKS THE JURY

"Maybe eleven of you will be grilled,"
 Ross said tensely. "Not me! I'm cracking
 this death trap now!"



heard his quarrel with Whitney? Was it not true that their relationship was like that of father and son? Would an astute judge of character like Bertram Whitney leave his fortune to anyone he believed capable of the act of murder?

"Nice work!" Ellen whispered.

"Our friend the Whisperer won't like it," Mike murmured back. "And whoever he is, he certainly believes in action!"

THE prosecution's third witness settled on the chair like a groundhog at the maw of his burrow. The uneasiness of the man, as Big Tom Fugazzi faced him, was so obvious that one wanted to squirm with him and twist some yielding object as he twisted a battered driver's cap.

"Your name?"

"Otto Goldhume."

"Your occupation?"

"I drive a taxi. For the Blue Star Company."

"Mr. Goldhume, you were brought here to tell these people what you remember of a certain fare you drove on the evening of October eleventh last."

"Yes, sir. Raining. A real chill in the air. I picked up a young couple after the early show at the movies. They wanted to drive round the park and—well, I never looks into me mirror. I drove them till along about quarter to eleven, I'd guess."

"And after eleven?"

"The fellow takes the girl home. I'm just circling back downtown when a tall, dark fellow hails me from the curb. I open up and he climbs in. Wants to be driven to the Whitney party's house."

"He said specifically the Whitney house?"

Goldhume shuffled his feet. "No, sir, he gave a number. But I read the papers after. That's where the old gent got croaked all right."

"So you drove your fare to this address." Fugazzi paused slyly. "Without, I presume, looking into your mirror?"

"Well—I did look back once. The guy was impatient, like, to get where he was goin', but pavements were too wet to speed."

"That once you glanced into the glass, did you see anything unusual?"

"Depends what you call unusual," answered Goldhume, gulping. "Me, I ain't used to guns. When I noticed what it was he was holdin' in his lap, clenchin' it sort of tight, I put on the speed then, all right!"

Fugazzi beamed on the jury box as if its occupants had shared with him some personal triumph. "And do you see that well armed fare of yours anywhere in this courtroom, Goldhume?"

"Yes, sir." The taxi driver's stained hand lifted, one finger extended. The finger pointed straight at David Leyden.

THE penthouse, already dark as early twilight deepened, seemed to have been awaiting their return—but not in any com-

fortable, homy sense. The waiting, rather, might have been that of a spider. Mike shook himself impatiently. Tabloid imagination! That's what was wrong with him!

"Open and shut case," the dour Eberlin declared, as dinner trays were removed an hour later. "Mr. Fugazzi established two motives for Leyden's deed, and the taxi man cinched the case."

Ellen glanced up at him from the chair where she sat quietly like a white-and-gold forest nymph. "Isn't that what they call purely circumstantial evidence, Mr. Eberlin?"

"Young lady," the landlord said ponderously, "when you've lived as long as I have, you'll know things *are* pretty much what they seem in this life. We know Leyden went to Whitney's home at the hour of the slaying. We know he carried a gun. Therefore—"

"Therefore," Ellen flashed, with sudden, quiet ferocity, "you are *quite* certain Leyden is a murderer—even though Dempsey proved later that the R. O. T. C. was holding target practice in Bertram Whitney's own garden! I know your kind!"

"Facts—"

"There's something called character, too. What about the suffering in Leyden's eyes? And can't you read what's back of his stiff, unmoving attitude? Dempsey told us all. It isn't just his own life. He loved old Whitney like a father—that's the cruel thing!"

With a swift, silent movement, she was across the living room and out the French doors. Mike followed her, leaving behind him a startled silence and Eberlin's unspoken answer. Mike had glimpsed the glitter of tears in her blue eyes, and that was enough for him.

"Ellen—don't take it so hard!" he pleaded.

She jerked back from the railing, where she had been standing between a pair of evergreens in heavy stone urns. "The sheep! A glib talker like Fugazzi—! Oh, it's dreadful to watch someone you know is fine being torn to shreds by an ambitious, unscrupulous hound!"

"Someone you *know*?" Mike's voice was

hoarse. "Ellen, look at me! Did you know Leyden before this trial started? Does he mean something to you personally? You and he—aren't—?"

It was funny, the relief that coursed through him when she shook her head.

"Of course not. It's just that—Mike, weren't you ever *sure* about somebody you didn't know from Adam?"

Well, of course he had been. He felt sure about Ellen herself, for instance. There was something about her, despite the appealing softness of her and the sweetness of her mouth, which was firm and strong, and true as steel. Some lucky man would learn, some day, just how deeply he could feel sure.

When they went silently back into the big room, new undercurrents of emotion already seemed to have swept away those they had left behind. Leo Kearney and Irving Miller were just returning from the kitchen, where they appeared to have been doing some favor for timorous Hattie MacRea.

"Now, ma'am," the red-headed truck driver grinned, with appealing Irish charm, "there's nothin' more to worry you. We've just rigged up that string o' brass temple bells dead in front of the fire door. The door opens inward, ma'am, and not a mouse could squeeze past without settin' those bells to jangling."

"B-but he's so clever! That telephone trick—"

Heath—or was it Wanzo?—cleared his throat resentfully, off in one corner. "Hur-rumph! Threatening us if we don't vote his way! I wouldn't trust that Tom Fugazzi smoothie. It's intimidation!"

"Tom Fugazzi is a brilliant lawyer, not a crook," snapped Emil Plimpton, pompous with authority. "He's handled legal work for our railroad holdings. I'd as soon suspect Judge Iglehart!"

"Well, whoever called last night," grinned Kearney, "he'll not be droppin' in again unannounced. Them bells'll warn us."

Olivia Glickman stood up slowly, somberly, one hand pressed flat to her shallow breast and her haggard face aglow. "I

wonder! I wonder if whoever telephoned last night *needs* keys and doors? Couldn't it perhaps be dead Bertram Whitney himself, demanding his revenge? A hand from beyond the Brink, reaching out to warn all of us that we must not let his murder pass unchallenged?"

With only the ghost of a moan, Hattie MacRea slid forward onto the floor in a dead faint.

IT WAS impossible for Mike to say how long he slept. It seemed, when his eyes opened, that they must have closed only a few seconds earlier. Yet the patch of moonlight which had flung its oblique outline over the carpet between his bed and Miller's, the last thing he could remember, had moved. Now it hung on the opposite wall, like a stain left on old wallpaper where a picture has been taken down.

He lay still, listening for the sound which had awakened him.

Or had it been a sound? Had the deep stillness of the penthouse actually been disturbed by even the scratching of a mouse? Pushing back deep veils of sleep, Mike still could not be certain. Something—something not as it should be, here in the darkness—

His bare feet were thrusting toward the floor by instinct, when the sound came again; or at least what he fancied must be the sound. Half-sitting on the edge of his bed, Mike grinned wryly. Jumpy nerves certainly made a man weak in the head! For of all undramatic, unmenacing, completely natural noises in the night, a loose casement creaking in the wind must certainly win the prize. Only a numbskull, overwrought by worry about Faustine and uneasiness about circumstances here in the pent—

"Great galloping ginger!" Mike muttered suddenly, and leaped to the middle of the floor, his heart thudding. What a dope he was! Casements of modern apartment buildings like the Liberty don't swing loose—they're held firm on adjustable metal elbows, so the wind can't swing them. Besides—*there was no wind blowing!*

Mike hesitated an instant near the foot

of Irving Miller's bed. Apparently his roommate had not been awakened by the nearby sound. He lay so motionless in the darkness, a mere long lump of shadow beneath the covers, that he might have been dead. Well—no need of pulling the guy out of a deep sleep, just on a mere hunch.

Mike eased back the door into the long hall and slid through it, bare-footed, but pulling his dressing gown about him. The penthouse silence was like a muffling layer of felt; soft, thick. He paused, uncertain, and then decided that the sound had come from somewhere near the living room.

Starting forward again, walking catlike on the balls of his feet, he realized abruptly that he was not alone in this ribbon of inky impenetrability.

Just how that awareness came to him, Mike was never sure. He flattened to the wall, tense, listening. There was some motion without sound, without visibility, far ahead of him in the blackness. How it managed to communicate itself to him was not the least of its mystery.

Then whoever had stood there, near the spot where the hall merged with the living room, moved on toward the windows facing the terrace. For a brief flash, a shadow slid through betraying moonlight. Then the small sound of a chair brushed by something passing gave evidence of a presence more substantial than shadow.

Mike started forward again, quietly taking up the trail. Whoever it was that preceded him had gotten clear across the living room by now. Once again, moonlight revealed a moving blotch. Then the man was past the tall windows and out on the terrace.

A coffee table drawn out of place during the after-dinner conversation bit abruptly into Mike's shins, cracking them painfully. He sucked in his breath, setting his teeth, and bent swiftly, quietly rubbing the smarting bones.

It came so swiftly, so totally without warning, that the scream from the terrace took him unawares just as he was straightening. It was a scream of mortal terror such as Mike Barkley never had heard in all his thirty years. "Ahhhhh!"

The ghastly sound was like a comet's tail, hurtling through space. It diminished in volume, but not in the dreadful revelation of panic underscoring it. Before the thud of a solid weight striking the parapet five stories below could come, Mike was racing forward.

A table, and the sofa on which Walter Nottage was grunting as if the scream had penetrated his dreams, conspired to slow up that fleet advance, but even so, not sixty seconds could have elapsed before Mike felt the cold slap of fresh air on his forehead. He vaulted to the railing, where Ellen had stood a few hours earlier, and looked down.

The moonlight was bright enough, even this late, to throw heavy shadow. Half in and half out of a black pool staining the terrace which topped the tenth-floor setback, a motionless figure sprawled grotesquely. Broken neck. Mike saw the hideous twisted angle of the fallen's man's head, even before the face and figure.

Philip Wanzo lay where he had fallen, no longer filled with defiance, no longer able to snort indignant repetitions of his ability to think for himself, despite intimidation.

No mistaking the truth, even at first glance, even before someone from the freshly aroused penthouse brought a flashlight to play across the railing onto that pitiful, fear-distorted face.

Wanzo was dead.

THEY huddled near the railing long after the grim truth had been brought home to them all—the twelve who were left. Sleep abandoned them, as on the night before—but this time it was more than fear of the unknown lashing their raw nerves. This time, death was a stark reality.

"You were the first to get here, Barkley?" Howard Ross demanded.

"I was. Except for whoever threw the poor devil over."

"What makes you certain he was thrown?" demanded Plimpton, a waddling Kewpie in monogrammed silk pajamas. "You say you saw no one."

"No one. But a reasonably active man could have gotten through that open window at the end of the row—the pantry window. I heard it being cautiously opened. That's what awakened me. Someone was preparing a getaway."

"You think Wanzo heard it too, poor devil? You think he came out here to investigate? Who roomed with him?"

"He had one of the maid's rooms, back of the others." Mike frowned. "I doubt if the sound I heard could have carried way back there. Anyhow, it would be too pat. Wanzo, the one man here who came right out and announced he was voting for acquittal, didn't just *happen* to be the one who went over that railing."

Olivia Glickman, haggard as a witch, stared at him in morbid fascination. "You don't mean—you can't mean it was *premeditated* murder?"

"Why not? Murphy didn't die by accident."

The woman swayed slightly, but she did not faint as Mrs. MacRea had done earlier. "Then someone must have lured him out here. Someone had an appointment with him, or—or carried him out."

"I think," Mike mused, "that he came out under his own power. I'm positive now that it was Wanzo I followed down the hall. Whoever did the job was waiting here—by appointment, as you say. Wanzo was as light as a reed. And he wasn't expecting *this*."

"What about the bells?" demanded Eberlin sourly. "Those bells Kearney and Miller fixed up in front of the fire door? None of us heard them. Nobody *could* have come in here!"

"Perhaps—nobody did," Mike said. . . .

THE city lay below them, sleeping, a pattern of shadow on which only a few thin spangles of light still shone. By contrast to last night's fog, the sky overhead was almost too clear, the stars as sharply defined as dagger pricks. This isolated terrace, cut off from all other human beings, seemed the loneliest place in the universe. It was a tiny kingdom, and Death was its liege lord.

"We don't have to stand out here in the cold, do we?" Chester Heath shuddered. "It won't bring poor Wanzo back. And—"

"*Mother of Heaven!*"

They all were too used to Leo Kearney's easy-going ways not to be startled by the hoarse, unnatural horror in his low voice now. Not one of them, turning toward him in startled surprise, had to voice the instinctive query on every lip. For the wild, stunned look of Kearney's Irish eyes was a signpost a blind man could not miss.

Mike caught it first, the tiny pinpoint of reflected light deep in among those low-spreading boughs of the trimmed evergreen to his left. He bent forward, seeing what Leo had seen, thrusting the dry pine filaments aside. It was a gold ring, a man's heavy signet ring, against which the moonlight sparkled.

The ring was still on a finger, and the finger was on a hand—a human hand which dropped inertly against the stone rim of the urn as Mike jerked at the little tree. . . .

The dead man might have been any age past forty, this man stuffed so ruthlessly into the urn so recently emptied of nourishing earth. Streaks of loam stained the forehead and cheeks, the shoulders of the commonplace gray business suit, the thinning, blondish hair. It had been a quick job, this entombing of the nameless and lifeless thirteenth occupant of jury quarters.

"It—it's horrible!" Olivia Glickman whispered weakly.

Mike realized that Ellen, a simple blue corduroy housecoat encasing her clear blond loveliness, had turned to him blindly in this moment of shock. Her eyes were wide open, a dazed patina over their blueness. "When? When did it happen, Mike?" she said huskily.

"He's been dead a long time, I think. Since yesterday morning."

"Then it could have been before we came here! This doesn't mean—it doesn't have to have anything to do with us, nor with the Leyden case!" She was trying to reason through to some dim fact only glimpsed, but terribly important. Her voice sounded stunned.

"We'll all be murdered!" the MacRea

woman was moaning, her face a mottled gray. "Whoever is doing this killing gets in and out of here by magic!"

Young Kearney had recovered a little from the shock of his gruesome discovery. "Maybe so. But I'm takin' a look at that fire door and them bells, nonetheless. If they're still in their place, the devil himself couldn't have come in without ringin' 'em!"

A moment later, Kearney was back in the living room, where the rest of them had gathered, the long terrace windows shut against a night wind suddenly chill and biting. A puzzled scowl etched deep lines between his quizzical red eyebrows.

"Nobody left *that* way, I'll be guaranteein'. I balanced a bit of paper atop the lowest bell, where it'd flutter off if the door was opened. Not an inch has it moved. Maybe—maybe—"

"You mean it's one of us!" croaked Nottage hysterically. "One of us, here in this room, who pushed poor Wanzo over! One of us who killed the little janitor and that—him, in the urn out there!"

Mike's voice was brutal. "Shut up, you idiot! There are women here. Whatever happens, we can't let it get us!"

"What all of us need," said Ellen, with cool control, "is hot coffee. I think I saw the makings in the kitchen. It'll be good for all of us. No, never mind, Mike—I can manage, thanks. And doing something—anything—will be a God-send."

She left the room, erect and graceful, and there was a feeling in Mike's heart that some sort of subtle radiance had left with her.

THEY all did their best to rally from the double horror of the past half-hour. Irving Miller, blinking behind his spectacles, even volunteered to entertain them with a few new tricks, but nobody encouraged him. He departed for his bedroom, nonetheless, to fetch his wornout cards.

Mrs. Glickman paced the long room, dramatizing the situation. Eberlin and Meek sought the terrace again, drawn by that sombre fascination a scene of violence exercises over some temperaments.

Ross, gnawing uneasily at his lower lip, prowled off somewhere on a mission of his own. The others milled about aimlessly, too restless to settle down, too stabbed with dread to return to separate quarters.

And then—the lights went out.

Blackness—all the more sinister, all the more startling, for its total unexpectedness—swooped over them like a monstrous crow. One instant, lamps shed their soft glow over haggard faces. The next, there was nothing; only a void over which evil spread an inky stain.

From the rear of the penthouse, high and thin and clear, a cry rose against the darkness, was throttled, and died away. Mike knew, despite the paralyzing shock of that swift blackout, exactly where the interrupted cry had arisen: the kitchen!

He was hurtling along the passageway, bumping from one side wall to the other in blind desperation, before any other conscious thought than Ellen's name occurred to him. Coffee—Ellen—that fire door! Like something in his own throbbing brain, he heard a new sound: the sharp click of a closing latch, and the brassy jangle of chimes suddenly disturbed.

The kitchen door swept backward as his weight surged against it. He was sprawling in the blackness, in the next instant, saving his head with upswept arms as his feet tangled with a warm, yielding mass and tripped him. Grunting, shaken, he crashed to the floor, struggling free of the thing which had thrown him. Then, up again, he fumbled wildly about in the darkness.

The ribbed smoothness of Ellen's coat identified her to his groping hands, even before they found loose hair and the cool softness of her cheek. She still was breathing, thank God! He gathered her close, cradling her head against him in unthinking protection. Only then he remembered that somewhere in this darkness, closing in on them—

A growl of sheer, primitive hatred stirred in Mike, rising out of something ten thousand years older than himself. He heard other footfalls in the passageway, heard the shrill cries and questions of stumbling fel-

low jurors, heard the swinging door bat open again, and yelled without knowing who it was.

"Look out! Something's happened to Miss Coburn. Someone was in this kitchen!"

LIGHTS snapped on again, blindingly sudden. Faces flooded past him as he crouched there, still shielding Ellen. Beside her on the floor lay a crumpled garment which he recognized instantly. Howard Koss's worn leather flying jacket!

Ellen opened her eyes, slowly. "Mike . . . M-Mike?"

Somebody—Leo Kearney—shouted from near the fire door, in queer, hoarse disbelief. "My bit o' paper! It's been knocked off the bell, and I'll eat me granny if I didn't hear these bells ringin' out a minute back!"

"You mean whoever it was really came in that door?" cried Walter Nottage wildly. "He can come and go as he likes? We're locked in here at his mercy, in the dark, never knowing—?"

But Mike wasn't listening. He had gathered up Ellen's feather-light form as he straightened. His arms felt as if she always had belonged in them, as he carried her along the hallway and into the living room, where lamps once more shone softly.

Maybe it was the gentleness with which he laid her down on one of the long couches that made her eyes fly to his lowered face and cling there. Just for that one long moment, they looked deep into each other. Then Mike's tense mouth was groping for hers, searching.

"Ellen—oh, darling, if he'd hurt you—"

"Don't, Mike!" Just before he could kiss her, she managed to twist her face away. Even then, he could tell that she hadn't wanted to. "Please don't. It might mean too much, if you called me darling again."

Mike knew what she was remembering. His arms fell away from her slowly, and after a moment he buried his throbbing head in them. What had he said, only last night? "Her name is Faustine Ashbrook, and she's had me dizzy for years. . . ."

Ellen remembered that.

THAT night's tragic happenings had at last shaken the elephantine calm of Sergeant McCoy. Seated in the jury box—no longer the thirteenth juror, no longer a spare—Mike went over events grimly. Wanzo dead, Ellen attacked in the dark kitchen, with Ross's jacket thrown over her head. The chimes. The fallen bit of paper. And that lifeless, pitiful stranger in the urn. . . .

McCoy, in a veritable frezy, had grilled the patrolman supposedly on duty near the fire escape; eliciting, thereby, earnest oaths that no one had used it during the night. After that, the sergeant had searched the penthouse fruitlessly; examined the body in the urn with inarticulate fury; and pronounced a hollow, unconvincing theory that Wanzo had been walking in his sleep.

Whatever weak conviction this line of reasoning might have carried had been invalidated by McCoy himself, immediately thereafter, when he shouted that, by heaven, a department man was going to guard every last room of the penthouse from tonight forward, and there'd be no more murdering monkey business! Mike remembered that with definite satisfaction, as Judge Iglehart came into the courtroom.

People stood up, then sat down again. An odd, prickling sensation raced along Mike's scalp as the second day of the Leyden trial began. For now *he* had a vote in the verdict—Wanzo's vote. And Wanzo, the only one of them who had announced a clear, firm decision for acquittal, was dead. . . .

THE State's star witness of the morning, taking the stand after others of the staff of Bertram Whitney's residence had contributed no new facts, was Bertram Whitney's butler, Prescott. The man had the traditional butler's long, deadpan face; the automatic speech; the stiffness and icy respectfulness of manner. He was almost too perfect.

Where had Prescott been on the evening of October eleventh? On duty at the residence of his master, naturally. And during that evening, had he admitted any guests to the house?

Only one guest. Mr. Leyden. Yes, that same gentleman who sat now at Hadrian Dempsey's side and crushed an unsmoked cigarette between his fingers.

"No, sir, I'm not mistaken. I've known Mr. David for several years. Mr. Whitney was exceptionally fond of him."

Now Big Tom Fugazzi had almost finished warming up. "In your own words, Prescott, please tell these ladies and gentlemen what happened after you had admitted Mr. Leyden to Mr. Whitney's library."

Prescott's own words were as stiff and formal as a rehearsed oration; yet with nothing dishonest about them. He had left David Leyden alone with his employer at 11:15 and gone below to the kitchens. Leyden had not produced the gun, already established, while in Prescott's presence. But he *had* kept his right hand deep in his pockets.

After that? Nothing, until 11:35, when the telephone had rung. It was a wrong number. A woman had wanted her baby's doctor. Prescott no sooner had hung up the receiver than the muffled sound of a shot had sent him bounding upstairs.

Mr. Whitney's door was closed, locked from the inside. Several knocks and calls, in which a maid had assisted, proved of no avail. Prescott had telephoned for the police.

No, he had not shown Mr. Leyden out of the house. But the library window stood open, a tree grew just beyond, and if a gentleman had some reason for wishing to leave hastily—

"*Objection!*" Dempsey fairly screamed the word.

Fugazzi did not even bother to defend the Prosecution's star witness. Smiling in triumph, he bowed to his opponent. "Your witness, sir."

That cross-examination was Hadrian Dempsey at his fieriest. By every means at his command he sought to confuse, to upset, to discredit the stolid butler. For this, as he well knew, was the most damning testimony so far presented against his client.

"You are certain you did not see Mr.

Leyden again, once you had shown him to Mr. Whitney's study?"

"Positive, sir."

"But you admit being in the kitchen most of the intervening time. Mr. Leyden might have let himself out the front door?"

"It's possible, but not likely, sir, unless Mr. Bertram Whitney were very upset. He was the soul of politeness, sir."

That damning business of the open window and the tree still stood before the jury, unbelittled. Dempsey, Mike figured, must be desperate about that. What was he going to try now?

"You say Whitney has a nephew, Prescott? A blood heir?"

"Mr. Gavin Whitney." Prescott nodded solemnly. "He is a consumptive, sir. His uncle has kept him at the Eagle Mesa Rest, in Arizona, for almost three years now."

"I submit," flashed Dempsey, "that Gavin Whitney had good and sufficient reason for wanting his uncle dead! Even a dying man may want money. Ignorant of his uncle's new will leaving the estate to my client, he might have murdered Bertram Whitney to obtain his supposed legacy. Mr. Leyden could have waited to inherit. Gavin Whitney, dying, could not. *Did* he know of the new will, Prescott?"

"I—why, I wouldn't know about that, sir."

Mike glanced toward Big Tom Fugazzi, astonished that no objection to this course of questioning had arisen from that quarter; but the District Attorney was staring at the ceiling, smiling to himself. For some reason, what his opponent was striving to establish seemed to worry him not at all.

Dempsey himself seemed surprised, for his eyes sought the bigger lawyer appraisingly before he formed his next question. "We do not know, after all, that Gavin Whitney was *still* in Arizona the night his uncle was murdered. Prior to the shooting, Prescott, when was the last direct contact you had with your employer's nephew?"

"Not for several months, sir. He sent me a birthday remembrance from Eagle Mesa. My birthday is June twenty-second."

"Ah!" Dempsey pounced on that. "Then it is possible he left the Rest without your

knowledge? That he was, in fact, right here in this city the night his uncle died? That my client left Bertram Whitney alive, using the door, and Gavin Whitney later fired the fatal shot—gaining access via that tree and window?”

“I think not,” said Prescott, his calm unbroken. “As soon as the police physician told me Mr. Whitney was dead, sir, I put through a long-distance call to Arizona. I personally spoke, first to his nurse, then to Mr. Gavin, there at the Rest. I told them what had happened.”

The court buzzed suddenly, as if a swarm of bees had been let loose in it. But above the clamor rose Dempsey’s outraged voice, still fighting. “You can’t be sure of that! It could have been someone else! Someone Gavin Whitney had left in his place!”

“I’d know Mr. Gavin’s voice anywhere,” came Prescott’s quiet answer. “He lived with us from the time his own parents died. Poor lad, he kept saying the same thing over and over: *‘I can’t believe it! Uncle Bert? I can’t believe it!’*”

TUNCHEON recess passed so quickly that, as the Leyden jury filed back into the courtroom, those reported words of Gavin Whitney’s anguished disbelief still seemed to whisper about the smoke-stained rafters.

Mike pulled out Ellen’s chair, and then his own. He wasn’t especially surprised to discover that her thoughts had been running parallel to his. She said:

“If Dempsey could only prove the opportunity to kill for that Gavin Whitney! There’s certainly a motive there.”

“Wishful thinking, lady. After what happened to Wanzo, and all the rest of it, you’re set and determined on Leyden’s acquittal. But look at the facts: A hospital, a dying man, a long-distance telephone call that Prescott swears to.”

“I know,” admitted the girl unwillingly.

It was those very facts which packed double dynamite into the bombshell Hadrian Dempsey waited to hurl, the moment court had reconvened. The little veteran popped up from his chair alongside David Leyden like a jack-in-the-box. And what

he said fell on the sudden stillness like a shattering explosion.

“May it please the Court, at this time the defense most urgently requests a postponement of trial in the light of new evidence.”

Big Tom Fugazzi leaped to his feet, protesting wildly. But Judge Iglehart overrode that impassioned protest with one sharp crack of his gavel.

“Before recess,” Dempsey continued excitedly, “I attempted to indicate a stronger motive for Gavin Whitney’s desiring Bertram Whitney’s death than any motive attributable to my client. Your Honor will perhaps recall that one witness’s testimony, as to his telephone conversation with Gavin Whitney on the murder night, appeared to discredit this effort?”

“My memory hasn’t started to fail me yet,” His Honor said drily. “Well?”

“Here is the affidavit of Joseph Kunz, feature writer for this city’s *Reporter-Dispatch*—” Dempsey handed up a folded document across the bench “—as to the reply received by Kunz half an hour ago, following telegraph inquiries to Eagle Mesa Rest in Arizona.”

“Inquiries?” Judge Iglehart cocked one eyebrow.

“Sensing a headline in Gavin Whitney’s story, because of Prescott’s testimony, Kunz wired his colleague there for details. According to the *Reporter-Dispatch* correspondent’s reply, Whitney is not now present at the Rest. *Nor was he at the Rest last October eleventh!*”

“Nonsense!” Fugazzi protested. “A sick man—”

“Gavin Whitney has taken frequent ‘vacations,’ as much as two weeks at a time, from Eagle Mesa. He is taking one now. He is listed on their records—despite Prescott’s alleged conversation—as having left for another *five days before his uncle was murdered.*”

The opportunity Ellen had been wishing for! As Mike glanced at her excited face, the courtroom hummed. But Big Tom Fugazzi was far from defeated. He said smoothly:

“Your Honor, this is the case of the

State versus David Leyden. Its postponement, on the grounds that someone connected with it only by far-fetched reasoning is taking a weekend, would be absurd! No evidence beyond Mr. Dempsey's vivid imagination has linked Gavin Whitney with this case in any way. Prescott's contrary testimony is already a matter of record."

Judge Iglehart tapped the affidavit reflectively. "The Court is inclined to agree. Nothing in this paper bears legally on Bertram Whitney's death, nor on the actions of the accused."

"But Your Honor—!" cried Dempsey, his eyes wild with protest.

"Motion for postponement denied." And down cracked the judicial gavel. "The Prosecution will proceed with its next witness."

MARY DOLAN was the maid who had assisted Prescott in his efforts to arouse their employer. China-blue eyes, blond hair which had not always been blond, a body flamboyantly proud of its own curvesome perfection, a mouth as wise as Eve's behind its scarlet slash of paint. Dolan wouldn't always be a maid; but she might never become anything better. Mike knew her type.

"You have heard the testimony of the last witness, Miss Dolan. You agree with its account of the night in question?"

"Why should Prescott lie?" The girl wriggled in her chair, but not nervously. "Servants quarters are third floor rear. The shot woke me up. I ran downstairs and Prescott was in the hall, hammering on the library doors. From there on in, you got the story straight."

"Thank you, Miss Dolan." Fugazzi bowed suavely. "I merely wished to have corroboration for Prescott's statements. You saw no sign, yourself, of Mr. Leyden?"

"I did not. And being I was in my nightgown, I'd have noticed if there was a man about. Prescott's too old to count."

Amid a wave of snickers rising from the gallery, Fugazzi bowed toward the defense attorney. "Your witness."

Watching Dempsey rise out of his chair, Mike felt a queer presentiment that some-

thing vital was about to happen. That made no sense, as Dolan was the least important witness called to date. Yet something in the way the old wolf hunched his ugly body forward, his head thrust ahead of him, his eyes gleaming—

"How long had you been in Whitney's employ, Miss Dolan?" Dempsey said.

The girl shrugged. "About three years."

"We have been told the staff included three others; a cook, another maid, a chauffeur. What about them?"

"People didn't walk out on jobs at the old man's," said Mary. "Work was easy and pay high. Ching had cooked there eight years. Lizzie, the other girl, had worked two years before I came. Nick—he's the chauffeur—had been with the family since 1918."

IT WAS then, and head-on into the middle of Mary Dolan's brassy confidence, that Dempsey attacked. Mike, watching, was reminded of a cobra and its prey.

"All in Whitney's employ far longer than yourself! Yet Miss Jackman reports you received a far handsomer bequest. Why? *Why?*"

The girl turned so white that her rouge stood out like a circus clown's. "I—listen here, you! If you're insinuating—"

"I insinuate nothing. I happen to have known Bertram Whitney. I couldn't suspect him of carrying on with a servant girl, one young enough to be his granddaughter, at that. That's why I consider it important for the jury to learn what lay behind that gift!"

Trapped, Mary Dolan glared at him. "I won't tell!"

"Will Your Honor," requested Dempsey, suddenly gentle, "instruct the witness in the penalties for contempt of court?"

Judge Iglehart said, "Witness will answer the question."

"I—" The maid obviously started to lie. But she was shaken now, thoroughly frightened. "Mr. Whitney *owed* me that money. He promised me a life job, and a slice of change when he kicked off, for—something I did for him."

"*Just exactly what?*"

She swallowed painfully. "When I first came there, I was Mrs. Whitney's personal maid—Mrs. Gavin Whitney's I mean. I'd been her dresser at the theater, and she took me along when she married into the upper crust."

Even Dempsey looked startled at what he had uncovered. "Gavin Whitney has a wife? Who? Why has there been no previous mention of her?"

"She was Louise LaSalle, in the show business," muttered Dolan. "Plenty of looks. On the make, like what smart girl isn't? So young Whitney marries her and takes her home to Uncle. The old gent sees through her right off and figures to bust things up."

"And so?"

"For a month or better, he just watches. Then one day he comes to me and asks can I help him prove that LaSalle is cheating on Gavin, with the hoofer she used to team with in show business. A steady job and cash when the old buck passes on—that's talk a girl out on her own can understand."

"So you took on the proposition?" Dempsey was a past master of contemptuous goading.

Dolan laughed sharply, a burst of sheer bravado. "Who wouldn't? He could have found out other places, anyhow, about her and Barry Jamison. The team of Jamison and LaSalle used to headline in vaudeville. But everyone on Broadway knew they were bats about each other."

"Hoofer?" The bantam lawyer frowned. "That means dancer, I believe. They did a dancing routine, as partners?"

"With new angles," Dolan nodded. "They always had plenty of angles, those two. He'd come out in white tie and opera cape, like a magician, and work a couple of conjuring gags—you know, like pulling a white rabbit out of his hat."

"Go on."

The maid didn't seem to be relishing her spotlight. "Well, then Barry'd take off the cape, twirl it around his head, hold it up in front of him, let it drop—and there would be LaSalle, popped up through a trap door. What little she had on was like a

rabbit costume, all in sequins. They'd go into their dance. It was plenty hot, too. All the old boys in the front rows went overboard every performance."

HADRIAN DEMPSEY had been pacing before the jury box with vigorous strides. "Not exactly the wife a man like Bertram Whitney would want for his nephew! And you say she was unfaithful to him?"

"Sure. It was Barry she was wild about. Sometimes, as Gavin came in the front door, Barry went out her window. That tree outside it was a regular ladder for his exits and entrances. Downstairs, we used to lay bets on whether Gavin would ever catch on. Prescott told the old man, and that's how *he* caught on. Gavin never did know."

"And you found little difficulty in—er—cooperating with your employer regarding his request for proof of Mrs. Gavin Whitney's unfaithfulness?"

"Why should I have had any difficulty?" the brassy blonde smirked. "LaSalle *trusted* me. I turn over some notes, old Whitney keeps his promise, and I'm in clover. Mrs. Gavin knew when she was licked. She cleared out without a murmur, to avoid the trouble the old boy could make for her."

"What about the nephew?"

"Him? He was just stupid about the whole business, and remained friendly with the old man. But not long after they found out his lungs were bad and sent him off to Arizona. I guess—"

The sharp, thin horror of Hattie MacRea's shriek split the calm of the courtroom like a rock shattering a mirror. Someone else—someone outside the jury box—stood up and shouted.

Mike reached for Ellen, drew her protectively against him, though she was already shielded by the thin figure of Irving Miller on the other side of her. And then—

And then the spare, sedate figure of Prescott, Whitney's butler, seemed to rise a little from its front row chair outside the railing. For a perilous instant it rode some invisible seesaw, and then it toppled

forward against the oak rail. There was a neat black hole in the butler's forehead, drilled expertly between his suddenly staring eyes.

WHY Prescott? That one question formed an undercurrent for all the others, eddying in fitful horror across the penthouse living room. The court's adjournment had been so sudden that McCoy was herding his charges away even as someone else discovered that small-caliber revolver lying in the narrow aisle back of the jury box.

"Why Prescott?" muttered Emil Plimpton. "Right in front of our eyes! Right in the midst of a murder trial! It's impossible!"

"But it happened," George Eberlin said dourly. "We all saw it. And the bullet came from *our* direction."

Olivia Glickman clenched her thin hands together. "P-Prescott! If Gavin Whitney were present anywhere in the courtroom, Prescott could identify him. That's the only reason—*Gavin's the only possible person Prescott might—*"

"They haven't proved the old man's nephew came East, either now or last October," Ross pointed out. "The back wall of the jury box is what interests me. It's at least four feet high. Crouching behind it, a man could shoot and be out the side door before—but I didn't hear any shot."

"The gun," observed Mike, "had a silencer. I saw the guard turn it over to McCoy. Looked like a toy—but it worked."

Eberlin, never pleasant, snorted. "Silencer? Mrs. MacRea let out a yell to cover the shot. A very providential yell for the killer, you folks might observe."

"C-could I help that?" Not since tragedy had hit the courtroom, half an hour earlier, had the portly matron responsible for that first outcry stopped sobbing. "I saw a mouse—a big m-mouse—scuttling right past my f-foot. I—I just opened my mouth and—"

"—covered what noise the gun did make!" Harrison Meek finished for her sourly. "By Jupiter, it *must* be the nephew! He *must* be lurking hereabouts, somehow,

somewhere! Why should anyone else want to kill Prescott! To silence him!"

"Why silence a man who's already spoken his piece?" Mike heard himself voicing that thought, the biggest stumbling block of all. "Why not kill him before he took the stand, if he could say anything dangerous? Logic does point to a Gavin somewhere—somewhere close to us all, able to strike when he likes. Except for him, Prescott was already out of the case."

It was like Ellen, so cool and logical, to have pondered that ahead of him. "I think I have an idea, Mike. But it's so fantastic, so difficult to imagine in detail—"

Mike glanced around the circle of tense listeners curiously. Grim, strained, afraid, they stared at Ellen. But so much had happened, facial expressions didn't mean much any more. Howard Ross's taut lips were twitching. Walter Nottage looked about ready to faint. The MacRea woman was whimpering in terror.

"Tell us, Ellen."

"Well," she began, feeling her way, "I think that Prescott's murder proves that Leyden is innocent. *He* didn't fire it. And the only person who would have taken a chance like that is the man who killed Bertram Whitney."

"The real murderer?"

She nodded eagerly. "Yes. Fighting for Leyden's conviction in order to save himself from suspicion. Everything that's happened to us here must be part of the killers desperate play for safety. If Prescott had suddenly remembered something, or recognized someone—and if, somehow, the murderer were watching and realized it—"

"He was in the courtroom!" Hattie MacRea cried wildly. "In the same courtroom with us! Mr. Barkley said the killer is close enough to strike when he likes. That b-butler was looking *straight our way* when he died. It's one of us, one of the jury, right here in this room! Gavin Whitney's *here!* He'll kill us all! Tonight!"

ELLEN'S hand flashed upward with calm deliberateness. Before anyone else could move, she slapped the woman's discolored face—slapped it hard. The hysteri-

cal crescendo choked to a moaning echo of its frenzy, as Hattie collapsed onto one of the divans. "You're a d-dreadful girl—a w-wicked girl! I think you killed him!" she sobbed.

"One thing," said Chester Heath, in the silence that followed. "I doubt if we'll have to spend another night in this damned place. After Prescott, they can declare a mistrial. This ought to be our last lock-up."

"The last one together, anyhow," sneered Eberlin, enjoying his bombshell. "Where did the bullet come from? That's what they'll ask. They'll lock us up in separate cells, investigating us from the ground up. Maybe one of *us* fired that gun."

"Holy saints!" came Leo Kearney's gasp. "Never did I think of it, but the man's right! We'll be on the carpet ourselves now. By what I've been hearin' of third degrees and the like—"

"Maybe eleven of you will be grilled. Not me! Not me, because I'm cracking this death trap now, and not one of you is going to stop me!"

As those words struck across the high tension which bound them together, Howard Ross stepped back into the mouth of the passageway leading to the kitchen. He was eyeing them alertly, as if he hoped someone would try to stop him. His thin face was as expressionless as stone, except for two little muscles near his mouth which twitched uncontrollably.

He was covering them all with an army Colt.

"He's going to shoot!" Olivia Glickman wailed.

Mike didn't think he was; not unless one of them moved. He prayed silently that someone wouldn't be Ellen. Somehow, she had gotten too far away from him. No quick move on his part could shield her from that unwavering muzzle now. If only she realized this man was too dangerous to be treated like Hattie MacRea—

"Stay where you are, so you won't get hurt." Ross spoke now with deadly calm. "I'm getting out of here. I'm backing down this hall and bolting the kitchen door behind me. I can shoot off the lock on the fire exit."

"Steady, Ross!" Mike said. "You can't get away. The police will be after you as soon as we can smash through into the kitchen. With the fire door open—"

"I'll have time enough!" The ex-flyer laughed shortly. "A head start's better than nothing. Suppose I waited here for the law to find out how I hate Leyden's guts? What'd they make of my sitting on their jury, waiting to hang the rat?"

"Y-you knew him before?" Plimpton managed to drown even his panic in startled surprise. "But you swore to the attorneys—"

"What's a little item like perjury?" demanded the man behind that motionless gun. "I'd sell my soul to pay Leyden off for firing me because that transport cracked up while I had a few drinks in me!"

"Ross! You—"

"Let *him* suffer, I told myself. Let *him* find out what it's like to be branded. When they drew me for jury duty, when Fugazzi and Dempsey couldn't spot me, who was *I* to turn down the chance to get Leyden? Sure I wanted to see Leyden dead! But I never bumped old Whitney. I never bumped that janitor, or Wanzo, or the fellow in the urn."

"You've as good as confessed!" Olivia Glickman, too, had her moments of rising above terror. "It's not probable *two* enemies of Leyden 'happened' to get onto this particular jury!"

"Believe what you like! I'll never hang. I'm leaving now—and don't start after me!"

Then he was gone from the archway. His swift backward retreat along the hall sent its staccato echoes back to them. Mike started for the French doors to the terrace. Ellen raced after him, suddenly comprehending, and he had to force her away from him. The others stood rooted where they were, stunned, incapable of action.

A LONG the open terrace Mike raced. and in at the last window of the line—the pantry window which Ross might, or might not, have forgotten in his hurried calculations. The sharp sound of a bolt sliding, shutting off the rest of the pent-

house from the kitchen for at least a few moments, coincided with the outward jerk of a sash as Mike pulled it.

As he eased across the sill and onto the pantry floor, the desperate swiftness of Ross's movements sounded in the room beyond. Stumbling across the linoleum, the fugitive flyer had reached the fire door, which stood almost opposite the barricaded exit to the hall. Apparently he meant to shoot that lock at close range, so as to waste no bullets.

Mike picked up a cheap glass water jug from the pantry shelf.

The sharp report of Ross's first shot sounded triply loud in the narrow pantry. But through it, above or below it, came the sharp, swift rasp of the flyer's breathing. His composure had cracked now; had left only the driving terror of a mortal need.

Mike spoke from the pantry door. "Ross!"

The man whirled, his finger jerking at his trigger almost before he could identify the source of that challenge. Mike's arm had lofted. He let the carafe fly, in the split-second that Ross's gun-arm swerved. Mike had once pitched for Yale, and he always kept in condition.

Ross's first shot went wild. There wasn't a second one, for the carafe hit him on the flat of his right wrist. The gun sprang from his hand like a startled rabbit. Mike plunged forward in a jack-knife dive, oblivious to the pandemonium of shrieks and poundings beyond the barred hall door.

He drove a square fist hard up under Howard Ross's jaw.

LICKING the salty blood from a split lip, five minutes later, Mike jerked back the bolt and kicked the door open, ushering his battered prisoner into the crowded hallway. He had Ross's automatic, with only two slugs shot out of it; he held it one inch from Ross's back.

"We're going into the living room," he said grimly, "and get down to business. If any of us knows what's been happening since the Leyden jury was sworn in, he's going to spill it now. We're going to have

the answers ready when Sergeant McCoy comes."

No one protested, not even Eberlin, who, as jury foreman, might have resented this switch in authority. Standing against the fireplace, the gun dangling lightly from his fingers, Mike faced them.

"Most of the 'business,'" growled Plimpton, "seems to be taken care of. Ross's break proves who's guilty. What more do you need?"

"A confession might help, for one thing. Any of us might have lost his head and tried to get out of this mess we're all in."

The railroad tycoon snorted. "But blast it, man, Ross *hated* David Leyden! And what about that leather jacket of his—the one that was used on Miss Coburn last night?"

"I wouldn't use it myself, would I?" the battered owner of the jacket flared. "It was there in my room, for anyone to pick up. You, for instance. Suppose your railroads had had some fuss with the Whitney aircraft outfit? How do we know—"

"Why, you miserable, drunken, gun-toting—"

"That's enough from both of you!" Mike put into his voice something surprisingly reminiscent of the recent gunshots in the kitchen. "Because I wouldn't have used my own jacket for a job like that, I'm willing to concede that perhaps Ross wouldn't either. Anyway, we're both going to get all the evidence we can."

"On what?"

"First, the shot that killed Prescott *after* he'd testified. I'm going to start along the jury box, in order, and I want each one of you to wrack your brains for anything you might have noticed at just that instant. Nottage, you sit in the left-hand rear seat—"

"But—really, Mr. Barkley, that ghastly scream! Mrs. MacRea's, I mean. I'm afraid I only put my fingers in my ears."

Mike's lips twisted. "I see. Mrs. Glickman?"

"Honestly, I can't help. I was watching Mr. Leyden listen to that Dolan creature. Then, suddenly, I heard the scream. That's all."

"Mr. Miller?"

Irving Miller had been nervously fingering through the dog-eared deck of cards he had fished from his pocket. He looked up blankly, as if his mind had been on the disappearance of an Ace of Spades. "I've been trying to remember. There wasn't anything I thought odd *then*."

"But now?"

"Well, admitting things look bad for Ross, still I'm wondering if anybody but myself heard a floor board in the aisle back of the jury box creak ever so lightly. Just before Mrs. MacRea's mouse."

DEAD silence filled the room, a silence of waiting. Nobody broke it, and at last Miller cleared his throat and said diffidently, "I suppose I could be wrong."

"Miss Coburn—" Mike almost stumbled over the formality—"you sat between Miller and myself. What about you?"

Standing there against a background circle of masculine shoulders—Miller's, Eberlin's, Leo Kearney's—Ellen seemed even slimmer and more fragile than before. Her head caught the noon light like a single golden jonquil. And Ross might have harmed her! If she'd made a wrong move, while that man had held his gun—

"I—I'm not sure, Mike. I keep having the strangest feeling that I *did* notice something—something important, but not the sound Mr. Miller believes he heard. It was something I saw, I'm almost sure."

"Try, Ellen! Try to remember!"

It was while his eyes were pleading with her, fixed earnestly on her face, that the change came. One instant, a frown of concentration puckered her forehead. The next, the frown was gone and her face was utterly expressionless, like a wiped slate. She wasn't trying to remember anything any more—but not because she had succeeded in remembering.

"Sorry," she said reluctantly. "It's no use. I can't call it back, if it was anything."

That made no sense, yet something in Mike's heart told him why that change had come. He knew, and his blood pounded furiously to that knowledge.

No, it made no sense. And yet somehow,

in that breathless interval, someone had managed to tell Ellen she would die if her lips formed the words that were on her tongue!

Yet no one had spoken. In the tense, listening silence, the merest breath of sound would have been underscored. No one could have warned her to silence that way. And any gesture visible to her would also have been visible to others. In any event, she had been looking straight back into Mike's own eyes. She couldn't have seen—

But she could have felt!

MIKE knew the answer, even as the sharp sting of realization penetrated the numb surprise in his brain. Felt *what*? Only a gun muzzle or a knife, surely, could have communicated so instantly and unmistakably a message of peril. Gun? Knife?

The words beat over and over again in his mind as he looked past the girl's bright head and took in its background, Miller, spectacled and mild. Eberlin, with his hard-bitten face and mean little eyes. Kearney—tough, red-headed, now as watchful as a lynx. Only one of those three could possibly be touching Ellen now!

An instant instinct to guard Ellen, to shield her, prompted him to pass on hastily; to question himself, and then Meek who had sat on his right, and then the others; to push the unspoken threat of this moment back into oblivion, as if it never had been. For the killer would not shoot or stab if the danger of revelation passed him by.

Yes, but that danger, once become a fact, could not pass. For now that Ellen knew what she had seen was vital, the murderer couldn't let her live. It might not happen now, while Mike was on his guard against it, but later—*before she could speak*—

"You're certain it was nothing?" He had to spar for time.

"Quite sure." It wasn't Ellen's voice; it was remote and brittle and toneless, something shut away from him behind a glass wall. Mike knew that the wall's name was Terror.

"I—that disappoints me. We don't seem to be getting very far." Miller? No; Miller

had been in bed in the room they shared when Wanzo had gone to his death. Eberlin? He'd been the one to urge Leyden's conviction, but—Kearney?

It had been Kearney who thought up the chimes-and-paper gag, that stunt to prove—no, to *seem* to prove—they were menaced by some outside peril. Kearney, again, who claimed the paper scrap had fallen from its perch after that first attack on Ellen. Kearney who called their attention to that body in the urn—which someone else must surely have discovered eventually, and perhaps less opportunely.

As if brooding on his own misgivings, Mike heaved forward. The scowl of pre-occupation never left his face. He wasn't even looking at Ellen, as he strode nearer. He said:

"There must be *something!* Twelve people couldn't sit mere feet or inches from an exploding gun, even a silenced one. even one camouflaged by a scream, without—"

He stood so close to Ellen, now, that he might have touched her. But he didn't. There wasn't even time to push her out of the way. He merely balled his big fist again, as he had done so recently in the kitchen, and let it fly. Where it flew—with everything he had in the way of muscle behind it—was on a straight line with Irving Miller's lean, pointed jaw. . . .

A GUN barked. It wasn't the gun Mike had held, because he had dropped that in order to free his right hand. Plaster showered down from the ceiling, where the bullet had dug a nasty furrow. White flakes of it powdered Miller's twisted face, as Mike sprang onto him to keep that muzzle pointing high.

The wrist his fingers had closed on was slender, but tough. It writhed away from him like a slippery eel. He had to clamp down hard. His weight carried Miller over backward, completing the work that unexpected blow had begun on the man's balance. When they fell, Mike was on top.

When they fell, something else happened too. The prominent teeth which had given his roommate much of that gaping goldfish look jarred loose and bounced out. Other

teeth showed behind them; small, regular, yellow with tobacco stains.

Mike straddled him panting, forcing down the man's writhing body, despite every trick Miller could summon to break his grip. Miller's sharp knee tortured him, Miller's claws left welts along his forearms, Miller's teeth found the flesh of one hand and bit deep. Cursing, Mike held on.

"It had to be somebody," he panted, "with clever fingers. Eberlin's too old, too stiff. Kearney's mitts are muscle-bound from hauling around ten-ton trucks. But you did card tricks and—" Mike broke off. "*Say!*" he yelled, stung by a new idea. "Wait a minute! By heaven, so did that hooper Romeo that's sweet on Gavin Whitney's wife—the one Bertram Whitney found out about!"

As Miller began cursing hotly, Mike gave a sharp twist to the man's gun-hand, twisting steadily, willing to snap the wrist, if necessary. He understood a lot of things now. Those false teeth, for instance—

"Barry Jamison—that's who you are!" he gritted. "The dance partner of Gavin Whitney's wife! Only a guy as quick and light on his feet as a dancer could have played phantom all over this penthouse without our catching him!"

"You crazy, raving—"

Mike went on swiftly. "You used all your knowledge of stage make-up, with that phony dental plate and the glasses and—yep—dye in your hair. And so Prescott didn't recognize you—not until Dolan's story began to jog his memory. Then he did. And when you caught him studying you, watching you, you knew he'd catch wise and talk, so—"

The tiny revolver dropped suddenly from fingers aflame with agony. But Mike was too deep in his thoughts to notice that. "You killed Bertram Whitney and planned things so Leyden would die too. Then Gavin could step in, as the nearest of kin, to sue for the unprobated fortune. Your lady friend, being Gavin's wife, could grab the money. Or would you have killed him, too?"

"You're breaking my wrist!" Miller snarled.

Inspiration was rattling in Mike's brain now like machine-gun fire. "Miller! Miller must have been one of the jurors actually summoned for our panel! And somehow you got yourself into his place. Where—? The man in the urn! That was the *real* Miller!"

"My wrist, damn you! My—*wrist!*"

"You lured him up here, after you'd killed Murphy for his key. No, you'd not even need that. Nottage did this penthouse over for a show girl. Louise LaSalle! You'd have *her* key."

"Stop! Stop, in God's name—*ahh!*"

Only then did Mike realize he was still punishing that twisted wrist; that at last he must have snapped it.

Mike stopped—but not until he had looked up into Ellen's sick, white face and Ellen understood what he wanted. She bent swiftly to scoop up the fallen miniature weapon—twin to that gun picked up behind the jury box—from "Miller's" possible reach.

"Now give! That telephone alibi Prescott gave Gavin?" Mike said.

SNARLING in torment, the man beneath him slacked against the rug. "Louise was his 'nurse.' The call came to his private room. She had a record of his voice. The sucker had made it, just the way she told him, while we had him hopped up with dope. We didn't want him suspected, and we knew what the news would be. The only trick was to keep Prescott from asking direct questions. Louise saw to that."

"But Gavin's absences from Eagle Mesa?"

"There's always the outside chance of a slip-up—like that damned reporter, that snoop Kunz." It still was difficult for the panting murderer between Mike's knees to talk. "We had to have a cover-up act all ready. That was Gavin."

"Why?" Mike demanded.

"If Leyden got off, and if the scent got hot, we could shove the job off on him. We kept him too doped to remember where he'd been, on those vacations. He had plenty of motive—crazy about Louise, and not really dying, as his uncle thought when he

cut him off with a lousy little trust fund."

"Gavin wasn't in this even as a tool, then?"

"Hell, no!" Then a crafty anger came into his eyes. Plainly, Barry Jamison realized he had missed a bet.

Just for remembrance, Mike made a gesture toward the mangled wrist. "You killed Whitney? You came in through his window—using that tree Mary Dolan told us about—after Leyden had gone?"

"I telephoned Leyden that night." Jamison grated between set teeth. "Boasted that I meant to murder the old fool. But I didn't say who I was, of course. I bragged that Whitney was defenseless without a weapon in his house. I made it sound like a screwball, a haywire employee. Sore because the factory had been closed."

"Hoping Leyden would dash for Whitney's house, to warn him and leave protection behind—a gun you'd remove later? A gun the State could prove Leyden had brought with him when he came?"

"It worked, didn't it?" the man beneath him said defiantly. "I was watching, outside the window. Then I climbed the tree, up to Louise's old room. She'd had her telephone separate from the regular house line and the wiring was still in. I've done enough stuff with stage lights, in tank road companies, to know my way around with a wire or two."

"What then?"

JAMISON'S stare was onyx-hard, fixed on Mike's unrelenting face. "I called the Whitney number, just as the library door opened, to keep Prescott in the kitchen. I put on an act about a woman with a sick baby. Prescott never saw Leyden leave at all."

"You must have blessed that tree and window," Mike said in a hard tone. "A seeming exit for a 'guilty' Leyden—an actual one for you! You and your girl friend certainly thought of everything, planning to get your hands on Whitney's fortune. Gavin wouldn't have lived long enough to enjoy it, would he, once it came to him?"

"A worm like that? Why shouldn't we get rid of him?" Bravado tinged the words.

"It was a natural! We had every angle figured; what I was to do in the courtroom if Dolan or Prescott spotted me—everything. Louise is smart. And she's got oomph—lots of it."

Defiant laughter burst from Jamison's lips.

"Young Gavin couldn't stay away from her, the sucker! She's like breathing or eating, to him. When we first figured the job, she wrote him how he should pretend to be sick, so he could come west to the private hospital of a doctor friend of hers. He scuttled out to her like a shot, because it meant they could be together. Old Whitney couldn't refuse to pay his bills there. And of course nobody figured I was the doc."

None of them heard the elevator door slide open and Sergeant McCoy was well into the room before the frozen little group became aware of him. He stood there, the blue-coated guards he had brought along to post for the night behind him, as if the scene he beheld were proof of the Leyden jury's mass insanity.

"So you're playin' rough already, eh? Well, you'll be findin' out what rough is, unless one o' you comes clean on that Prescott shootin'! And while we're about it, which of you loonies was playin' practical jokes in the courtroom?"

McCoy held up his hand. In it was the final evidence of that cleverness, that attention to detail, which had marked every move in the ambitious scheme of Barry Jamison and Louise LaSalle. And yet the object itself was so simple, so foolish, that Olivia Glickman burst into a sudden irrepressible giggle and Mike swore softly.

What McCoy held up for them to see was a child's rubber mouse. . . .

IT WAS twilight when the elevator spilled eleven passengers into the ornate lobby of the Liberty. Spring twilight, as purple as smoke, as fragrant as lilacs in the rain. Mike held fast to Ellen's elbow as he guided her out into the fresh air; into a light-gilded street which once had seemed distant sanctuary, but now was only a street again.

"It—it's good to get away from that place and that horrible man," Ellen said breathlessly. "Somehow, everything seemed even more evil and sordid after we'd found out than—than before."

"Sure," agreed Mike morosely. "Sure." He wasn't thinking about Barry Jamison. For now he had that thing which had seemed more important than life itself, so recently: he had his freedom.

"Wanzo would have acquitted Leyden." Ellen seemed to be talking against time, as if she were afraid of silence. "I suppose poor Wanzo did have to die, considering their abominable scheme. I can see why Jamison tricked him into sharing a search for the 'intruder,' met him on the terrace, and threw him over."

"Sure." Mike nodded again.

"But I never did quite understand about Murphy, not even after Sergeant McCoy started asking questions and—and using his fists."

Mike explained dully. "The main point was to scare us into convicting Leyden. But it had to seem as if an outsider was threatening us. Murphy's was the only fire-door key we were at all likely to realize existed, so it had to appear that Murphy was killed for that key. That was just window dressing, Ellen."

"With a man's life!" she cried, aghast.

"Yes. Just window dressing. The same as those rolled-up blankets Jamison admits having fixed in his bed to fool me, if I woke up while he was meeting Wanzo that second night."

"And the tie?" But Ellen didn't sound as if she was really thinking about green neckties with yellow transverse stripes.

"Jamison himself was wearing that tie, when he inveigled the real Miller upstairs to die. Imagine climbing up two stories of a hotel fire escape, Ellen, just because a stranger you'd met in a bar claimed he could introduce you to someone who could quash a jury summons! Yet Jamison says the real Miller did just that."

"You didn't want to serve, either," said Ellen soberly. "But what about that tie?"

"Jamison told McCoy he still had it on when he went after Murphy in the court-

house washroom. Murphy grabbed it, ripped off one end. Jamison had to sprint out and buy a new tie before court convened." Mike was reciting from memory like a kid in school. "He was scared stiff, until he got the evidence out of his pocket there in the penthouse. He meant to burn it that night. But then you—"

Ellen nodded vigorously and, with a wry smile, said:

"I certainly must have been a thorn in his flesh! Even at the end, when I almost remembered noticing he'd used his left hand for fiddling with his cards while his right was in his pocket—just before Mrs. MacRea saw the mouse and screamed."

"That might have hanged him, if you'd ever understood what you saw. He couldn't have risked your telling about it."

She tried to laugh. "I guess I ought to thank you prettily for saving my life, before I call a taxi," she said.

Taxi! That meant Ellen was leaving him. It meant he wouldn't see her again. He could ask her for a date, but—well, the answer to that was in her averted blue eyes. Ellen was so sensible.

Mike fumed and fretted inwardly, trying to think of something to say, and finding not one word that would sound reasonable. Darn it, if Ellen got a cab—

"Here comes one!" She lifted a hand in

signal. "Well—good luck, Mike. Have fun tonight. I know that lovely, stormy-eyed girl will forgive you."

"No she won't!" Mike barred her way, determined to hold her. "She doesn't love me—never has and never will. Anyway, a girl like Faustine could never forgive a man for what I've done. She's a vain, spoiled—"

He ran out of breath, took a long deep one, and began again. "She never did care—neither did I. Not really. She's so unreasonable and vain—"

Ellen trembled, as if she were cold. "Silly! She must know by now it was jury duty that kept you. Any girl could understand that. You—why, Mike, you had no choice!"

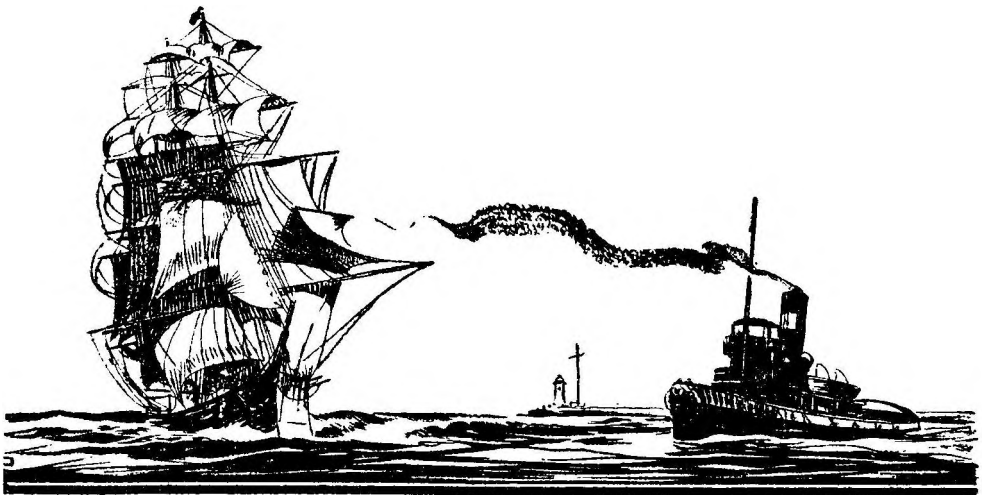
Mike's eyes shone with sudden fervor, and he said:

"You're right. Could I have helped falling in love with you? Could I help getting into this taxi with you now, whether you like it or not? There *would* have been a choice, maybe, if she and I had really loved each other."

"Mike!" she said, suddenly radiant.

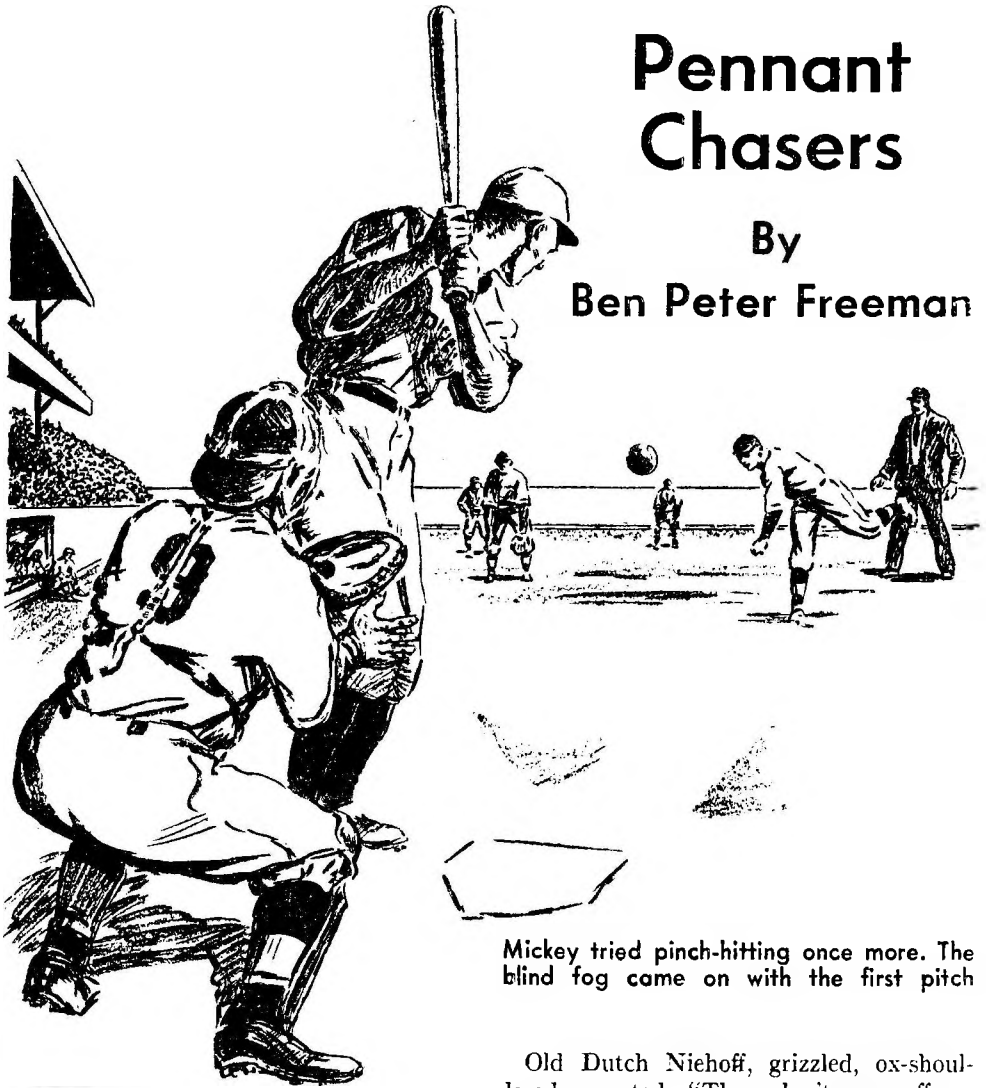
"Ellen!" He pulled her roughly, yet tenderly, into his arms. The taxi driver was grinning. "You will marry me, won't you? You've *got* to marry me. I darn well didn't save your life for any other man!"

(The End.)



Pennant Chasers

By
Ben Peter Freeman



Wasserman

Mickey tried pinch-hitting once more. The blind fog came on with the first pitch

IN THE surrounding night, the Metro City ball park was a brightly lit jewel. White-painted horseshoe stands inclosed the rolled black of the infield and the emerald green carpet of the outfield grass. The noise of the fans seemed higher, more exciting, in the night; the *cr-rack* and *spat* of the ball more exhilarating.

In his grandstand seat behind the home plate, Mickey King made an appreciative sound. "A nice layout," he told his companion. "Neat, but not gaudy. We're going to like this!"

Old Dutch Niehoff, grizzled, ox-shouldered, grunted. "They don't pay off on pretty ball yards. And from what we've seen so far, this new outfit of yours would look more at home on a sand lot!"

Mickey King smiled. He didn't smile often, and now it was a rare illumination in his dark, intense face. He was still young: flat-cheeked and iron-jawed. Stormy blue eyes under bumpy black brows. "Thunder Mike," the newspaper boys called him. "The Hustle Guy." Until his near-fatal injury in last year's World Series, he'd been the outstanding catcher of his time.

"You watch," Mickey told the grizzled coach confidently. "I'll have this club hustling like big leaguers—and winning!"

Dutch Niehoff looked gloomily dubious, but he said nothing. Dutch had protested vigorously when the world's champion Wolves, upon the completion of their training trip a month ago, proposed to sell their injured star, Mickey King, down the river as manager of the Metro City Dippers. A class A loop.

"Don't go," Dutch had pleaded with Mickey. "If you go to the minors now, everyone will say you're washed up. You'll never get back to the big time. Stay out of baseball this year. Next year your eyes will be okay, and you'll be right up here."

But Mickey King, who lived for baseball, and was surcharged with a fierce, restless energy, had refused to contemplate a year on the sidelines. The medicos said his eyes, injured when he was beamed in last year's World Series, *might* come back—and they might not. Mickey, in the prime of his career, shuddered at that "might not," and so he had leaped at this chance to manage the Dippers.

Dutch Niehoff, the champion Wolves' number-one coach, had resigned from the Wolves to follow the fiery catcher. Mickey protested at this, but the loyal Dutch insisted, came along. . . .

A Metro City player singled sharply to right field. He tried to steal second-base on the first pitch and was thrown out by ten feet. The crowd howled disapproval and Dutch Niehoff groaned in disgust.

"That guy is so slow he couldn't steal his grandmother's false teeth," Dutch snorted, "and they send him down. I never saw such sloppy business!"

Mickey didn't answer. He watched the next Metro hitter, a cocky, cotton-haired little giant, blast a line drive at the enemy third-baseman like a whistling shot out of a cannon. The third-baseman got his hands up barely in time to save his head, and the ball stuck in his glove, then dropped. The Metro batter had slowed down. Now he started to run again, half-heartedly. The third-baseman threw him out by a step.

This time it was Mickey King who snarled fury and disgust. "That dope should have had a hit! How does he get that way, slowin' down because he thinks he might

be out? I'm going down there and tell him—"

"Take it easy!" Dutch cautioned, and his heavy gnarled hand gripped Mickey's arm as the latter was starting to leap up. "In case you forget, *you're* not in the saddle till tomorrow!"

MICKEY sat back then, growling angrily. This club he had come to manage, these Dippers, needed to hear a dozen choice, well assorted words. They needed a kick in the pants. No wonder they were occupying the league's cellar after the first month of the season. And no wonder the fans howled disapproval.

"Tomorrow," Dutch said again. "After the banquet."

"Yeah," Mickey growled. "Okay. Let go my arm!" It had been Dutch's idea that they slip into town the night before Mickey was to be formally installed as the Dipper's new pilot, and sneak a preview of their new club. "Let's catch the lay of the land," Dutch had suggested. "To me, it smells bad."

Dutch insisted it smelled bad when the Dippers, in a blaze of publicity which reached headlines in the big city papers, announced they had paid a record sum for Mickey King, and would pay him \$10,000 to manage the club.

"Why should they pay a lot of dough for you, when maybe you can't catch at all this year on account of your eyes?" Dutch demanded. "And why should they pay you ten grand as manager, when they can get plenty of *experienced* managers for half of that?"

Mickey shrugged his flat, muscular shoulders. "Publicity, I guess. And they know I'll make the club fight."

"Nuts!" Dutch snorted. "I tell you it smells bad."

The Metro City Dippers looked bad in the field too. Their first-baseman was slow and lumbering around the bag. Their second-baseman was flashy, but highly erratic. Their catcher, to Mickey's own catcher-wise eyes, seemed to unsettle his pitcher by working him too fast. Only the third-baseman, in the infield, displayed a

smooth, if not brilliant, knowledge of his job.

There were two errors by the Dippers in that sixth inning—a bad throw by the erratic kid second-baseman, and a muff, due to a late start, by the lumbering first-sacker. The opposing team pushed two more runs across.

The modern electric scoreboard in center field said: *Dippers* 2; *Oilers* 7. The crowd, which only half-filled the compact but spacious stands, were jeering the home team now. Mickey jumped up, his stormy blue eyes rebellious, his hard jaw thrusting. "Let's get out of here," he snarled at Dutch. "I've seen enough—until tomorrow!"

Dutch followed the ex-big-league catcher out of the stands. "Lookit, kid. Whoever's been ridin' herd on this bunch doesn't know his ear from his elbow. Also, he's been sparing the rod and letting the team get fat. They're spoiled, and you want to start out easy-like—"

"Easy?" Mickey barked. "Easy? Listen—"

The grizzled coach only half-listened. He knew "Thunder Mike." There was no soft streak in Mickey's fighting, nervous temperament which would tolerate soldiering or sloppiness on the field of battle. There were going to be fireworks around here, and—Dutch grimaced. He wished he knew just what it was which made him so sure the whole set-up carried an ominous odor. . . .

THE Metro City Chamber of Commerce threw their welcome banquet for Mickey King the following evening in Elks' Hall. The brass hats were there, and the town's substantial citizens, and a plentiful sprinkling of the small business and professional men. They whooped it up for Mickey King, and clapped his back; and the ex-big-league star, tackling his first managerial post, felt a fine, warming glow. This was a red-hot baseball town!

And then Metro City's mayor, rising after the toastmaster's introduction, brought Mickey to sharp attention.

"Fellow citizens," the mayor began, "and

stockholders of our ball club, which is now to see better days—"

Mickey's black eyebrows bent down, and he turned to Lou Gramm in the next chair. Gramm was the Dipper's executive vice president, and had closed the big deal with Mickey in the East. "What did he mean by that?" Mickey asked. "That stuff about 'fellow citizens and stockholders?'"

Lou Gramm smiled. He was in his late thirties and beginning to run to fat. He had a round, sleek face, thin sandy hair and protuberant brown eyes. He was immaculately groomed, and gave off an aura of breezy friendliness and high-powered efficiency.

"The club was on the rocks a few years ago," Gramm answered softly. "Almost lost the franchise. So the whole city—big fellows, little fellows—chipped in what they could. They saved the club and franchise, and—" he shrugged, smiled with a tinge of mockery—"now they're our stockholders."

"I see," Mickey said slowly. "That means all these little fellows take a kick in the pocketbook when the club loses."

Lou Gramm looked at his new manager shrewdly. "Sure," he admitted. "But forget that." And when Mickey frowned, Gramm added quickly, "Never get sentimental in business. Every man who buys stock takes a gamble, doesn't he?"

Mickey hesitated. "Yes," he said finally, "I guess that's right." But he couldn't dismiss the thought as easily as Gramm seemed able to do. His new job assumed sudden larger proportions, greater responsibilities. He was carrying the hopes and the hard-earned dollars of some three hundred plain citizens. Small shopkeepers, doctors, dentists, clerks, mechanics.

Lou Gramm was responding to the toastmaster's call and the crowd gave Gramm a hand. Mickey found himself watching the Dippers' vice-prexy closely. Gramm spoke well, forcibly and cleverly, and he could play his audience like an accordion.

"We've been getting licked long enough," Gramm declared, "so we got the best man available—regardless of cost!—to lead the Dippers back to the top. And if Mickey

King can't do our job, I know we will all be greatly surprised."

All eyes were on Mickey King as he rose to his feet; a spare, muscular young man of middle height. He waited a moment, a sharp crease breaking the even tan between his black eyebrows.

"Mr. Gramm has put me on the spot," he began.

They looked back at him, those hard-working, loyal citizens, and there was hope and trust in their faces. Mickey thought anxiously, and not without resentment: "Damn it, Gramm passed the buck to me! If I can't make the club a winner, I'm the patsy!" But he thought, too: "These are nice guys. I won't let 'em down!"

Mickey spoke simply: "I promise I'll do my best to protect your investments by giving you a fighting ball club."

MICKEY'S first move as manager of the Dippers was to call a practice session for ten o'clock the next morning. By ten-thirty, only half a dozen players had appeared. The rest began to straggle in after that, yawning sulkily.

Mickey spoke sharply to Bert Bell, the catcher who had been acting as temporary manager before Mickey's arrival. "Is this the way the club obeys orders?" Mickey demanded.

Bert Bell shrugged. He was a lean, well set-up athlete with an intelligent but tightly closed face. Mickey sensed a lack of friendliness in the man. Bell answered questions about the team; but his answers were as monosyllabic as possible, almost grudgingly given.

Now Bell replied, "During the week, when we play mostly night games, Mr. Gramm doesn't favor daytime practice sessions." He walked to his locker before Mickey could retort, removed a bat and began to sandpaper it.

Dutch Niehoff spoke quietly into Mickey's ear. "Remember that guy? He was up twice with the Wolves for a tryout."

"Oh, yes," Mickey said slowly. "I thought he looked familiar." He looked over at Bell with more sympathy. Naturally Bell, up twice for a tryout with the big-

league champions, the famous Wolves, might feel some resentment toward the man who, for eight years, had easily repelled any challenges for his job.

Old Dutch's faded but still sharp eyes perceived Mickey's sympathy. "Sure," said Dutch. "You can't blame him for not lovin' you, considerin' maybe he wanted to keep this manager's job too. But he's a broody guy, and he's smart. We'll have to watch him."

When all of the players save "Hack" Nelson, the sawed-off little giant of an outfielder, finally appeared, Mickey made his little speech.

"I'm here to make this club a winner," he said. "I'm getting paid to do my best, and so are you. That means, first of all, *that we fight to win*. We try for every ball in the field. We run out every hit—and we run like hell!"

Somebody called mockingly, "Yeah, team!" and there were some snickers. Somebody else said mockingly, "The old college try, by gad! Anybody seen my fraternity pin?"

Mickey's stormy blue eyes darkened. He ignored Dutch Niehoff's warning glance.

"Those cracks make it pretty clear why this club is in last place," he snapped. "While I'm running this club, cracks like that are going to cost fifty bucks each." His jaw jutted at the assembled players. "Which one of you wise guys wants to donate the first fifty?"

There were a few scornful laughs, some angry mumbles, but there were no more obvious cracks in the locker room. Fifty bucks is a lot of money in the minors; even in a Class A league.

ON THE field, Mickey sent the entire squad into a series of fast pepper games. They stooped lazily, snapped the ball around listlessly. Mickey walked among them. "Faster!" he commanded. "Get the lead out of your pants!"

Two pitchers began to wheeze. Mickey walked over to them. "You boys put on rubber shirts and trot around the field eight times," he ordered.

Bert Bell appeared at Mickey's elbow.

"Red Hale, here, is due to pitch tonight," he began. "If you run him now—"

"Red Hale, nor anybody else, can pitch winning ball with an inner tube like that around his belly," Mickey retorted curtly. "I'm surprised you haven't run it off him before!"

Bell flushed slightly, bit his lip. "Lou Gramm wants Red Hale to pitch tonight."

Mickey put his hands on his hips, purposely pitched his voice so it was audible to the nearby players. "Lou Gramm runs the front office," he said. "I run the club both on and off the field. I don't want to hear any more about 'Lou Gramm doesn't favor morning practice,' or 'Lou Gramm wants Red Hale to pitch.' Is that clear?"

"Somebody paging me?" a hearty voice boomed cheerily, and Mickey swung around to see Lou Gramm approaching with Hack Nelson, the stunted, cotton-haired giant outfielder. Nelson was the man who had refrained from running out his hit last night.

Mickey nodded briefly to his vice president and fixed Hack Nelson with a stern eye. "Practice was called for ten o'clock," he clipped. "Where were you, Nelson?"

Nelson, built like a miniature heavy-duty truck, had a broad, beefy face and the immature features of a child. But his eyes were hard and insolent.

"I lost a stitch in my knittin', so I stayed in my room lookin' for it," he drawled. "So what?"

"So you'll also lose twenty-five smackers out of your next pay check!" Mickey barked. "When I say ten o'clock, I mean ten on the dot. Try that on your embroidery!"

Hack Nelson's thick neck reddened. He took a step toward his new manager. "Big-league stuff, huh?" he sneered. "Only you ain't up in the big league any more. Lemme tell you—"

"Just a minute, Hack," Lou Gramm said smoothly, and he was in between the two uniformed men, deftly separating them.

"Don't be too hard on Hack," Gramm said smilingly to Mickey. "You see, we don't favor morning practice around here."

Old Dutch Niehoff, his stooped, treelike

body quietly menacing, was at Mickey's side like a fleet shadow. But Dutch made no warning gestures to Mickey this time. He watched Lou Gramm.

Mickey eyed Gramm irritably. Gramm seemed like a friendly, well-meaning guy and Mickey didn't want to slap him down in front of the ball players. But from what Bert Bell had said before, Gramm apparently wasn't content to stay in the front office, where he belonged. He wanted to have a finger in the actual running of the team too.

Mickey said, a little regretfully, "When you said '*we* don't favor morning practice,' Mr. Gramm, you made a mistake. *I* favor morning practice whenever necessary."

"But—" Gramm began.

"There are no 'buts,'" Mickey cut in firmly. "You made me manager. Now you've got to let me run the team my way."

GRAMM flushed, and a small glitter appeared in his protuberant eyes. Mickey's voice rose, quick and loud: "Batting practice! Pitchers in the outfield. Dutch, take over!" Then he took Lou Gramm by the arm and led him aside, out of earshot of the players. "Okay, Mr. Gramm," he said quietly. "Shoot!"

Gramm, for a moment, seemed taken aback. But he recovered himself immediately, was his usual suave, friendly self. "I don't want you to think I'm meddling—" he began.

"Then why meddle?" Mickey interrupted drily.

Gramm was fussed again by this abrupt frankness and his large mouth pursed angrily. But once more he controlled himself.

"I'm just trying to help you, King," he explained. "I know more about the players and the customs here than you do—"

"Tell me what you think I ought to know in privacy," Mickey cut in. "But stay away from the players—and *stay off the field*. I'm not trying to second-guess you in the front office. Don't you try to second-guess *me* in the club house or dugout."

Their glances clashed and locked. There

was cold determination in Mickey's eyes, rather than anger. He wanted this man's friendship and cooperation, but Gramm would have to understand he had hired the Dippers a manager, and not a stooge.

Gramm's eyes were very bright and vexed, but suddenly he laughed and put out his hand. "I like a man with spirit, King," he said. "I think we'll get along."

"I'll sure try," Mickey said earnestly.

They shook hands and Lou Gramm departed from the field. Mickey watched him go, his black eyebrows knotted. He had the sense of a showdown approached, won—and yet deferred. Unconsciously he rubbed the hand which Gramm had shaken on his pants. . . .

THE Dippers went into action against the Lewiston Oilers again that night. There was a better crowd in the stands, on hand to watch the famous Mickey King's debut as a manager. Mickey started the young southpaw, Lefty Young, in the box. He had warmed up Lefty himself, and liked the kid's delivery.

Lefty breezed nicely for three innings, holding the Oilers to one measly hit, while the Dippers collected two runs on a walk, followed by a home run by Hack Nelson. The little giant strutted back to the dug-out after his mighty clout, and Mickey said warmly, "Nice goin'."

The glee went out of Nelson's eyes and they were hard and insolent again. "Almost as good as *you* could do, huh?" he sneered.

Mickey let that pass; but he said to Dutch Niehoff, when the Dippers were going out to take the field, "I'm gonna have to take Hack Nelson down a couple of pegs, too. He's got the makings of a fine hitter, but his stance is bad."

"Also his sneery attitude," Dutch grunted. "I tried to tell him how to stand this morning, but he wouldn't listen. He rooms with Bert Bell, and that's the only guy he'll listen to."

In the fourth, Lefty Young began to falter. The Oilers pounded out two hits. Then, pitching much too fast, young Lefty hit a man and followed that with a pass, forcing in a run.

Mickey slid up and down the bench, wild. He ached for his harness and his big mitt; ached to be back of that plate again. He could steady Lefty; he had always had an uncanny ability to soothe a jittery hurler, to ease him back into the groove. But Bert Bell, an able receiver mechanically, seemed to have no knowledge of how to steady a pitcher—or else he didn't give a damn.

"I told Bell to make Lefty work slow," Mickey groaned to Dutch. "To work in slow stuff, if they started to hit him."

"Bell is another one who won't listen," Dutch growled. "He's stiff-necked—" Dutch broke off disgustedly as the Oiler batter reached across the plate for one of Lefty Young's foolish fireballs and golfed it over the tiny center-field bleachers.

Four more Oiler runs crossed the plate, and the scoreboard flashed: *Dippers 2; Oilers 5*. The crowd rose in wrath, as they had done the other night, and jeered the Dippers. They had occasion to jeer more as the game progressed. In the eighth inning, two successive errors by the Dipper infield presented the Oilers with two more runs. The game ended like that.

IN THEIR hotel room that night, Mickey pored carefully over past box scores of the Dippers, while Dutch scowled over his pipe. Suddenly Dutch spoke. "Mick—let's scam."

Mickey said absently, "I'm busy. Go to a movie."

"You don't get me," old Dutch said doggedly. "I mean scam out of this town. Get a release on our contracts."

Mickey turned around then, frowning. "Are you nuts?"

"I'm not," Dutch answered heavily, "but this whole set-up is. I can't put my finger on it, but there's something fishy here. The Dippers are a Class A club, but they couldn't win in a Class C league. Half the club is deadwood: washed-up old-timers who belong in the old soldiers' home, and green kids still wet behind the ears."

"Bad management," Mickey explained. "We'll get rid of the deadwood—"

"Hold on a minute!" Dutch raised a

hand. "In the last three years, the Dippers have had three managers, not counting this guy Bert Bell. Two of them were good men. One was Miller, who used to run the Yanks. But none of those managers stuck. Now what I want to know is *why*?"

Mickey shrugged. "They couldn't make a go of it."

"They made good before here," Dutch countered. "Maybe," he asked shrewdly, "they couldn't get along with Lou Gramm?"

"Maybe," Mickey admitted. "Gramm likes to have his hands in all the pies. But I had it out with him today and we understand each other. Don't worry; I can handle him."

Dutch shook his grizzled head. "I'm more than twice your age, Mick, and this Gramm is one of the smoothest, smartest articles I ever saw. You're a baby in *his* hands!"

Mickey laughed confidently. "I tell you I can handle him. Besides, he told me he's worried about his job. He'll lose his nice job unless we can produce a winning club and get out of the red. So it pays him to cooperate with me, doesn't it?"

Dutch rubbed his beaked nose worriedly. "That part makes sense," he admitted. "Only there's more there that we don't know about. But anyhow, I don't think we can produce a winner. The spirit of the players is sour. I never saw such a bunch of spoiled, don't-give-a-damn guys as this in my life!"

"I'll fix that too," Mickey vowed grimly.

"I don't think so," Dutch retorted. "They've taken it easy too long. And now most of them are sore—and some are scared—because you started right out snappin' the whip, like I told you not to." Dutch got up, walked around. "Mick," he said earnestly. "listen to me. You'll fall down here, and your reputation will be shot. Let's get out of here clean, while we can."

"And what then?" Mickey asked. "My eyes aren't right yet. Sometimes they fog on me. Maybe they'll never be right again." He stopped, caught in that dread that, with ten good playing years still before him, he might never catch again. He shook himself

roughly. "I've got to figure I'm through as a player. I've got to start all over as a manager. And what chance will I have if I walk out on my first tough assignment?"

"You'll get another post. Your eyes will come back."

Mickey shook his black head. He had never walked out on a scrap yet. Besides, he liked this town. He liked the fine, modern little ball park. And the other night, when those worried citizens, most of them small stockholders, had looked to him with new hope, he had promised that he wouldn't let them down.

Mickey showed Dutch one of his rare grins. "We'll play out the string," he said. . . .

THE next night, in the final of the series against the Oilers, the Dippers were one run to the bad in the ninth inning. Sundstrom, the Dip's left fielder, opened the last half of the frame with a single, and Hack Nelson started his swagger to the plate.

Mickey trotted to him from the third-base coaching box. "Bunt," Mickey ordered in a low tone. "Shove Sundstrom along!"

Nelson glowered at his manager. "Bunt, hell! I ain't had a hit tonight, and I'm due. I'll ride it outa the park."

"You heard me," Mickey repeated. "Lay it down!"

Nelson scowled and proceeded to the plate, swinging his three heavy bats. He let two pitches go by, a strike and a ball, then came around joyfully, his big bat lashing, for the third pitch. There was a ringing *cr-rack!* and the ball rose high, high, for the tiny center field bleachers.

The customers came up roaring from their seats, and in deep center field the Oilers' picket plastered his back against the short bleachers wall. Suddenly he sprang high, twisting in the air to snatch the ball as it was dropping into the seats. He fell back into the field, stumbled to his knees and recovered, then rifled the ball to his shortstop.

Sundstrom, already forced past second-base by the crowing Hack Nelson behind him, swung back around a now cursing

Hack and made a desperate effort to beat the double-play to first base. But the short-stop's relay was there long before Sundstrom.

The crowd noise subsided into a disgusted groan as the customers turned to the exits. The Dippers' first-baseman promptly popped up to end the threat, and Mickey, his jaw set hard, followed his players through the dugout tunnel. His first two games, as the Dips' manager, had been kicked out the window. . . .

HACK NELSON was jerking his shirt over his tremendous shoulders, declaiming loudly that the Oilers' center fielder had robbed him, when Mickey walked into the club house.

"So you'll remember to bunt the next time I tell you," Mickey told Hack tightly, "I'm fining you another twenty-five bucks!"

Hack stared, then flung his uniform shirt to the floor. "For what?" he bellowed. "For bein' unlucky? That sock would have won the game if that lug fielder hadn't been shot full of four-leaf clovers and rabbit feet! You try finin' me and—"

"I'm not *trying*—I *am* fining you," Mickey cut in coldly. "A bunt would have put Sundstrom in scoring position, with only one down. And if you had the brains of a mosquito, you would have let Sundstrom hold up to see if that ball was caught!"

Hack Nelson made an ugly sound and hunched his great shoulders. Mickey braced himself; but as Hack was about to spring, long arms wrapped him about and held him fast. Dutch Niehoff's arms.

"Okay, dirty nose!" Dutch rasped. "Just relax."

The little strong man strained mightily, but Dutch's grip held. The other players had arisen and were watching Dutch and their manager hostilely. Hack began to curse.

"King, you yellow punk, tell this old heel to let go and I'll take you apart!"

Red was in Mickey's dark face, and in his eyes, but he held his voice even. "There will be no club house fights while I'm

manager. When I decide it's necessary, we'll go down under the stands and have this out."

"*When* you decide!" Hack sneered. "You yellow dog, you'll never decide! Bad eyes, huh? There's nothin' wrong with your eyes, except they're yellow too. They dusted you off once in the big time, and when they found out you didn't have any moxie, you quit cold. So you come down here to play the big shot four-flusher—"

"Let him go, Dutch!" Mickey snapped, and Dutch let go.

Hack came like a charging bull, his cottony head lowered to butt behind his hamlike fists. Mickey ducked and sidestepped, and one of Hack's fists slashed along his right ear, leaving it ringing. Mickey bobbed up fast and poled a ramming right hand to Hack's short thick neck.

Hack, turning for his manager, jerked with the blow. His bare feet splayed, slid away as he worked them fast to right himself on the wet patch of concrete where some player had stood to towel himself after his shower. Slipping, he threw himself for Mickey, tripped short and cracked his head banging against the edge of the locker bench.

Hack crumpled on the floor, out cold. Mickey, cursing himself for letting himself be forced into a club house fight, leaned to turn Hack over. A rough hand on his shoulder sprawled him to his haunches.

"What you tryin' to do, pop him when he's cold?" Bert Bell demanded. Bell's face was mottled with rage and hate. Other players, grouped around the groggy Hack and the club trainer, called furiously. Some of them moved toward Mickey.

This was a bad spot, and Mickey recognized it. The short fight had proven nothing, except to suggest to the more unruly athletes that the person of their manager was not inviolable. To the pampered and the sullen men, Mickey, with his driving methods, was an unwelcome interloper. And now the fight, and Bert Bell's cockeyed accusation, had set the stage for a dangerous brawl.

Mickey found a bat thrust into his hand.

Beside him, Dutch Niehoff loomed huge, menacing, a bat in his own gnarled paw. When no player made a move to chance a clout from a bat, Mickey dropped his mace and turned to his locker. The hot mob moment was past. Nobody would jump him now. . . .

MICKEY did some heavy thinking that night, while Dutch betook himself to one of his beloved movies. Mickey had always been popular with his teammates and enemy players alike. But here in Metro City, a few influential players were blocking his efforts to establish workmanlike relations with his new club.

Bert Bell, jealous of Mickey, and frustrated in his own ambitions to make the big league, was standing in Mickey's way. So was Hack Nelson, Bell's roommate, who looked up to Bell, as so many men who know they are not smart worship a man of brains. Art Troop, the washed-up first-baseman who had drunk his way out of the majors, resented Mickey, and led younger players to do so.

One thing was clear: there would have to be a drastic shake-up in the ranks of the Dippers, if the club's standing was to be improved. Such a move must be Mickey's responsibility alone; and if it failed, his goose would be cooked for good. On the other hand, if he did nothing, his goose would be cooked, too. Later. And, along with his, the geese of a few hundred poor stockholders.

The next morning, before going to the field for practice, Mickey stopped at the Dippers' offices. A slender, rather pretty girl was there alone.

"Mr. Gramm hasn't come in yet," she said. She smiled. "You're Mr. King, aren't you?"

Mickey's frown stayed put. "Yes. When will Gramm get in?"

"He ought to be here soon." She smiled again. "Why don't you wait?"

Mickey said, "I'll wait a few minutes." He found a chair and picked up the Metro City *Herald*. The headline on the sports section said: *Dipsydoos Do Usual—Lose Again*. So they were calling foolish names,

now, huh? The "Dipsydoos!" Mickey slapped the paper back onto the table.

IDLE waiting—any form of inaction—always made Mickey restless. He got up and began to prowling the office. He picked up pencils, papers, put them down again unnoticed. He thought he heard light laughter. He heard it again. He swung around and saw that girl laughing at him.

"What's so funny?" Mickey demanded.

She said, "Oh, I'm sorry!" She was a nut-brown girl. Tawny brown skin; brown hair with chestnut-red glints in it. Her short nose wrinkled when she tried to stop laughing, and her sherry-colored eyes were full of mischief. She broke into fuller laughter.

"You look so funny, glaring at me!" she apologized. "And prowling around like a—a—"

"Like a monkey in a cage." He hardly knew he said it, or that he laughed too. He wasn't used to kidding with girls. But he caught himself observing this girl. He hadn't thought she was particularly attractive; but when she smiled, she was—well, she was something to see. Merry and sweet. A darned cut kid.

After laughing together, they found it easy to talk together. Her name was Doris—Doris May—and she was Lou Gramm's secretary. She said, "I hope you can pull the Dippers up by their bootstraps. We've been losing money, and our stockholders are mostly little people who can't afford to lose their savings."

Mickey's strong, square-tipped fingers drummed the desk by her hand.

"We need some new players," he said abruptly. "Look, hasn't the club got a few good boys farmed out for seasoning with lower clubs?"

"Yes," Doris answered eagerly. "I was asking Mr. Gramm only the other day why he didn't bring up young Kelly and Ames—" She stopped, shook her head regretfully. "I guess I was talking out of school. I'm not supposed to discuss Mr. Gramm's secrets."

"That's all right," Mickey assured her. "I'm here to ask Lou Gramm about those

very—secrets.” He grinned at her, caught himself holding her hand too long for a handshake. He dropped it, and they looked at each other, oddly embarrassed, oddly intent. Then Mickey said, “I’ll be seeing you.”

He thought, going out, that was the first time he had said that to a girl and meant it.

It was Saturday, and they were playing in the afternoon.

Mickey surprised the fans by starting the revamped line-up he had experimented with that morning. Art Troop was benched, and Bert Bell, his whole manner a mute and bitter protest, was moved out from behind the plate to cover first base. Rosen, the chunky little bull-pen catcher, went behind the rubber. Mickey also supplanted the Dips’ regular right fielder with a reserve.

The rookie, Lefty Young, started in the box.

BASEBALL experts will tell you it is the “heart line”—the line from catcher through the second-base combination, and into center field—which will make or break a ball team. Now Mickey, restless in the dugout, watched his heart line.

The opponents today were the Bingham Brownies, and the first Brownie batter scratched a hit over second base. Mickey flashed a sign to his new catcher, Rosen, to call the pitch high and close for a possible double-play ball. Rosen’s signs were right, and Lefty Young pitched it through the hole, and the Brownie hitter obliged with a bounder between short and second.

The Dippers’ shortstop rushed the ball, fumbled and recovered, and his toss to second base was late. Martin, the Dips’ flashy but erratic keystone sacker, grabbed to make the force-out, then hurried a bad throw to Bert Bell on first base.

Bell was pulled off the bag, and he paused to glare at Martin, as the umpire called both Brownie runners safe.

The fans voiced loud disapproval, and next to Mickey in the dugout, Dutch Neihoff said sourly, “We need a shortstopper!”

Bert Bell was yapping at both his sec-

ond-baseman and shortstop. Martin, the second-baseman, shook his head apologetically, but the shortstop yapped back angrily at Bell. The shortstop was still yapping at Bert Bell when the third Brownie batter boomed a drive between short and third. The Dips’ shortstop wasn’t set, and two Brownie runs scored before Hack Nelson could retrieve the onion and get it back into the infield.

Mickey muttered in pain, and Dutch swore quietly and steadily. Another hit, when Bert Bell tried to play the second-baseman’s ball, then scuttled for first while his second-baseman had to wait—and another Brownie run was across the plate.

Lefty Young proceeded to blow up. His chunky catcher, Rosen, worked hard with him, trying to steady him, holding up a big, reliable target. But when Lefty issued a pass, and Rosen, trying too hard, threw the ball into center field to nip a double steal, Lefty Young blew higher than a kite.

There was howling disapproval from the stands now, mixed with jeering laughter: “What a ball club!” . . . “Oh, you Dipsy-doo!” . . . They sang, “Take me out of the *ballll* game!”

When the massacre was finally over, the overworked scoreboard showed: *DIPPERS 1; BROWNIES 15.*

Lou Gramm kept a second small office in the Dippers’ club house, up a small flight of stairs from the locker rooms. Mickey went there directly after the game, to go over the farm roster with Gramm and find a new shortstop.

The office was empty. Mickey was just turning away when he heard loud talk and laughter from beyond a door which he had thought was a coat closet. He walked over and pulled the door open, then paused, his black eyebrows bending down.

The room, long and narrow, lit by indirect lighting from above, held a mahogany bar along one entire wall. A white-coated barman was mixing drinks deftly, and before him, lining the bar, talking loud and laughing, were six or seven men. A couple of newspaper reporters and four Dipper players: Art Troop, Bert Bell, Hack

Nelson and the rookie pitcher, Lefty Young.

THE noise died abruptly as Mickey walked in, then picked up again, forcedly. A sports writer whom Mickey recognized as "Tip" Foster, a former well-known columnist who had passed out of the big-town picture on the liquor toboggan, raised his voice unsteadily:

"The Hustle Kid himself! Step up here, Mick, an' have one with us!"

Mickey said, "Hi, Tip," and approached the bar. He said pleasantly to the barman, nodding at his players, "Give me the same as the boys are drinking."

The man put his hand on the bottle in front of Lefty Young and set it down in front of Mickey. Next to Lefty, Hack Nelson's hand started for the bottle swiftly, then dropped down. Hack's glance swerved from the bottle to his manager, challengingly.

Mickey raised the bottle and regarded it interestedly.

"Hm," he said appreciatively. "This is nice stuff!" He smiled at his players. "I guess none of you boys consider twenty-five bucks a shot too much for good liquor, eh?"

Hack Nelson growled. Lefty Young, reddening under his tan, dropped his glance. Bert Bell regarded Mickey with dark, vengeful eyes. Art Troop spoke up:

"Whaddaye mean, twenty-five bucks?"

Mickey feigned surprise. "You're no piker, are you, Art? You saw my training rules posted in the club house. Twenty-five bucks a drink. Take all you want."

Art Troop snarled, "I'll just call that bluff!" He reached for the bottle, poured a shot and downed it defiantly.

Mickey said as pleasantly to the barman, "Tell Art when he's had four. That will wash out his next pay check—and *his last*. He's getting his unconditional release tonight."

Lou Gramm walked into the bar. He was natty in a tan gabardene suit and bow tie. Art Troop swung to him.

"Lou, did you hear that? Napoleon, here, is trying to bounce me off the club!"

"You boys better go back and dress," Lou Gramm said. He started the four ball players toward the door. He walked with them, murmuring soothingly. He said, "I'll talk to Mickey."

Mickey flushed hotly. Gramm was taking the play out of his manager's hands.

At Mickey's elbow, Tip Foster, the columnist lush, hiccuped gently: "Mick, watch out—you're in a bad spot."

Mickey shook his arm loose impatiently. "Okay, Tip. Go back and sit down!"

The former big-city writer looked reproachful. "I'm not drunk. Look, Mick," he mumbled. "I always liked you. Take a tip from Tip." That was the title of the popular syndicated column Foster used to compose. "You can't beat the rap here. I *know*. Take advice of old Tip an' let it lay, Mick."

Lou Gramm was returning from the door. His eyes were narrow on Tip Foster.

"Still lappin' it up, hey, Tip?" Gramm's voice cut. "Go crawl back into the woodwork; I've got business with Mickey."

TIP FOSTER winced. He started to reply, then let his shoulders sag and slanted back along the bar to where another reporter lounged, leering amusedly. Mickey frowned uncomfortably; Tip was a lush, but five years ago he had been right up on top of the heap. There was no call for Gramm to needle the poor guy. Gramm said, "Come on back into the office, fella," to Mickey. They turned back into the cubbyhole of an office, and Gramm heeled shut the door to the bar. His round sleek face was fixed in a studious frown. He said, "About the boys being up here. Don't hold it against them. Sometimes they drop by here to see me, and once in a while I give them a little drinkie."

Mickey said shortly, "I figured it was kind of a habit. Next time they break in, ship them right back."

"Why, that might be difficult, old man. You see, sometimes they bring me their problems, and I try to help them. I want them to feel we're all pulling together; from the front office all the way down. Harmony is a great thing—"



Mickey, sweeping his mask off, angled fast, his eyes following the ball's flight

This guy Gramm was a born orator. Give him an opening and he'd go into a spellbinder. And he was good; convincing Mickey had to admit that, even while his irritation grew.

"That's all fine," Mickey broke in. "But I thought I made myself clear the other day. The players are *my* responsibility, and mine alone. I can't have you cutting in on me, giving the men the idea they can go over my head when they don't like my decisions. I can't exert any discipline—"

"I've been meaning to speak to you about that," Gramm said. He wasn't frowning any

more; he was friendly, smiling. "I believe you can carry—uh—discipline too far. It's bad business to make your men resent you; to give them the idea you're pushing your weight and authority around. But if you're friendly and helpful with them, you'll win their confidence. Now—"

Gramm was off in a speech again, and Mickey's anger rose sharply. Damn it, did this guy think he, Black Mike, was a green kid, to be told how to dress himself? He

had been captain of the world's champion Wolves, and directed the team from behind the bat with no interference whatever from the Wolves' manager.

"Now listen!" Mickey broke in again. "You hired me to manage this club. You're paying me a helluva big salary. That means you must think I know my business. *Now how about you just sitting back and letting me run this club?*"

Gramm's eyes, before the heavy lids slid down over them, flared. But his voice hardly rose: "You want it like that, eh? Even though I can help you a great deal—"

"Damn it!" Mickey barked, and banged the desk with his fist. "Don't make speeches at me! That's the way I want it, and that's the only way I'm going to have it!"

A twitch of a spasm passed over the vice-prexy's round face, and his plump, beautifully manicured hands forced the white gleam of knuckles as he gripped his desk. But he had admirable control. The spasm was hardly visible, and then he was smiling, cajoling again.

"All right, Mickey," he said. "I'll try not to step on your corns any more. Maybe later on"—his voice barely hardened—"we'll understand each other better." He was suddenly brisker, efficient. "Now about Art Troop. I heard you tell him we were releasing him. I don't think you should do that—"

"Art Troop is a washed-up rum-hound and a troublemaker," Mickey said bluntly. "He's got to go, and go tonight."

"But he's our only experienced first-baseman—"

"Bert Bell will play first base and like it! Bell is not a natural catcher, but he'll make a darned good first-baseman; and he'll play first or get fired too!"

Lou Gramm stood up. "You'll ruin the club!"

"It's past ruining. It stinks out loud. And that reminds me of what I wanted to see you about in the first place. I need a shortstop, a pitcher or two, and a center fielder. Get out your farm roster and we'll go over it together."

LOU GRAMM hesitated faintly. "It isn't here; it's in the office downtown. But I can tell you now, we haven't got one string on players of Class A caliber. There are one or two kids who may develop in a season or two, but they're not ready yet."

Mickey said, suddenly quieted, "I see."

Yesterday, Doris May had told him Gramm kept the farm roster out here. Doris had mentioned two promising young

players, Kelly and Ames. Of course Doris' knowledge of baseball might not be so hot; but she worked in the front office, and she knew those names—

"I'll stop by the office in the morning," Mickey told Gramm. "We'll go over the roster then."

Gramm replied, regretfully, "I don't know when I can get down tomorrow. I have an appointment with the bank."

"We'll make it after the game tomorrow, then."

"I'm afraid I'll be busy then too. But I tell you, King, that roster isn't worth a damn. We haven't got anybody. Now it might just be possible we can cook up a trade—"

Mickey let Gramm ramble on about a possible trade with the Brownies for a shortstop. The Brownies had two. But Mickey had already had a word with the Brownie manager and it had been made clear to him that the Brownies would only trade for Hack Nelson. Mickey wasn't trading Hack. He had ideas for that little strong man. Gramm ought to know the Brownies wouldn't deal.

Mickey jerked a notebook from his hip pocket, tore out a page and put it before Gramm.

"Here are the fines I had to deal. See that they come out of the next pay checks." He turned to the door. "And don't forget that roster. I want to see it."

Mickey returned to the now deserted locker room and showered. That guy Gramm! Battling him was like battling water. You closed your hand on him and he slithered away. He didn't want Mickey to see that roster. Now why?

Could Gramm be conspiring with lower club executives to cover up the Dippers' own optioned players, shift them around and unload them back to the Dippers at a good price, Gramm taking a secret cut? But that kind of trickery was dangerous; a conviction would mean the can. Gramm was too smart to leave himself open.

Besides, there was no *big* money in milking the Dippers. They had hardly anything left in the bank. And breaking the club entirely would cut a very handsome job

out from under Lou Gramm. \$12,000-a-year jobs didn't grow on trees.

Mickey finished dressing and left the club house, trying to shake off an odd uneasiness. Tip Foster with his mumbled warning: "You're in a bad spot here, Mick. You can't beat the rap. I *know*." And Dutch Niehoff, with his constant gloomy hunches.

"A couple of old men with the jitters," Mickey growled.

There was no percentage in Lou Gramm's dealing them from the bottom of the deck. Gramm was just another one of these dictators who tried to hog every show; and now that Mickey had slapped him down, Gramm would be good. He would produce that farm roster too. . . .

THE Dips—now beginning to be known ingloriously as the "Dipsydoos"—dropped the Sunday game next day, making it seven losses in a row. But they didn't look as bad as they had on previous days. With the loud-mouthed Art Troop off the club, there was no open rebellion. Even Hack Nelson was strangely silent, his resentment taking the form of a smirking, passive resistance—a form of sabotage he adopted from Bert Bell and one or two others.

This passive resistance sapped the hustle and spirit of the other members of the team. And with the shortstop still fumbling and kicking 'em, thus unsettling the erratic Martin at second, the Dips dropped their eighth straight on Tuesday night.

The Wednesday morning *Herald* carried a blast across its sports sheet: *Mickey King Fails to Rally Dipsydoos*. And the double-spread column recited that Mickey appeared to have failed to win the confidence and coöperation of the players.

"It is a little early to speak dogmatically," the story ran, "but King, like other fiery star players, doesn't look like good managerial timber. . . ."

The Metro City *Times*, the afternoon paper, was on sale when Mickey left the ball park after another morning drill. A

front page story was bannered: *Mickey King's Slave-Driving Tactics Unsettle Dips!*

Mickey smiled crookedly. Slave-driving tactics, huh? Now the papers were second-guessing him too. Well—he shrugged his flat, muscular shoulders. While the Dips lost, the papers would blast him. The Dips would have to stop losing!

Mickey grabbed a cab for the club's offices.

Lou Gramm was just leaving the office with Tip Foster when Mickey came in. The newspaperman looked embarrassed when he greeted him, and Mickey said gently, "Nice story you had about me in the *Times* today, Tip. Or is your paper the *Herald*?"

"*Herald*." Foster's glance slid furtively at Mickey and away. "Hell, Mick," he muttered apologetically, "you know how it is! I've got a boss to please—"

"Always crawling, hey, Tip?" Lou Gramm interrupted mockingly, and there was a curt warning in his tone, too.

Tip Foster straightened, flushing. He said, "Be seein' you, Mick," and went through the door.

A few years ago, Mickey thought contemptuously, Tip Foster would have slugged Gramm for those words. Tip had come down in the world. Apparently he took Gramm's insults for the sake of free drinks and maybe an occasional ten spot.

Gramm nodded at Mickey and started after Foster, but Mickey held his arm across the doorway.

"How about that roster?" he said.

"Oh, yes." Gramm looked regretful. "I left it over at the bank. I'll pick it up next time I'm there. But as I told you, King, there aren't any prospects. Now, what I think—"

"Skip it!" Mickey said shortly, and anger twitched the small muscles along his hard jaw. Gramm was lying; Mickey was sure of that now. He almost reached for Gramm, to shake some of the smoothness—and the truth—out of him, and then he saw Doris standing in the rear of the office.

Doris looked surprised, and concerned, and Mickey dropped the arm which was

barring Gramm's way. He didn't want to start a rough-house scene before Doris. Mickey told Gramm, "Go on. I want to make a phone call."

Gramm winked. "Yeah. She *is* a looker, isn't she?"

Mickey almost put a fist in the guy's puss; but he checked that impulse again, grimly watched Gramm join Tip Foster at the elevator.

Mickey said to Doris, "How about lunch with me?" And when she smiled at him, some of his hard anger, and that new beginning of helplessness, drained away.

THEY lunched at the Casino, on the open-air balcony overlooking the park, and for a while Mickey felt light-hearted.

It was Doris who brought him back to reality. She asked smilingly, "So you're a slave driver?"

"Yeah. You better watch your step with me or I'll have you in the chain gang."

"Seriously, Mickey, that kind of publicity is doing you great harm." She looked troubled. "Many fans and stockholders are getting sore. The team keeps losing, and those unfriendly newspaper stories—well, they're making you the goat."

"I know." He frowned, remembering Lou Gramm and that farm roster. "What clubs are Kelly and Ames on?"

"Carson Tornadoes and Western Reap—" She caught herself, stiffening her slender body. "You tricked that out of me!" she said angrily. She began gathering her gloves and bag. "So that's why you took me to lunch!"

"Doris!" He reached anxiously across the table for her hand, but she snatched it away from him. "Honestly, Doris, I asked that without thinking. I—"

"I don't believe you!" She stood up, and he rose with her, half-anxious, half-angry. She was pale, and her fine eyes raked him. "You had no right to take advantage of our friendship. Mr. Gramm *warned* me you would try."

"He did?" Mickey's black eyebrows jagged. "He was a louse to say that—"

"Don't you dare insult Mr. Gramm! He's a fine man."

"Yeah, he's fine, all right. You heard him stall me on that farm roster."

"Mr. Gramm is responsible to our stockholders. He assured them you would save the club for them. And then you come in with your domineering ways and set all the players against you. And besides, Mr. Gramm suspects—" She stopped.

"He suspects what?" Mickey snapped. "Go ahead and say it!"

"I've said enough," Doris replied, tight-lipped. "I didn't want to believe it, but after seeing how sly you were today, I almost *have* to believe it."

Mickey's anger, always near the surface, boiled over. "Believe what you like!" he said. "It looks like I was wrong about you, too. You're sappy about Gramm—anybody can see that—and now you're stooging for him!"

"Oh—you!" Doris' eyes were tear-filled, and she hurried, almost stumbling, from the balcony. She turned blindly, when Mickey started after her: "Don't come after me! Don't you dare ever come near me again!" she said.

Mickey let her go then. So that was that! Under his resentment, his heart was sore. The only girl he had ever looked at twice—why, he had almost fallen in love with her!—and she was nuts about Lou Gramm.

Back there at the office, Gramm had made no resistance when Mickey stayed behind with Doris. Gramm had probably coached the girl to soften Mickey up, so he would knuckle down to Gramm!

One thing was sure: if Mickey was to save his job and reputation, and pull up the Dippers to save their hundreds of little stockholders, he would have to do it without Lou Gramm. It was cockeyed, but he would have to do it despite Gramm!

DUTCH NIEHOFF was emerging from the hotel when Mickey arrived. "No movie this afternoon, pal," Mickey said crisply. "You're gonna take a plane ride. Come on up and start packing!"

Old Dutch turned promptly. "I don't know where I'm goin'," he grunted, "but it's sure about time!"

In their room, Dutch prepared for travel;

a pair of socks, a pair of shorts and a toothbrush, flung into a worn duffel bag. A windbreaker.

"Okay," he said. "What's the dope?"

Mickey was busy with a baseball guide. "Carson Tornadoes; Triple-State League. Shortstop name of Kelly. You can get a plane to St. Louis, and a train out of there." He thumbed some more. "I can't find the Western Reapers. Ever hear of 'em?"

Dutch nodded. His forty years of baseball had given him a knowledge of clubs and averages beyond most record books, and that knowledge was always at his fingertips.

"Industrial club," he said. "Semi-pro, up around Buffalo. They wouldn't have anybody for us."

"Unless," Mickey drawled, "they're hiding somebody up there. Good place to hide a boy, huh?"

Old Dutch looked sharp. "I've been figurin' something like that myself," he growled. "Only I couldn't figure out the why. As you said, Gramm wants to hold his swell job—"

"Skip that part right now," Mickey interrupted. "I'm going nuts trying to figure it myself. An outfielder named Ames is the lad to look-see on the Reapers. Get going—we haven't got much time."

"You're tellin' me!" Dutch retorted, and got going. . . .

IT WAS 6-6 in the ninth inning with the Cougars that night. Mickey sweated, restless and on fire, in the dugout. The Dips should have sewn up this game long ago. But their shortstop kicked in two runs; and the rest of the club, visibly disheartened by the hostile indifference of their two stars, Bert Bell and Hack Nelson, bogged down in the pinches.

Martin opened the Dipsydoos' half of the ninth by working a walk. Sundstrom bunted Martin along to second. Hack Nelson started for the plate, and suddenly Mickey was running for the row of bats. Calling, "Hack, come back here!"

Hack had tripled once this evening. He struck out twice when the Cougar pitcher

worked Hack's weakness for wide curves. Now Mickey told the smirking, sawed-off giant, "Go back there and sit down!" He told the head umpire: "King batting for Nelson."

Mickey's hands were cold and clammy on his bat as he faced the Cougar hurler. He had taken an occasional turn in the Dips' batting practice sessions, and he had noticed that, strangely, those foggy blind spots came to him less under the night lights than in the sunshine. But this was the first time he got set to face a pitcher in a game since last year's World Series, when that duster had taken him over the right temple, cruelly cutting short the career of baseball's number-one catcher.

The Cougar hurler looked at Martin leading off second-base; hunched, tilted, and let fly. Mickey poised—then froze, unmoving. There was that blind spot. *He couldn't see the ball.* His heart thudded; then thudded more heavily in relief as he heard the apple spank the Cougar catcher's mitt. He had felt the *whoosh* of it past his face.

Mickey stepped out of the batter's box. He made a pretense of tapping dirt from his spikes while he forced himself to steady. He had made the mistake of looking up—right into the lights—after observing the positions of the Cougar outfielders.

Mickey stepped back in, his eyes glued on the Cougar pitcher. That funny little hunch of the pitcher's shoulders—the tilt back—here it came! A fast hook, and Mickey hitched a full step, his shoulders and wrists blazing his bat through.

There was a satisfying *smack!* and Mickey was pouring it on down the first-base line. He didn't dare look up for the ball, into the lights. He rounded first base and looked back and across. Martin was crossing the plate safely with the winning run. Then, grinning a little shakily, Mickey slowed down.

One victory in the last nine games. The half-filled Dipper stands cheered, but without much enthusiasm.

The Dipsydoos took to the road for a short trip. They played three night games with the league-leading Oilers in Lewiston.

and dropped two out of three. They won the third game in the tenth inning, when Mickey went in again as a pinch hitter, for Bert Bell this time, and doubled to score Sundstrom.

The Dipsys went on to Bingham for a Saturday game and a Sunday double-header against the Brownies by daylight. Red Hale—a much thinned-down Red Hale since Mickey had put him to running around the field in a rubber sweat suit—pitched a beautiful game, shutting out the Brownies in the opener.

Then the Dips folded like rugs again in the next two games: their shortstop bungling and upsetting the infield; the players falling prey to the listlessness of Bert Bell and Hack Nelson.

Mickey tried the pinch-hitting role once more in the final Sunday game. The blind spot—a dim path of fog between the plate and the pitcher—came on him with the first pitch. He stood there helpless, sweat breaking on his temples. He was lucky, because the Brownie hurler hooked three through the slot. Strikes. . . .

IN THE club house, Mickey stood under the shower and fretted. His eyes had betrayed him again, under the sunlight. There was no word yet from Dutch Niehoff; and until—and unless—Dutch came through with a couple of able performers, Mickey couldn't force a showdown with the passively resisting Bert Bell, Hack Nelson and Hobson. He had no able replacements for them.

Hack Nelson's voice rose loud, sneering, from the locker room. "Our great manager sure looked good in that pinch spot today, didn't he? Little Napoleon was scared stiff!"

Hobson, the center-fielder, chuckled. "The yellow punk won't be here much longer!"

Rosen, the chunky catcher, protested. "He is like hell yellow! No yellow guy could hit three-fifty in the big time—"

Nelson and Hobson shouted him down, and then Lefty Young, embarrassed and apologetic to Mickey ever since that day in Lou Gramm's bar, sided hotly with

Rosen. A brawl was developing when Mickey stalked in. It quieted.

The hapless Dipsydoos turned toward home. They dropped three out of four to the Beavers. The fans jeered them all along the route. The sports reporters wrote: "Mickey King used to be a great catcher. As a manager, he still used to be a great catcher."

The Metro City papers, when the cellar-intrenched Dippers got home, had their gloves off. Particularly the *Herald*:

The Dippers—pardon us, we mean the Dipsydoos—have gone from worst to terrible under Mickey King's management. It is no secret that the players are feuding with each other and with Mickey, and he is unable to control them. We suggest that hard-working Lou Gramm heed the protests of the fans and the Dipsydoos' stockholders, and change horses in mid-stream.

There were two wires from Dutch Niehoff awaiting Mickey at the hotel. The first one read:

Kelly okay shortstopper and how STOP Also good southpaw here under Dippers option

The second wire was from Buffalo:

Hunch right on Ames Stop Funny situation here regarding our friend LG Stop Heading south on trail of pitcher Stop Contact me Antlers Hotel Hartland

Mickey's eyes glowed. He closed himself into a telephone booth in the lobby and put in a long-distance call for Dutch in the Antlers Hotel in Harland. "Dutch? . . . Mickey. Shoot!"

"The pitcher with the Tornados is Herb Weaver," Dutch said. "He's no world beater, like Kelly is, but he'll do."

"What's that funny stuff you wired about Ames, in this industrial league?"

"It's funny all right. It's a factory league, though Ames right now is ready

for the Wolves—no kidding! But they've been covering him up. Shiftin' him back and around on three teams, and half the time keepin' him out of the games. Manager got fishy-eyed when I asked questions. Clammed up."

"How about this pitcher you chased to Hartland?"

"He's a comer. Name of Hill. Used to be on the Dippers' list. I can't find out now. Try to get him."

"Okay. Grab the first plane back here!"

FRIDAY was an open date for the Dipsy-doods, but Mickey held to his unrelenting rule of morning practice. Friday was also the 15th of the month, pay day; and when Mickey entered the clubhouse Lou Gramm was there, beginning to distribute the checks. Dutch Niehoff, just returned, puffed his pipe on a locker bench.

Gramm called jovially, "Here's the steak and beans, Hack," and started toward the giant, stunted outfielder.

Mickey said sharply, "Just a minute, Gramm!" and stepped in front of the vice-prexy. He held out his hand. "I want a look at those checks first."

Gramm kept smiling. "That won't be necessary." He started to stretch the paper slip above Mickey's shoulder. "Hack—"

"Damn it!" Mickey snapped. "Stop playing your games with me!" and snatched the check. He caught Gramm's right wrist with his hand, squeezed. Gramm's hand relaxed, and Mickey took the pay checks.

Gramm said nothing, but he stopped smiling and his eyes weren't pretty. Hack Nelson swore softly. Dutch Niehoff arose, tapping out his pipe on a locker.

"Just hand me that bat, Lefty," he commanded Lefty Young.

Mickey leafed through the checks and took out three. He examined them, then looked coldly at Gramm.

"You didn't deduct the fines I levied against Nelson, Bell and Hobson," he said.

A small, fat vein pulsed out over Gramm's left eye. Otherwise there was no change in his expression.

"No, I didn't," he began. "I didn't agree with you—"

Mickey's hand was on Gramm's pouty chest. He pushed roughly. Gramm staggered back. "Get up in your office and wait for me," Mickey said. "I want to talk to you!" He turned to where Dutch Niehoff had been sitting, but Dutch was standing behind him now, waving a bat invitingly at Hack Nelson.

"Come on, dirty nose!" Dutch taunted the little strong man. "Step up here and let me wrap this around your dumb konk!"

Mickey laughed shortly and slipped all but three checks into Dutch's pocket. "Pass these out, and wait here for me." His chin jutted at Hack. "You can wait too, fella. When I get back, I'm gonna give you that beating you've been begging for!"

LOU GRAMM was sitting in his cubby-hole of an office, carefully trimming the end from a cigar, when Mickey stalked in. Gramm was cool; the man was a master at dissembling emotion. He said casually, before Mickey could speak, "Save your breath, King. I suppose you've seen the papers, demanding your resignation? I have decided they are right. I made a mistake about you. I have decided to inform the stockholders of your resignation."

"Before you do," Mickey said hardily, "here is a little job for you. Get on that phone and call the Carson Tornadoes and the Western Reapers. I want Kelly and Weaver from the Tornadoes, and Ames from the Reapers, and I want them up here at once!"

Gramm stiffened. "What do you know about them?" he demanded.

"Plenty. They're what the doctor ordered. Get on that phone!"

Gramm laughed. "Been pumping Doris, huh? I told her you'd try that. But those men you mention aren't ready for the Dippers yet. Besides, I just told you I was firing you."

Mickey put his square-fingered hands on the desk, leaned on them lightly. This bluff had to be good. Dutch and he had some stray facts, but they hadn't had time to investigate them. The confidence of his bluff now would make or break him.

"Gramm, you dirty crook, get this!"

Mickey snapped. "If you try to fire me now, I'll go to your stockholders with the story of how you've been holding out Kelly, Weaver and Ames, while the Dippers are starving to death for a few decent players."

Gramm laughed again, but with a slight uneasiness. "They won't believe you. *Those* men are no good."

"Kelly is hitting three-sixty. Weaver has already won eight games this season. Those averages speak for themselves."

"A Class B league! They're not ready for us."

"You're a liar!" Mickey's stormy eyes were blazing now. "And get this too! If I go to Judge Landis with the dope on how you've been covering up Ames, shifting him around to keep him hidden, you'll face the District Attorney when Landis finishes you."

Gramm's sharp sucking in of breath told Mickey that there was enough truth in this bluff to have hit home. Gramm was two-timing; trying to keep the Dippers down. Whatever his purpose in that—and Mickey couldn't fathom it now—the trick was to keep Gramm scared and make him act while he was scared.

"This is Friday," Mickey said sharply. "I'll give you until Tuesday night to get those three players up here. If they're not here then, I'll take no excuses. I'll go straight to Landis and the stockholders."

Mickey turned at the door. "And while you're about it, get me Hill, too, from Hartland." He grinned tightly. "Pleasant dreams!"

For once, Gramm's smooth mask broke and showed furious hate. . . .

Mickey returned to the locker room—and to a shambles. Uniforms, shoes, towels were strewn everywhere. Blood spattered the place like red snow. In the center of an awed ring of players, Dutch Niehoff sat astride Hack Nelson's bull-like chest like a maimed old colossus, happily beating Hack's head on the floor!

DUTCH'S shirt hung from his great bowed shoulders in tatters. One eye was closed. His left ear was torn, and his mouth was swollen. But Dutch's good eye

gleamed in glory, and with both his hands he beat Hack's head on the floor.

"Say it, dirty nose!" Dutch growled. "Say it, or I'll bang your dumb noggin through this concrete! Say—" *pound-pound!* "—you'll take your cut at the plate like I showed you, and"—*pound-pound!*—"you'll play ball like hell for Mickey!"

Hack swore weakly and groaned. Both his eyes were swollen shut, his beefy face was pounded into lumps, and his mouth was bleeding.

"Okay," he wheezed. "I say it. Lay off, you old fool! You're killing me!"

"You don't keep your word and I *will* kill you," Dutch promised. He arose reluctantly, hardly able to stand on his feet, but still a ferocious old gamecock. "Hi, pal!" He grinned crookedly at Mickey and winked his good eye. "I saved you a little job. You won't have any more trouble with *one* dumb palooka."

"You crazy old goat!" Mickey said with gruff affection; but he thought: "First Gramm; now Hack. This is pay day!"

The players had just seen that the rough-and-tumble Hack wasn't invincible. A determined man almost three times Hack's age had whipped the little strong man, made Hack a ludicrous figure.

In Mickey's book, when the time came you had to pour it on hard.

"Hobson!" Mickey snapped at his sullen center-fielder. "You're another dirty back-sticker. You're a cheat and a heel! Step out here and get yours!"

Hobson, a head taller than Mickey, hesitated a brief moment, scowling in disbelief at the fallen Hack Nelson. Chunky Rosen's hand propelled the outfielder forward. "Go ahead," Rosen taunted. "You were all the time beefing that Mickey was yellow!"

MICKEY stabbed a short, stinging left into Hobson's nose, starting the claret. Hobson's head snapped back, and then he snarled, and lunged in with a Sunday punch. Mickey's teeth bared briefly as he stepped inside the punch, let it whistle around his black head. He jolted an iron

fist into Hobson's mid section, straightening him, then whipped his right up, his muscular shoulder pistoning the savage blow all the way from his knees.

Hobson's eyes flew open wide, and he gaped, dazed silly. His hands tried to come up, but fell back. He started to crumple. Mickey didn't punch again; he shoved easily, contemptuously, and Hobson went over like a straw man.

The players gasped. Rosen, Lefty Young and Red Hale chuckled happily. Mickey thought: "Gramm—Hack—Hobson!"

He swung to face Bert Bell. Bell's lean, intelligent face was set in lines of hate and fury. His shoulders dropped, and his hands formed into clubs as Mickey King faced him.

"Relax, Bert," Mickey advised. "You're gonna get yours on the ears." He hooked his thumbs in his belt. "You're a smart guy; but like lots of smart guys, you can't take it. You couldn't make the grade in the big time, so you've been eatin' yourself up inside, makin' yourself a sourbelly."

"That's enough, wise guy," Bell began harshly. "Put up your hands and—"

"Every player can't make the big leagues," Mickey continued over Bell's challenge. "That's nothing to be ashamed of. But instead of facing that like a man, you hate the guys who do make the grade. So you hate me; and you hold yourself down, and you hold down dumb guys, like Hack, who believe in you."

Bell's face was working. "That's a damned lie!"

"Hack is a natural big leaguer," Mickey rapped. "He isn't up there, and that is because he lets the pitchers bad-ball him to death, and his stance ties him all up. But he won't let Dutch and me help him because you tell him not to. Now go cry on Lou Gramm's shoulder," Mickey concluded disgustedly. "For a guy with brains, you're the biggest damn fool I ever saw!"

It was a strangely chastened and battered Hack Nelson who took his place in left-field for the Dipsydoos the next afternoon; and an obviously hard-thinking Bert Bell who took his position at first base.

The Dips fought the Cougars into the

tenth inning, tied up 4-4, and the discouragingly small Saturday crowd looked on in surprise at their brisker ball club. With Mickey and old Dutch chattering hard pepper from the coaching lines and talking it up in the dugout, the Dipsydoos spread after those drives harder, and marched up to the plate with new determination.

Dutch Niehoff accompanied Hack Nelson to the plate each time, talking, talking. Hack scowled, but he listened. Hack shortened his spread-eagle stance; he obeyed Dutch and stayed back in the far corner of the batter's box. And he drove in three of the Dipsydoos' four runs.

And so it hurt, in the first of the tenth inning, when, with two Cougars on base and one down, the Dips' shortstop hurried an easy double-play ball, kicked it, picked it up and dropped it, and the leading Cougar run came in.

And it hurt again in the last of the tenth, when, with two away, Bert Bell and Hack Nelson singled in succession. Then Hobson, still smarting and vicious, struck out—and smirked. . . .

DUTCH tried to cheer Mickey in the locker room. Mickey took every defeat very hard. "For the first time, this bunch looked like a ball club today," Dutch said. "And as soon as we get that honey Kelly boy up here to play shortstop, and have Ames in center-field, instead of that rat Hobson—"

Mickey listened, but he worried outloud. "Dutch, I took a round from Lou Gramm yesterday, but I didn't knock him out. If Gramm wants the Dips to go to hell, even though that means he loses his big job, he's got a bigger stake in this monkey business than we can even guess. And he's smart, Dutch. He knows we haven't got the real lowdown on him."

"Forget that lug," Dutch advised with false heartiness. "We've got him on the run." But his faded old eyes brooded.

Lou Gramm's answer came quick and hard, and it promised to be shattering in its shrewdness and timing. It came in the form of a boxed editorial on the front page

of the Sunday *Herald*. The editorial was signed by Tip Foster, *Conductor of the former nationally famous column: Take A Tip From Tip*.

Under the big blocked headline: *What's Wrong With Our Dippers???* Tip Foster wrote:

The inglorious Dipsydoos have now lost more than two-thirds of their games. The fans, many of them stockholders, want to know *why*. We all thought the Dips would be a pennant contender this year, after our able and popular Lou Gramm went out and paid a big price for the famous Mickey King, and gave King a record-breaking salary for a minor league pilot.

Well, my poor friends, it is old stuff now that Mickey just ain't a good manager. His players fight him, instead of fighting *for* him. BUT MICK WAS THE BIG LEAGUE'S ALL-STAR CATCHER LAST YEAR! WHY ISN'T HE BEHIND THE BAT FOR THE FALTERING DIPS?

Good old Lou Gramm, always loyal to his men, refuses to state that Mickey was hired to be a PLAYING manager. But make your own guesses. Mickey has had no experience as a manager. *Does it seem logical then that our smart Lou Gramm would pay him \$10,000 a year to be a bench manager?* No, folks; we hate to say it, but it looks like Mickey has gone "big shot," or else—as some rumors have it—Mickey lost his nerve when he got bumped on the head last year.

The monthly meeting of the Dipsydoos' stockholders, next Tuesday night, ought to be interesting—and the important business in hand shouldn't take long.

DUTCH NIEHOFF, framing every word like a curse, read that juicy item aloud to Mickey over breakfast in the hotel.

"Gramm's work!" Dutch swore. He kicked his chair back. "I'm gonna get him, and that dumb stew-bum, Tip Foster, and bust their dirty heads together!"

"Sit down!" Mickey snapped. His mouth was a tight line over his chin. "We did our fisticuffin' yesterday in the club house. Now we need brain work, and we need it quick."

"Brain work, hell!" Dutch exploded. "We've got to get hold of Gramm and get him to make Tip Foster write the truth: that Gramm knew you couldn't catch this year, on account of your eyes, and he hired you on your name, to be bench manager."

"We can't prove that," Mickey muttered. "That was agreed, yes; but Gramm was smart. When the medicos said I *might* get all right again, Gramm gave me a player-manager contract. That's what I signed. It's just my word against his."

Dutch looked suddenly helpless and scared. "Then what do we do?" he said. "You *can't* catch! They'll throw you out on your ear. And with this kind of dirty publicity goin' all over the country, you're done. You'll never get another post!"

Mickey grimaced. His big ranch was just about paid for; he could stay alive without baseball. But baseball was his very life, and the name he had built in the game his most cherished possession. To be kicked out like this, branded a yellow flop—

There was another angle. Some three hundred plain citizens, stockholders, had voted permission—and their money—to Lou Gramm to bring Mickey here. Those little guys had placed their trust in Mickey King's ability and integrity. And now, for some ugly, mysterious purpose of Lou Gramm's, those little guys were going to be gypped of their hard-earned savings. Because it was clear that Lou Gramm meant to drive the Dips to bankruptcy.

A light rain began to patter against the dining-room windows. Mickey prayed, "Come on, rain!" A thin plan was beginning to develop in his mind; it would help if today's *afternoon* game was rained out. He needed time! He needed at least a week.

The rain beat down harder. There would be no game today.

At ten o'clock the next morning, Monday, Mickey was in the Dippers' downtown offices. As he came in, he heard Lou Gramm's raised voice from the vice-prexy's

private office. He clicked the door shut, and Lou Gramm's voice silenced. Mickey faced Doris May. He said, "I want to see Gramm."

"He isn't in." Her voice was cold, impersonal.

"Don't give me that—I just heard him."

"All right then; he isn't in to *you*."

Mickey laughed curtly. "Still stooging for your foxy boy friend, huh?" He started for Gramm's door.

Doris turned quickly and put her straight, slim back against Gramm's door. Mickey stared at her and she flushed hotly. Her eyes deepened. She was lovely; and despite himself, a welling softness rose in Mickey's chest, the way it always did when he saw this girl.

And then Doris said scornfully, "Why don't you knock me aside, the way you do your poor players? You—you bully!"

The softness went out of Mickey then, leaving only a sore regret. The only girl he had ever wanted—and she was Lou Gramm's. He said shortly, "That's a good idea," and lifted her deftly by the waist and set her behind him. He swung away from her trembling outrage and pushed on into Gramm's private office.

LOU GRAMM said swiftly into the telephone, "I'll call you later," and replaced the instrument. He said coldly, "I told Miss May I was too busy to see anyone this morning."

"I convinced her you weren't," Mickey replied. "I want you to postpone tomorrow night's stockholders' meeting for one week."

Gramm shook his head. "Can't be done. The club's charter provides for a meeting the third Tuesday of each month."

"The *fourth* Tuesday will have to do this time," Mickey said. "And I know you can do it. If you don't—"

"I know," Gramm said curtly. "You'll go to Landis. Don't try to kid me. If you really had anything on me, you wouldn't be here begging me to put off the meeting!"

That was exactly what Mickey had been fearing Gramm would say. Gramm was no

babe-in-the-woods. So Mickey went into his well prepared song and dance.

"Maybe you're all covered up, and maybe you aren't," he said. "But a Landis investigation won't do you any good, and I know you want to duck it. So I'm here to offer you a deal."

Gramm looked suspicious, but he nodded, grudgingly.

"Put off that meeting *one week*. Get Kelly, Weaver and Ames up here by tomorrow night, as you agreed, and I'll promise not to make one squawk to Landis or the stockholders. I'll abide by whatever action the meeting takes next week."

Gramm looked, first surprised, and then contemptuously amused. He didn't even trouble now to mask his expression, which said clearly: "You poor dope—I thought you had brains!"

He said aloud, amusedly, "You figure you can make such a good showing in a week that the stockholders will want to keep you on, huh?"

Mickey choked down his sigh of relief. That was what he wanted Gramm to think. "You bet!" he said boldly.

Gramm asked, "Will you put this agreement in writing?" He added quickly, "Not that I'm afraid of any investigation, but this will save time and money for lawyers."

Mickey said, "Draw up your agreement," and Gramm pulled out a portable typewriter and went to work. Mickey read it, and signed it. Gramm called in Doris and the bookkeeper to witness the signings. Doris read the agreement, and she looked from Gramm to Mickey, clearly puzzled. But she said nothing.

THE next night, while the Dipsydoos were taking their last practice before the series opener with the Beavers, the announcer chattered the line-ups over the loud-speaker system. He called the Dips' batting order, and finished: "*King*—the catcher. *Young*—the pitcher."

Surprised cries came out of the stands, and some jeers too: "The big shot is goin' to work, eh?" . . . "The *Herald* scared him!"

While Rosen warmed up Lefty Young

in front of the stands, Mickey strapped on his harness and pads in the Dips' dugout. Above him, Dutch Niehoff stormed and pleaded.

"Mick, are you nuts? Your eyes aren't right yet! You'll get killed! Listen, Mick—"

"I tell you I can make it," Mickey repeated. "If I don't look into the lights, it's okay. This night stuff is better than the sun."

Dutch pleaded more urgently, but Mickey stayed deaf. What the hell—there *wasn't* any other out. Rosen was a promising catcher; but he was weak with the stick, and too inexperienced to handle pitchers expertly. Besides, if he planned this right—

Despite the fear which made his knees tremble, it felt good, when he crouched down back there behind the plate. The helplessness, which made him reckless and nervous on the bench, was gone. He could run his ball club from here, the way he always used to. Keep 'em on their toes; confident, hustling.

The rookie southpaw, Lefty Young, smiled more confidently on the mound, preparing to pitch. Mickey smacked his mitt, flashed his sign. "Give it to me, boy!" he called, and he prayed he would see that fast hook when it came.

He saw it. He held it as the Beaver bat lashed viciously at it and missed. He timed his throw back to Lefty; not too fast, not too slow, to fret the kid. "That's goin' in there, fella!"

His eyes were going to be okay. Just don't look up into those lights. He even took the foul tip all right.

They had two strike-outs that first inning. Lefty was fast and strong. He had a good curve. Mickey had watched these Beavers in previous games. He had made notes. He knew them all now.

In the dugout, Lefty chuckled happily, clapping Mickey's back.

"It makes a difference," he said. "It makes a big difference to a man, with you back of that plate!"

Mickey nodded to the anxious Dutch Niehoff. "I'm okay." His pepper could

spray now—now that he was in there with the boys, fighting with them, taking his licks with them. He hit in his old spot, number-two, and in his first time up he ran out a scratchy roller for a hit.

Mickey perched on the bag and yodeled to Sundstrom: "Take me along, Sundry! Give it a ride!"

The play was the hit-and-run, and Mickey sprinted with the crack of the bat. took Dutch Niehoff's sign from the third-base line and fled over second, raced and launched himself into a headlong, slashing dive for the bag.

They called him safe, and Mickey was up, brushing at the dirt and calling at Hack Nelson: "Bring us home, Hack! Give it a ride, little guy!"

Dutch was walking once more with Hack to the plate, but Hack waved him away impatiently. Hack's eyes were on Mickey: half-doubtful, half-enthusiastic.

Hack gave it a ride. A screaming drive to the flagpole in deep right center, and Mickey and Sundstrom rode in. Hack stood on third base and jawed strongly with old Dutch, who was sneering that if Hack wasn't a turtle, he would have had a home run.

Bert Bell, silent, but walking with a spring, went to the plate and skied high and deep to left. Hack scored after the catch, and the Dipsydoos were three runs to the good in that first inning.

The fans hesitated, then cheered in scattered calls. Jeers fell, too, on Mickey—but fewer jeers.

THE Dips hustled along through the innings. Mickey was still seeing that ball. He breathed. "Stay with me, eyes!" When the shortstop kicked one in a tight spot in the ninth inning and the first Beaver run scored, Mickey was out there pepping up the disgruntled shortstop, steadying the easily unsettled second-base kid, Martin.

It was on the play after that when it happened.

Two Beavers on the bases; two outs. One more out, and this game would be in the bag. Mickey called easily to Lefty

Young, "Just breeze 'em to me, Lefty boy!" and Lefty, a little drawn now, grinned back and breezed a strike through.

Mickey called for the sinker, and the Beaver hitter got a piece of it coming up. Mickey was sweeping his mask off, drumming back toward the screen under the ball, even before the Beaver hitter had finished his follow-through.

A gust of wind caught the high pop-up, blew it toward the Beavers' dugout. Mickey angled fast, his eyes following the ball's flight. The ball was falling fast now, and Mickey raced with it—those confounded big lights!—he was losing that ball! He saw it blur, and that blind fog was on him. He couldn't see, but he knew how that ball was coming.

He kept racing, his big mitt up. He felt the ball in his mitt and he covered it fast with his bare hand as he crashed into the concrete dugout. . . .

MICKEY came out of it in the tunnel leading from the Dips' dugout to the club house. Two players were carrying his feet, and Dutch Niehoff held him under the armpits. Dutch saw Mickey's eyes open and he grinned like a fool. "Mick! You okay?"

Mickey nodded, closed his eyes again. He was groggy and his head ached; but the fog was gone, and he was making sense. He heard Dutch rage, "That rummy Tip Foster is to blame for this! Used to say he was your pal, huh? Even claimed he discovered you! When I get my hands on him—!"

By the time they reached the club house, Mickey felt okay. Just a bump on the noggin. Not like when he was beaned last year in the World's Series. But he kept his eyes closed and heard Dutch still raving at Tip Foster. And he thought: "Sure! Why not? It might work!"

They put him on the rubbing table, and Oscar, the trainer, went to work with the ice bags. Mickey said, "Oscar, clear the boys back. Dutch, bend down here!"

Oscar cleared the anxious players back. Mickey spoke into Dutch's ear:

"Dutch, get this. I'm okay, but I'm

gonna pull a little act. Get me to the hospital, see? Tip Foster and the other newspaper boys will be up here in a minute. Tell Tip I'm in a bad way. Ride him to the hospital. I want him. Catch?"

"I oughta beat his stew-block off—" Dutch began; but when Mickey frowned, Dutch said: "I'll get him there, if I have to bring him in the ambulance. And *that* would be a pleasure."

At the hospital, the doctor said, "I think you're okay, King. But we'll take a couple of pictures, to make sure."

The pictures showed no concussion. Mickey nodded. "I thought it was all right. Now listen, Doc. Hold up any statements to the newspaper boys for an hour, will you? Tell 'em you can't tell yet." Mickey told Dutch, "Get Tip Foster in here."

Tip Foster came in pale, dry-lipped, and Mickey knew Dutch had already been working on him.

Tip began, "Mick, honest to God, I never thought you'd go in there and catch—"

Mickey said from his bed, "You used to be a nice guy and a helluva good newspaper man, Tip. Now you're just a stinker. Who's been telling you how to write your stories? Lou Gramm?"

Tip was badly shaken. Liquor had his nerves, and Mickey guessed Dutch had told him Mickey was a goner and he, Tip, was responsible. Tip said in a rush:

"Gramm and my crummy business manager. Mick, I'm sorry as hell—" He began to babble. "Don't die on me, Mick!" And then the poor oaf was crying like a baby!

Mickey said gruffly, "Snap out of it! I'm not dying! Go on and talk, if you're sorry. Why does Lou Gramm want to bankrupt the Dippers?"

"So he can steal the club from the stockholders." Foster gushed the words. "He and the *Herald's* business manager. Mick, it'll mean my job if I talk, but I've got to. You don't know how those heels have humiliated me, and now I almost killed you—"

Foster started to shake violently again, and Dutch leaned to him and slapped his cheeks hard, rocking him from side to side.

"Come on!" Dutch commanded. "Come out of that!"

Mickey's brain was racing. He saw it now—almost.

UNDER Dutch's rough but adequate treatment, Tip Foster was steady. Dutch handed him a glass of water, and he drank.

"Sorry," he said. "I wish I'd run into that concrete dugout tonight!"

"You're worth more alive," Dutch rasped. "Tell Mickey what he wants to know."

"I'll be glad to," Foster said, not without dignity. His eyes began to glow. "Mick, maybe we can get those two rats—"

Mickey nodded grimly. "We'll try. Gimme the rest."

"Why, that's it. At the next stockholders' meeting, Gramm will say: 'My poor stockholders, the jig is up. Mickey King was our last hope, and he flopped. Nobody has been coming to our ball park to see our Dipsydoos, so we have no money to pay the bank's mortgage next month. When the bank forecloses, you will be wiped out. *However*—I know a kind-hearted man who will take your worthless stock off your hands for twenty cents on the dollar.'" Tip looked up wryly. "Catch?"

"Yeah," Mickey growled. He caught now, all right. Hiring him had been Gramm's false gesture to the stockholders. Gramm expected Mickey would be a willing stooge; but when Mickey rebelled, when he set about rebuilding the team, Gramm had to get rid of him. And since Gramm was conniving with the business manager of the *Herald*, who in turn could control Tip Foster—

Dutch was cursing Gramm loudly and steadily, but Mickey spoke over him to Tip: "How big is the bank's mortgage?"

"One hundred grand, even."

"And how much is the stock issue?"

"One hundred fifty thousand dollars. Mostly the life savings of about three hundred little fans in this town."

Mickey's black eyebrows knotted. "That means we'd need seventy-six thousand bucks to control the stock, figuring that

half the stockholders would sell for one hundred cents on the dollar. You think they would, Tip?"

"*Would* they?" Tip cried. "They'd fall on your neck and kiss you! Didn't I tell you Gramm plans to offer them twenty cents on the dollar?"

"I don't do business Gramm's way," Mickey said curtly. He mused, "And a hundred grand for the bank. That's one hundred and seventy-six thousand dollars. *Whew!*" He rubbed his hard jaw. "My ranch is about paid up. I can borrow fifty grand on that quick."

"You're nuts!" Dutch Niehoff said. "All the big dough you ever made is in that ranch. You dump it in a long-shot deal like this and maybe never see it again!"

"So what?" Mickey challenged.

"So I'll match that fifty grand with *my* fifty," Dutch retorted. "I ain't been called a penny-pinching Dutchman for nothing!" He sighed. "Golly, we'll look funny sellin' apples on the corner, Mick!"

TIP FOSTER agreed to handle the deals with the stockholders, pronto—and quietly. "We've got to keep this from Gramm," Mickey warned. "And we've got to control the stock by next Tuesday."

They finally decided to offer eighty cents on the dollar to fifty-one per cent of the stockholders. *On option*. Which meant that the stockholders, at the end of the season, could either sell out for that price, or return the money and keep the stock.

"That's a fair deal for the stockholders, I think," Mickey said.

"And how!" Dutch agreed. "*We* stand to get stuck, not them. If we flop, they're sitting pretty with their dough."

"And that will leave us about forty grand to offer the bank to extend their mortgage," Mickey went on. He pounded his fist into his palm. "And if I can make this club play like I expect, the bank will be glad to extend the ante."

The Metro City fans saw two new faces in the once more revamped line-up of the Dippers, when the second game of the series got under way with the Beavers the following night. They saw Kelly, late of the

Carson Tornadoes—a rangy, lightning-moving redhead—at shortstop. And they saw a smiling, graceful bean-pole of a kid in center field: Ames, from the Western Reapers.

In the very first inning, with a Beaver on first base by virtue of a fluke Texas League hit off Red Ames, Kelly went far over second base to pluck a scorcher, and start a double-play that brought even those long-discouraged Dipsydoos fans yelling out of their seats.

It was in the second inning that the newcomer Ames turned in his debut thriller for the fans. Ames loped like a deer into the deep hole behind the right-center field flagpole and pulled in a Beaver drive that was earmarked for three bases.

The Dipsy's battery tonight was Red Hale and Mickey King. They worked sweetly, easily together; and the Beavers, long used to feeding on Dipsydoos meat, went up to the plate, then back to the dugout, dragging their bats in wonder and chagrin.

Each inning, Dutch said to Mickey, "The eyes, pally! How are the eyes?"

And Mickey answered honestly, knocking the wood of a bat, "So far, so good. That doc in the hospital last night said he thought this night stuff was a good idea. Said my eyes needed exercise." He swallowed. "Dutch, they *gotta* be okay!"

"You said it," Dutch agreed, knocking wood emphatically too. "With you behind the plate, and that Kelly and Ames out there, we've got a ball club, Mick. We've got a *ball* club!"

The Dipsydoos looked like a ball club that night, as they snowed the Beavers under, 7-1. Kelly broke in with two hits. Ames had one; a long double. Mickey had two. Bert Bell and Hack Nelson collected two hits apiece.

Mickey kicked out of his pads, threw them to the bat boy.

"Maybe we'll do," he mumbled. "Now it depends on Tip."

TIP FOSTER, looking weary, reported discouragingly slow progress that evening. "One of the first stockholders I saw

must have telephoned Gramm for advice, even though I warned them all that that would queer their deal. Either Gramm smelled a rat, or he's just playing safe. He's sent a wire to every stockholder, telling them to sit tight until the meeting next week."

Dutch said hollowly, "Oh-oh." And Tip groused, "In spite of what's happened, most of them still believe in Gramm. The guy has them buffaloed. I need some inside help, and I need it quick."

Mickey growled, "That's like asking for the moon!"

"Maybe not," Tip said slowly. "I've got one last hunch card to play. We might still have a chance." He got up briskly. "Mickey, you keep that bunch of yours playing ball. We're not licked yet!"

The Dipsydoos, with Mickey handling his pitchers in big-league style, and radiating confidence and high-voltage energy from his place behind the bat, continued to steam it up that week. The club's all-important "heart line" was sound now. The keystone combination of Kelly and Martin worked around that bag like a pair of rapid-fire vacuum cleaners. In center-field. Ames, the smiling bean pole, fielded and hit like a hurricane.

The Dips—"The Re-upholstered Dipsydoos," the Metro City *Times* called them—knocked over the Beavers twice more, then crashed through the second-place Brownies to win three decisions out of four.

Mickey didn't catch in the weekend daylight games. Rosen went back behind the plate, and Mickey roamed the coaching lines like a caged tiger, and chipped holes in the concrete floor of the dugout with his restless spikes.

There had been no word from Tip Foster for three days, except an occasional vague, hasty phone call to "Keep punching!"

Mickey told himself desperately, "This is my ball club! I made it! I love every dirty son on it!" The compact, modern little ball park was the apple of his eye. He could face the loss of his ranch with hardly a tremor. But he couldn't bear the thought of losing his "Re-upholstered" Dipsydoos. . . .

ON MONDAY night, the high-riding first-place Oilers blew into town for a four-game series. The stands were filled for the first time in the season. Noisy fans, beginning to bubble with revived enthusiasm.

It was Lefty Young on the hill for the Dips again. Lefty Young on the hill, and the ex-big-league star, Mickey King, receiving. The Oilers went down one-two-three in the first inning. They went down in order again in the second. It was the sixth inning before Lefty yielded his first hit—

1-1 in the sixth; in the seventh. Mickey opened the Dips' half of the eighth with a hard single to right field and galloped to second on Sundstrom's sacrifice bunt.

Hack Nelson swaggered to the plate swinging three big bats, the ever-present Dutch Niehoff dogging him and wagging his chin. They yapped at each other all the way to the rubber; and there Dutch left Hack.

The little strong man megaphoned his hands and called to Mickey on second base: "Take it easy, boss! This one is goin' over those bleachers!"

Three wide ones, and the now well-coached Hack let them go. The straight one down the slot, and then the hook. It was the hook which Hack leaned on joyfully, and he rode it as he had called it—high dropping over the center-field tiny bleachers.

Bert Bell doubled then, and bean-pole Ames poled one over the pavilion for another homer. That was the ball game; and while the fans went nuts, Lefty Young, pitching perfectly to Mickey's sure target, fogged down the Oilers in the ninth.

There was noise in the Dipsydoos' club house. Good noise, high chattering and confident. These men were cogs in a fast-stepping ball club, and they respected their positions and reveled in them. They were even talking pennant.

"They can't stop us now!" Hack Nelson boasted. "We'll be in first place before August!"

Bert Bell appeared at Mickey's locker. Bell's face was red under his tan.

"Mick," he said, "you've got an apology coming from me. I—well—" he paused, embarrassed, but his eyes shone "—it's fine playin' for you on a hustle club like this, Mick."

Silently Mickey's hand stabbed out, and Bell gripped it as silently. Mickey swore at the lump in his throat, but—doggone it, he wanted to stay at the helm of this gang. . . .

THE decisive stockholders' meeting was called for five o'clock the next afternoon. That night, the last night before the meeting, Mickey and Dutch sat up until past midnight, vainly trying to reach Tip Foster by telephone. They gave it up.

"He's back in a gutter some place," Dutch groaned. "We should've known better than to depend on a lush." He sighed. "Well, Mick, it's a pushcart for us."

For the first time in his life, Mickey King admitted defeat. "Looks like," he mumbled.

They were in their beds, staring blankly into the darkness, when the phone rang. They both grabbed for the phone on the night table between them, wrestled for it. Mickey won.

"Mick?—Tip." A wholly weary, distant-sounding Tip. "Can't quite tell yet—I think *maybe*. See you at the meeting tomorrow. 'Night."

"Tip!" Mickey rattled the trigger desperately. "Tip—*listen!*" But Tip had rung off. Mickey replaced the phone grimly, saying nothing.

"Well?" Dutch demanded impatiently. "What'd he say?"

"He said— 'Maybe.' "

"What the hell does that mean? Was he drunk?"

"I'm not sure," Mickey answered honestly. He lay back, staring into the blackness again. If Tip hadn't rounded up fifty-one per cent of the stock yet, it looked bad. Mickey stifled a groan. It wasn't only his dough that was gone, and the dough of all those too-foolish little stockholders who were still bamboozled by the clever Lou Gramm—it was Dutch Niehoff's savings that were up the flue too. Dutch was an old man. He had followed Mickey—

Mickey didn't get much sleep that night. In the next bed, Dutch wasn't sawing wood to wake the dead, as he always did when asleep. That meant Dutch wasn't asleep either. . . .

The next day dragged interminably. With the club coming so fast, Mickey had cancelled morning practice. He moped around the hotel. He thought of Doris; that hurt as bad as the other thoughts. At four o'clock, an hour early, Mickey and Dutch were in the meeting hall. They sat there like wooden Indians for fifty-five minutes, while two or three score stockholders filed in. Not one man more. Then Tip Foster came in with a brisk-looking man.

Tip looked as if he had been put through a wet wringer with his clothes on. He saw Mickey, started toward him, then stopped, as Lou Gramm ascended the rostrum and rapped for order.

Lou Gramm looked a little surprised at the small gathering.

"I had expected a full meeting," he said. "There may be some transportation tie-up. Perhaps we had better wait a few minutes."

The brisk, efficient-looking man with Tip Foster spoke up. "That won't be necessary. Most of the stockholders you expect won't show up." He paused, then said clearly, "I hold certificates and voting proxies for fifty-three per cent of the outstanding stock. Go ahead with the meeting."

Lou Gramm stiffened as if he had been shot. "You *what*?"

"I hold the stock and voting proxies—"

"You hold them for *whom*?"

"In the names of Mr. Mickey King and Mr. Dutch Niehoff."

Gramm turned white. "I don't believe you! Let me see that stock and proxies!"

Mickey's heart beat exultantly, and he pounded Dutch's knee as the brisk-looking man advanced to the rostrum. The man was followed by Tip Foster and two other strangers. The man told Lou Gramm curtly, "My name is Connel, of the law firm of Lyons, Connel and Connel. These men with me are gentlemen of the Court, here to testify to the validity of these documents."

THERE was a wild buzzing in the meeting hall, while Lou Gramm learned the worst. Then, his mask of composure finally and completely broken, Gramm rushed from the hall, frantically brandishing his fists.

"You can't pull a fast one like this on me, King!" he bellowed. "I'll get my lawyer! I'll show *you*—"

He exited to the loud, insulting noises which issued from Dutch Niehoff's accomplished lips. Noises known in the trade as the Bronx cheer.

The remainder of the meeting didn't take long. Mickey and Dutch, voting fifty-three per cent of the Dippers' stock, voted Lou Gramm out of office immediately, and voted Tip Foster into the executive vice presidency.

Then, with the loud, if unnecessary approval of the stockholders present, they voted to ask the bank to accept forty thousand dollars on their mortgage and extend the balance of the lien for a year, until the Dippers' earnings could pay it.

Tip Foster, grinning tiredly, said, "I think we can take care of that right now." He raised his voice: "Mr. Day!"

A ruddy, white-haired little man arose in the back of the hall. He was smiling. He said, "I think I can safely speak for my bank's Board when I say we will be glad to extend the balance of the mortgage. Frankly, this new turn of affairs comes as a happy surprise to us. I congratulate you, Mr. King, and hope to see you lead the Dipsy—pardon me, I mean the Dippers—into the next Little World's Series."

And that was that. Then Tip Foster, literally out on his feet, and grinning like the weariest but happiest man in the world, said, "Darn it, I kept myself goin' this last crazy week by promising myself a helluva toot when this was over. And now you dopes make me your executive vice prexy, and I suppose I'll have to stay on the wagon!"

"That's right," Mickey said. He looked puzzled. "Tip, you said last week you needed *inside* help to put this deal over. Did you get that inside help? And if so, where?"

Tip grinned again. "Maybe I'll answer that question sometime," he said. "Now, how about you hired hands scrambling out to the ball park? We've got to finish up near the top this year, if we're going to be able to clean up that mortgage."



Tip

THE Dipsydoos stayed hot during their series with the Oilers, taking three out of four from that snooty and unbelieving outfit. Then the Dips took to the great open spaces on a long road trip. With Lefty Young and Red Hale pitching great ball, and the rest of the club hustling like happy kids on a picnic, the Dipsydoos ran a winning streak to twelve straight games before they were stopped. They turned toward home in fifth place.

It was in the middle of July that Mickey caught his first daylight game. There hadn't been any fogginess on his eyes since that night he crashed into the dugout. He was tied with Ames, just behind the leader, Hack Nelson, for second place in the club's batting championship.

In his first daylight game, Mickey stopped his cold sweat after the fifth inning. His eyes were right again! The old *quick* sight—what they called "quick" or "double" sight—was back with him again. Mickey really began calling out to his ball players then, and they shook their fists and poured it on for him.

The Dipsydoos took two out of three from the Brownies; and on their last stop on their long road trip, they halted in

Lewiston long enough to knock the now worried Oilers out of first place by bowling them over in four straight.

The Dipsys came laughing home to their own ball yard in third place and climbing fast. They came laughing out of their clubhouse to engage the plainly apprehensive Cougars in the first game of a series, and the roaring, welcoming blast of cheers from the jammed stands was deafening.

Tip Foster came into the Dip's dugout while Mickey was completing the writing of the batting order for the umpire and announcer. Tip looked haler; ten years younger. He banged Mickey's back.

"Congratulations, boss! And look at those stands! Sold out! At this rate, we can pay off that puny mortgage by the end of the season!"

Tip's face shone with enthusiasm. He was exuberant.

"Yeah," Mickey said. "Yeah." In the last week or so, a strange idea had been buzzing in his bonnet, an idea that made him at once jumpy and depressed.

"Tip," Mickey asked humbly, "you told me, before we started this last road trip, you'd tell me sometime about—about that inside help you got for lining up those stockholders."

Tip looked solemn, but his eyes danced. "I said '*maybe*,'" he corrected. "And I say '*maybe*' again. After this game."



Mickey

So the Dips, with their new hurler—Herb Weaver, late of the Western Tornadoes—feeding 'em up to Mickey; and with

Hack Nelson and Ames putting on a batting spree for the delighted home fans—the Dips polished up the Cougars, 9-2. . . .

MICKEY showered and dressed, his fingers fumbling. He knew he couldn't put it off any longer; in spite of the meteoric rise of the Dipsydoos, he was too unhappy. Lou Gramm had left town, hadn't he? And Doris—what about Doris? . . .

Mickey came slowly down the club house steps to the street, alone. And then he stopped dead. Tip Foster stood there grinning. And beside Tip—lovely, smiling, but trembling a little too—Doris.

Mickey's face was a study as he stood there looking at her, incredulous. He didn't know what to say.

"Mickey," Tip chuckled, "permit me to introduce my 'inside help.' Without Doris, Gramm would have licked us. She knew just what stockholders to see. She had some other dope on Gramm too, and she worked night and day with me—"

Mickey stopped listening. His stormy eyes were light, quick now on Doris.

"Why?" he demanded. "Why did you do all that for me?"

"Why," Doris began softly, "because—" She stopped then, and she was half-laughing, half defiant. "Don't you dare try your slave-driving tactics on me, Mickey King!"

Mickey laughed too then, huskily.

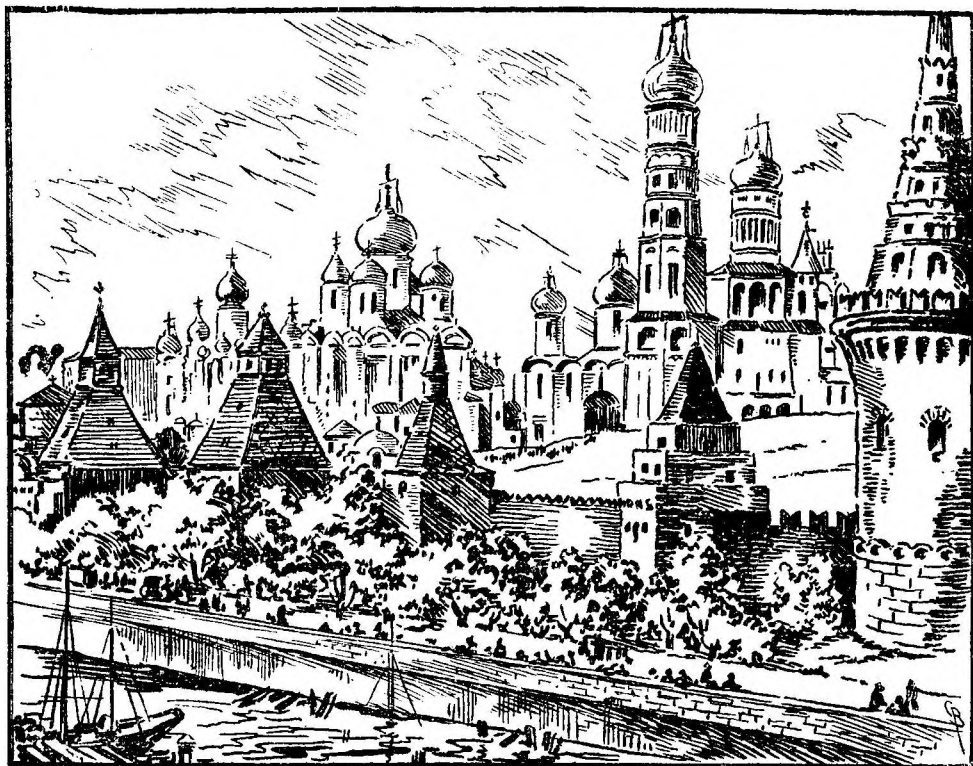
Behind them, Dutch Niehoff and Hack Nelson were clattering down the steps, their voices raised at each other hotly.

"If you'd got the lead outa your pants, dirty nose," Dutch yapped, "you'da had a triple instead of a double, you dope!"

"Yeah?" Hack yammered back. "Now you listen to me, you dirty old goat!" They went right past the trio of Mickey and Doris and Tip, not seeing them, their happy argument continuing lustily.

Tip chuckled to Mickey and Doris, "You two go right ahead and fight. I'm going home to kick my dog!"

(The End.)



Outlaws' Roost

Gar yelled, "All right, you rats!
Give it to us now!"



By
Frank
Carl
Young

IT TOOK the last ten of Jim Coe's twenty-eight restless years to do it. Ten years of recurrent vagabondage away from Piñon range in search of a more satisfying pattern for his uncomfortable life. Ten exciting years of pilgrimaging down the danger trails, hitting hard camps and towns, see-

ing more of the raw, ugly side of living than the beautiful. But now it was done.

At last Jim Coe believed he had found himself. For after all these years of hazardous wandering and search, he discovered

that the proper life pattern for him to follow had, from the beginning, been already cut out for him—right on the very range he had ridden away from. He knew now that he had been meant to be a respectable, honest cowman like his father, on the Coe range, the modest old Bar C.

But no one in Piñon range believed Jim would—or could—stay put—not after all those years on the danger trails. Some things just never completely worked out of a man's blood.

Today marked the second full month since Jim's return. And that morning, when he saddled up and rode down to the south range for the herd cut, the last thought in his mind was that he would ever again meet the Skurlock brothers, the most talked-about outlaws in Arizona.

But he did.

All morning Jim plunged his cutting horse into the loose herd, ate dust, and dragged out two-year-olds for the Bar C beef cut. As they had done since the day he came back, the Bar C hands watched Jim closely. Like the rest of the range—even to Fox-Fire, Jim's own father—they were skeptical, full of doubt.

"He won't stick," said Abe Benner, as they left the cook shack at noon. "It ain't in him. He's helled around too much. He'll pull out before the week's over."

Long Wes Markman nodded and built his cigarette carefully. "What can you expect? When he was a kid and old Fox-Fire was up-trail half the year, Jim always hung around with the Skurlock kids over in the Pagosa Hills. He grew up with them. Why, I'll bet there's more of their kind of bad blood in his veins than Fox-Fire's!"

"I won't take that bet," Abe said.

Toward mid-afternoon, Jim went to the cavy and changed his worn mount for a fresh bay bronc. As he slipped into his saddle, his blue-gray eyes wandered southward. In the distance he could see the uneven rims of the lonely hills.

He didn't ride back to the herd, he rode past it. And as he flashed past, more than one pair of eyes followed him—especially those of Long Wes and Abe.

"What's that look like to you?" asked Long Wes, coiling his rope. "Hell, this cutting ain't done!"

"It looks to me exactly the same as it does to you," replied Abe, shaking his head with disgust and spurring into the herd. "If Jim ain't pulling out again, you get my next month's pay."

"Something tells me I'll collect!" the other drawled.

LATE that afternoon, Jim pulled his bay bronc to a halt deep in the Pagosa Hills, ten miles southeast of the Bar C. The crooked shadows of mesquite and sage grew longer and deeper on the uneven carpet of gramma grass. A mild breeze lifted. It rustled through piñon-juniper and oak rising above the tumbling slopes of the jumbled hills, a whispering forecast of the cool, starlit night to come.

Jim forgot that it was late. He forgot that there were ten miles between him and supper back at the Bar C. Nor did it matter that he had inexcusably drifted away from the cutting.

All he was conscious of was the strange, magnetic pull of these lonely hills. He had felt that attraction ever since he was a foot-loose boy and first came here to play; to spend great, reckless hours with the Skurlock brothers, Gar and Curly Tom; to listen to the wild, bloody tales of their hellhound father, who had once been a member of Sam Bass' bunch, but was pardoned.

Here, too, came little Mina Owens, as wild and daring as any of them.

From the time they were nine until they reached sixteen, the four children had practically raised themselves. All were motherless, with fathers much too busy to bother about them. A fast pony had made the miles to such an exciting rendezvous only an hour distant for Jim.

Now he let his lean, whiplike body fall slack in the saddle. His low-strapped gun glintingly reflected the dying glow of the sun. With a deep, wistful expression softening his swart, mature features, he regarded the tangled hills huddled around him and rode on.

Entering a broad, parklike draw, with

piñon and oak covering the brushless slopes, Jim swung around a bend and was suddenly on the exciting playground of his reckless youth. The old Skurlock hut and small barn near it stood far up on the slope to his left, screened by the trees.

There wouldn't be anyone at the Skurlock hut now. At least, not Gar and Curly Tom. Nowadays those two wild boys were the leaders of the notorious gang of rustlers operating down in Pinal and Pima Counties.

Their outlaw career was a natural one, Jim had long realized. With their crude background and outlaw heritage, they could hardly have become anything else but lawless, quick-shooting hellions.

There was a tiny, rock-lined springhouse near the foot of the slope. Thirsty, Jim dismounted and strode toward the dense clump of barberry brush that shielded the spring from the trail. Soft, grass-matted sod hushed his footsteps.

Suddenly, when he was ten yards from the brush-clump, there came the splash of water and the thud of something wooden on rock. Instantly wary, Jim was puzzled that anyone should be around. Angling stealthily to the left, he moved forward, tense and expectant. When he came abreast of the brush and spring, he paused abruptly. His eyes narrowed.

A TALL man was bent over the spring, dipping up a pail of cool water. His back was to Jim. Well-filled shell-loops glistened in the lowering sunlight. Powerful shoulders stretched a blue shirt tightly, and a thick, wide neck, muscle-corded, sun-yellowed and leathery, glistened with sweat.

Jim, curious, took a step forward—and stepped on a dry twig.

There was an instantaneous burst of action at the spring. The pail plummeted out of the man's fist. Before it could smack the surface of the gurgling water, he had whirled and pulled his gun with blinding swiftness.

The moment he had stepped on the twig, Jim had expected this. And now, as the other's gun snapped up, level and glinting,

Jim's blurring fist simultaneously came waist-high—filled.

For a tense second the rigid guns of the two men faced and threatened each other.

The man in front of Jim's gun was about his own age. He was thick-chested and narrow-hipped, powerful. He had a broad, weathered face, with a jutting jaw that was a defiant invitation to fight. Thick, shaggy brows formed a dark T-bar to the short, straight line of his blunt nose. Shining out from under them, like two hot yellow fires in the depths of dark caverns, were a pair of the fiercest, and most resentful eyes Jim had even seen.

Recognition suddenly burst upon them both.

"Gar Skurlock!" cried Jim, and his gun at once tilted down.

"Jim Coe!"

The big outlaw instantly put up his gun. He took a quick step forward, hand outstretched. "Why, damn you, Jim!" he said. "Sneaking up on me nearly got you killed! How did you know Curly Tom and me were back?"

"I didn't," replied Jim, sticking out his own hand. "I only trailed in from Kansas a couple of months ago myself. Just happened to mosey down around here today, that's all."

For a fleet instant, the sharp eyes of Gar Skurlock clouded with doubt, and then cleared.

Jim caught that momentary fleck of doubt; also the passing of it. And he knew *why* it had passed.

Many times during his years of vagabondage, his wandering trail had crossed the crooked trails of Gar and Curly Tom. Sometimes he even spent short periods with them, while they were laying off, or on the duck—days of hunting and fishing, and just lazing around, talking of kid days.

He'd even been to their secret headquarters, called the "Roost," far down in the Cerbero Mountains, just north of the Border. He knew most of their gang. And they knew him, knew that he was an old friend of the Skurlocks and would keep his mouth shut, even though he refused to tie in with them.

Jim knew more about the Skurlock brothers, probably, than any other man. They began to steal when Curly Tom, three years younger than Gar, was about fifteen. It was just petty thefts at first. Then it was saddles, ropes, pistols.

For a while they rode with their lawless, hellhound father. He taught them the finer points. After a deputy killed him, they struck out for bigger stuff, collected a gang, and engaged in large-scale rustling.

JIM never championed their cause. Neither did he advise them against their lawless way of living. For, until recently, he had always been in the middle—in doubt himself. A man must live life as he himself saw it, right or wrong. The Skurlocks had always seen it one way. Now, at last, Jim clearly saw it another.

That was why, when he gripped the outlaw's big hand now, it didn't give Jim the pleasure he anticipated. It was like touching something he liked, used to be fond of, but which he knew wasn't as clean as it should be. Yet, for the sake of their boyhood and mutual trust, he gripped it hard.

After all, they had grown up together, almost like brothers.

"Ain't bad, seeing you again, Jim," said Gar, retrieving his pail and dipping it full of water. "But I didn't count on it. Didn't aim to take a chance on seeing anybody up here except Mina."

Jim dug for his tobacco and papers. From boyhood up, he and Gar had amiably vied for the attentions of Mina Owens. Tantalizingly, she had always left them both in doubt.

"How come?" he asked, licking his smoke into shape.

The shaggy-browed outlaw eased the water pail to the ground. "Needed a month's rest, for one thing," replied Gar, striking a match to light the cigarette stabbing out from Jim's lips. "We pulled a tough job down below and things got a little hot. Decided to split up for a spell and then gather again in six weeks, down at the Roost."

Jim sucked hard on his querly, staring at

Gar closely. "So you two hit for home. Ain't counting on a job up here, are you?"

Gar's eyes snapped back quickly. "You know better than that, Jim! Curly and me were born on this range. We figure on sticking close to the old hut, keeping out of sight and resting up. We don't aim to have anybody getting hep to us being back up here, except Mina."

Jim frowned. "What about Mina, Gar?"

Gar's harsh eyes softened. His face lit up. "I've been writing her. You know how it's always been between us, Jim. When Curly and me head back south, I'm taking Mina with me. I can set her up grand. down there near the Roost."

The cigarette fell slack between Jim's lips. Gar's words had come suddenly, and hit hard. One of the reasons Jim had returned to Piñon range for good was Mina Owens. Even as a kid he had loved her.

Gar turned his head, looked up the slope, through the wide-spaced trees. "Come on up to the shack, Jim. Guess you'd like to see Curly Tom. Luke Draffan's here, too. You remember Draffan. He's sticking here for a day or two, then heading north to some friends for a spell, before we gather down at the Roost. Come on, Curly'll be glad to see you."

At first Jim meant to refuse. Then he reluctantly agreed. But he wondered what the boys on the Bar C and Piñon range would say, could they see him now. . . .

THE hut was a single-room, log affair, about fourteen by twenty feet, with only one side window and a front door. It squatted in the middle of a small, grassy clearing. Smoke curled from an elbow of tin pipe sticking out the side.

Jim waited for Gar to set the pail of water on the wash bench outside. Then he followed the big outlaw up the three worn steps into the hut's gloomy interior.

"Company coming," announced Gar, striding into the shabby, ill-kept room. "Sheathe the hardware, Curly."

Jim came to a slack, loose-armed halt a yard inside the door. Curly Tom was standing before the rusty iron stove in the back left-hand corner. He had a big fork in one

hand. In the other was one of his two big-nouted Colts. It was tilted waist-high, covering the door. From a large pot on the stove came the aroma of boiling beef. Jim guessed that somewhere on their backtrail a slow-elked steer was feeding the buzzards.

Jim swung his eyes to the right. An old leather couch was pushed close to the wall. Sitting on the edge of it, his long, sleeve-gartered arms resting on his thighs, was Luke Draffan, a pearl-handled gun in his hard fist.

"What is this, Gar?" demanded Draffan, as the elder brother spur-clinked to the rickety table in the center of the room. "Thought this place was safe—!" Then Draffan recognized Jim. "Oh—you!" He sheathed his gun and stood up, grinning coldly.

"Howdy, Draffan," said Jim, shrugging away an inexplicable chill.

Draffan had always effected him that way, the few times he had met him. The outlaw was about thirty, his face thin, sharp, wedge-shaped. There was a deep, ugly scar in his neck where a bullet had been cut out years ago. His hair was pitch-black and parted exactly in the middle. And now the outlaw's protruding, heavy-lidded eyes were regarding Jim with a mixture of caution and distrust.

Jim read the same expression in Curly Tom's eyes. "Hello, Curly." Crossing to the stone fireplace between the iron stove and the front wall, Jim leaned his back against the face of it. "See you're back on home grass. How's it feel?"

Curly Tom chucked the fork into the stew, sheathed his gun and cocked his hands on his hips. A thin smile lifted the corners of his firm mouth.

"Yeah, Jim," he replied and Jim noticed that some of the old warmth was gone from Curly Tom's manner. "We're back for a short spell, all right. But what brings you here? How did you know?"

Jim caught the ring of disapproval in Curly's voice. Curly had changed, become harder, more surly. He was slighter in build than Gar, thinner of face, but had the same stiff fighting jaw, flashing eye and jet-black hair.

Although double-gun-rigged, Gar could do more with one gun than Curly could with two. Curly was more vicious, more hot-tempered and lawless. He was the schemer, the planner, the one who put the bugs into Gar's bonnet, the "big ideas." But it was Gar's strength that carried them out.

Gar worshiped Curly.

"I didn't know," Jim told Curly. "As I told Gar, I just happened down around here today."

THERE was a long, significant moment of silence. Jim saw it in Curly's and Draffan's faces. They didn't quite believe him. Even Gar looked away.

"We didn't figure on you being up here on Piñon range, Jim," said Curly Tom, turning back to the stew and stirring it. "You've always been ramming around, looking for the right game to get into. How come you're back?"

"Yeah—how about *that*, Jim?" said Gar pointedly.

Never before had Jim felt uneasy in their presence. He did now, and he knew why. He saw their ugly business for what it really was, saw it more clearly than ever before.

"I'm back because I've found my game," he told them. "It's been here all the time, only I couldn't see it before."

"What is it?" asked Gar.

"The game of raising cattle and kids and respect. My wild days are over, Gar. Finished."

Curly Tom abruptly stopped stirring the stew. Draffan tensed. Gar's eyes suddenly narrowed, glittered.

"I see now why you never went the whole way with us," said Gar, rubbing his watch chain with nervous fingers. "You always hung on the fence, always let us think you'd fall on our side."

"I was never *on* the fence, Gar," Jim told him. "I just happened to trail around, looking over the fence to see what was on the other side, and what it was all about."

Curly Tom snapped, "And you didn't like what you saw—is that it?"

Jim Coe hesitated; then: "That's just

about it, Curly. But for a long time I didn't know whether I did or not. Now I do."

Gar Skurlock pulled uneasily at his pants' belt, then looked squarely at Jim. "So that kind of makes us enemies now, eh, Jim?"

Jim had expected it. Gar was like that. Always wanted to know just where and how he stood—exactly.

"No, Gar. Not enemies. It just puts us on different sides. You see, I'll never forget that I grew up with you two buckos. In a way, we kind of mean something to each other. I've learned to savvy you and your kind a lot, but without playing the game. It's just that, from now on out. I'm definitely on the side of the fence I started from. I didn't like what I saw on your side, that's all. My tumbleweeding days are over. It's time now for me to settle down and get married."

IT WAS a long speech for Jim and a long one to hand *them*. But they had listened. They had taken it all in carefully. And now they seemed to be weighing him more than ever, with perhaps even more doubt and distrust.

"Sounds like you were counting on Mina, too, Jim," said Gar.

Jim smiled. "You knew I always did, Gar. She knows it, too. But she's still holding out, like always. I know, because I asked her just last week."

"It's me, Jim, I tell you," explained Gar. "Like I said, she'll go back with me and Curly when we pull out for the Roost."

Jim turned and clumped to the door. "Maybe you're right, Gar. Maybe she will."

The big youthful outlaw glanced questioningly at Curly Tom and Draffan. Then his eyes swung to Jim's retreating back. "How about having chuck with us, Jim?"

Jim paused in the doorway, turned and faced them. "No, thanks," he said. "I figure it would be kind of hard swallowing for all us, Gar. I'll just get along on up home. *Adios, amigos.*"

The moment the tinkle of Jim's spurs faded in the distance, Curly Tom grabbed his big brother's arm in a tight grip.

"Hell, Gar! This is bad!" he cried. "Jim's changed! I don't trust him any more!"

Draffan spat and slumped down on the couch. "Me, either," he growled. "He used to be all right. But you heard him. He's all law and prayer book *now!*"

Gar shook his head. "Hell, no! You're just boogery. Jim Coe savvies us. He said so. He'll keep his mouth shut just as tight as ever. Nobody'll ever know we're laying over here."

"You're a damn fool, Gar!" snapped Curly. "We're in a spot! Jim's got every reason in the world to blow off about us. What about Mina? He's back for her—and so are you. Jim would be a damn idiot not to try to trip you up and get you out of the way. And one word to Sheriff Jock Little can do it! Gar, I'm going to stop him!"

The seed of doubt had been planted in Gar Skurlock's slow, hard mind. The yellow fires dimmed in his cavernous eyes. They became dull, murderous discs of opaque ice—a bad sign for any man the big outlaw believed treacherous.

Then, as if in self-reproach, he suddenly shrugged off the feeling. His fist came down heavily on the table.

"Cut it!" he bellowed. "That ain't Jim Coe's way. For years he's had chances to turn us in, but he didn't. And he won't now."

Draffan rose from the couch and purred. "You *are* a fool, Gar. There is always a first time for everything!"

Gar whirled on the bullet-scarred outlaw. "Shut up, Draffan!" Then he swung around on Curly. "Get the grub out! And no more of this talk!"

Draffan looked at them both. A cynical smile lifted the corners of his treacherous, slit-like mouth. Most men only *thought* they knew their friends. . . .

IT WAS a surprise to many of the Bar C hands when Jim racked up to the corral that night and threw his saddle on the ground. Especially to Long John and Slim.

Jim told no one where he had been. But it was impossible to ignore a feeling of

guilt in possessing the knowledge that the two most-wanted outlaws in the state were holed up ten miles away.

He lay awake most of the night, tormented by the thought of Mina going back with Gar. Gar would be good to her, of course. But Gar's kind of life wouldn't.

The whole of the next day, Jim worked like three men, wearing out horses as well as himself. It kept his mind off Mina; off the fact that she had always shown a slight preference for Gar. That night he bade old Fox-Fire an early good night, turned in dog-weary and promptly fell asleep.

He seemed to have just closed his eyes. Suddenly the chopping thunder of hoofs pierced his unconsciousness. Elbowing himself erect in bed, he glanced toward the open bedroom window. By the slant of moonlight shafting through it, he judged it to be around midnight.

From outside came the jingling of bridle chains, the creaking of stiff saddle leather and the blowing of winded horses. Gritty, spiked heels thumped across the porch and a fist crashed heavily against the door.

Springing out of bed, Jim ran to the window. Down below, he made out five mounted men and a riderless horse. The black hat-shadows made identification of the men impossible.

Puzzled by such a night visitation, Jim climbed into his clothes and strapped on his gun. At this instant, his father came racing up and pounded on his door.

"Jim! Wake up!" came Fox-Fire's excited voice.

Jim opened the door. His father stood in the hall, a lantern in his hand. In the dancing yellow light, the ring of white hair around his bald head acquired the appearance of a halo above his round, fleshy face.

"What's up, Dad?"

"It's the sheriff, Jim! He wants you!" Fox-Fire reached out, gripped Jim's arm fearfully. "Boy, what have you done?"

"Nothing." And Jim moved past his father and quickly went downstairs.

SHERIFF JOCK LITTLE was pacing back and forth across the moonlit porch when Jim came out. Little was a big man,

heavy-set, with fine, clear eyes—and an inflexible sense of duty.

"Glad to see you're dressed, Jim," said the lawman jerkily. "We can leave at once. The Skurlock boys are holed up in their old home. We're going down to get them. Now."

"What!" cried Jim. For an instant he felt flushed with guilt, as if, in some uncanny way, his secret had escaped him. "How do you know this?"

"I was tipped off. Somebody rode past Tol Martin's ranch tonight and threw a rock through his window. There was a note strung to it. It said Gar and Curly Tom had been spotted down at their hut and to notify me. Come on, Jim. We're wasting time. Got plenty of ammunition?"

Jim stared at the lawman as if he didn't see him. He felt shocked, almost as badly as if he had been asked to turn and shoot his own father.

He had always known that some day Gar and Curly would be captured or killed—it *had* to end that way, and he had accepted that eventuality. Someone was bound to spot them, betray and turn them in, somewhere, sometime. And now it had happened.

But why did it have to happen here, on Piñon range? Who had seen them? Why did he have to be home when it did happen? And why, most of all, did he have to be asked to become a party to their destruction?

"I'm not going with you, Jock," he said.

The lawman's eyes flashed. "Not going?" he growled. "I'm taking only picked men, Jim, and you're going to be one of them."

Jim shook his head. "You're wrong, Jock. I'm not going. I can't! I grew up with Gar and Curly Tom. They used to be like brothers to me. No matter what they are today, I can't forget that. Count me out!"

There was an uneasy stir among the waiting riders. Jim heard someone mumble, "Told you so!" He stared at them, found it possible now to recognize them. They *were* picked men.

There was "Doc" Keane, an old army surgeon with guts. Beside him was Jock's young deputy, Ed Price, recently married, eager to make good. Moonlight glinted on

another badge, and Jim made out the clean-cut features of Al Marsh, the U. S. Deputy Marshal from over in Wolf Basin. Next to Marsh was "Two-Shave" Wade Nugent, an old Indian fighter who lived alone and raised horses. And just behind the latter, was Herb Webb, who ran the livery in Piñon and badly needed a needle on his shabby, tattered vest. He too was a good man in any kind of fight.

Yes, Jock Little had picked his men well, thought Jim. The kind of stout, fearless men it would take to round up Gar and Curly. The kind of men he had come home to win the respect of, to work and fraternize with.

Yet with his very first opportunity, he must reject, must turn them down!

"Count you out?" stormed the sheriff. "Hell, Jim, I need you more than anybody! And it's just because you *did* hell around with the Skurlocks. There's nobody who knows those boys or those hills better than you."

Torn with conflicting emotions, Jim started to turn back into the house. "It's no use, Jock. I'm not joining any pack that's out to kill Gar and Curly Tom Good Lord, man! I'm only human!"

THE sheriff suddenly reached out and caught Jim roughly by the shoulder. "And I'm the sheriff of Piñon," the lawman growled. "And I want you down there!" He quickly reached into his pocket. The next instant he had stabbed a badge on Jim's shirt. "Take that off, or refuse again, and I'll hold you for malignant contempt of the law!"

Jim's fists knotted. He fought to control himself, fought to remember that he had come back to Piñon to win the admiration of these men, to serve them, to pattern himself after them and to flourish and marry. But this was still a hell of a righteous duty to be compelled to perform—gunning men you were raised with!

Unless—

"All right. If it's just that you want me along, I'll go," he snapped, seeing the only way out. "But I'm not going down there to fight. Nobody this side of hell can make

me join a pack and pull my gun on a pair of boys I've slept and ate with, boys who trust me! Get that straight. I'll go—sure—but for only one reason, and that's to be there with a wagon to bring back their bodies—or the bodies of any of your men. Because you'll never take them alive. I know!"

Sheriff Jock Little was not an unreasonable man, nor an inhuman one. "Have it your way," he replied, shrugging and walking back to his horse. "Just so's you're around in case those crazy hills fool us. Get your wagon hitched. I want that Skurlock hut surrounded before dawn."

Sick and choked up, a hundred boyhood scenes flashing through his mind, Jim dolefully shuffled down to the barn, pulled out the spring-wagon and hitched a pair of bays to it. Gathering up the reins, he climbed to the hard, flat seat and called to the team.

Like the driver of an as yet unfilled hearse, he somberly followed the grim cavalcade of horsemen filing southward through the moonlight toward the Pagosa Hills. . . .

THEY reached the entrance to the broad, park-like ravine in the hushed, dim hour before dawn. It was as close as the sheriff would permit Jim or the men to come with the wagon or the horses.

Jim stayed on the seat of the wagon, his shoulders slumped forward. Jock Little instructed his men to load their pockets with plenty of ammunition. After that, Jim saw them vanish into the darkness to take separate positions around the hut on the slope and to wait for dawn.

The silent minutes dragged like hours. The suspense began to knot Jim's nerves. It was like waiting for the hangman to drop the trap-door.

With the first flush of dawn, Jim leaped from the wagon. He couldn't stand this isolation any longer. He didn't want to see the raid; but he knew his tormented mind would magnify the poignancy of it a dozen times if he stayed behind and waited until it was over.

He moved up the slope the short distance

to the tiny springhouse where he had met Gar two days before. From behind it he could see the positions of the attacking party. It was easy to locate nearly all of them, behind their various breastworks of tree-trunk, down log, woodpile and barn. Several turned and gave him glances of reproach for refusing to join them.

It was not a pretty sight to Jim Coe. But it wasn't for him to interfere, for any law-abiding man to intercede. Gar and Curly had picked their game long ago. They knew the risks, and now the game had played out—as the outlaw game always did.

And yet Jim had to admit a desire to stop it—this raid.

It grew brighter. Jock Little, behind a tree ten yards in front of Jim, looked up at the sky, and then at his men. After nodding to those he could see, he cupped one hand to the side of his mouth and called:

"Hello—the house!"

Jim's pulse leaped. Every muscle tensed, ached. His eyes riveted anxiously on the door of the hut, couldn't leave it.

There was no answer.

"Hello in there!" bellowed Jock Little again. "Hello—the house!"

Still no response. No sign of movement. Nothing.

Jim suddenly felt himself tingling with wild hope. Had Gar and Curly become boogery the other day? Had they packed up and pulled out? Had the tip to Jock Little been a false one, one that, perhaps, Gar and Curly themselves had sent out as a mocking jest?

And then Sheriff Little called out once again, punctuating his words with the crash of his sky-aimed pistol.

THE first time Sheriff Little shouted, Gar Skurlock blinked his sleepy eyes and flung his stocking feet over the edge of his lower bunk. With the lawman's second hail, Gar reached up and shook Curly Tom, who snored in the wall-bunk above.

"Curly!" he hissed. "Out of them blankets! Quick! We got company!"

Curly snorted and shook his eyes open.

"What?" he grunted. Then, in the weak dawn light, he saw Gar pulling on his clothes and reaching for his gun. The next instant Jock Little's voice rose outside for the third time:

"Hello—the house!" There immediately followed the crash of his six-gun.

Curly Tom came out of the bunk fast. He lit on the floor, catlike. "Answer him, Gar!" he hissed, frenziedly grabbing pants, boots and double-gun belts.

Gun in fist, Gar went to the door and opened it a crack. "Hello!" he called, his eyes raking the dawn-lit grove.

From down the slope came the sheriff's answering voice. "Skurlock, this is the sheriff! I've got your place completely surrounded with dead-shots! You haven't a chance. You and your brother better come out and surrender!"

Gar's sun-leathered face paled. His fierce eyes widened and shot Curly an anxious glance.

"We're trapped, kid!"

Curly's eyes met his. They were brimming angrily with an I-told-you-so expression.

"Stall them!" hissed Curly. "I'll be damned if I'll give in to a pack of badges without a fight—and not even then!"

Curly dived to his knees before the lower bunk. From under it he dragged forth a pair of rifles and saddle-bags in which were boxes of cartridges.

Gar pressed his mouth to the door-crack again and called: "All right, Jock! We'll be out just as soon as we can dress!" Closing the door quickly, he slammed a heavy wooden bar in place.

Gar turned back to the center of the room. He kept biting his lips, opening and closing his free fist, his broad face ugly in its bewilderment and fury.

"Who did it?" he grated. "Who's the dirty skunk that tipped them off? Nobody knew we were here! Nobody *could* know!"

Curly Tom broke open a box of shells and looked up. "The hell they couldn't!" he snarled. "What about Jim Coe? I told you he changed, Gar. He gave us a fine speech, then went dirty and doublecrossed us!"

"Shut that up!" rasped Gar, whirling. "Jim wouldn't do it! Hell, we were kids together—all of us!"

"You fool! But there ain't time to argue with you."

Curly laid loaded rifles on the table and pulled his two six-guns. As he feverishly filled the safety chamber in each, he grated:

"I wish Draffan had stuck around, instead of trailing on north yesterday. With all them skunks outside, we're going to need an extra hand in here!" He paused, looked hard, questioningly at his brother. "Is it to the finish with you, Gar?"

Gar rubbed his mighty fists down his thighs, his eyes burning into Curly's. "To the finish, kid!" he replied grimly. "But if we get a chance to make a break for it, we're taking it."

THAT suited Curly. A fierce smile bared his teeth. Pulling his knife, he darted across the room and attacked the mud chinking between the wall-logs.

Grabbing up the leather couch, Gar dragged it before the window and upended it. Then he helped Curly dig out the mud chinking for port-holes. When he finished, he made the rounds, peering intently through each one.

Ten minutes had passed since Gar called to Sheriff Little. It was awfully quiet out there, peaceful. But Gar knew they were there, waiting, and it wasn't hard to pick them out, even to recognize some of them. For, since hostilities had not yet begun, the besiegers were slightly lax in keeping themselves well concealed.

"I'll bet Jock's behind that big oak tree—" Gar broke off suddenly. He had just seen a face down the slope. His own paled. "Curly—Curly, you're right! It was Jim! I—I just saw him! He's with them—down behind the springhouse! Why, damn the betraying—"

At this instant the voice of Deputy Marshal Al Marsh cut through the thick silence gripping the slope:

"We waited long enough! Do you aim to surrender or not?"

Gar clicked down the hammer of his

gun and roared, "No, damn you! If you want us, come in and get us!"

There was another minute of tense silence. And then: "That's all we want to know!" The voice of Jock Little turned fierce. "Turn it loose, boys!"

JIM dug his fingers into the rock-wall of the springhouse, clamped his lips and muttered an oath under his breath.

The next instant the silence of the quiet little grove was shattered by the splitting crackle of two, three rifles and the jarring roar of .45 six-guns. A hail of lead splintered into the logs and chugged through the mud-chinking. A bullet smashed through the couch, making an odd popping sound as it burst from the heavy leather cover.

Jim saw Sheriff Jock Little cautiously edge his pistol-filled fist out from the side of the big oak. A spurt of flame instantly speared from a port-hole in the front of the hut.

Jock Little cursed. His gun-arm snapped down, his pistol falling from it. A groove of blood instantly appeared along his forearm, deepening near the elbow. The slug had seared the bone, and for five minutes his entire right arm was paralyzed.

"Thanks, Gar," Jim heard the lawman hiss, as he stooped and cautiously retrieved his gun with his left hand. "You always did have eyes like a hawk! But they'll see their last today—or I will!"

Harassed and beset with wretchedness, Jim sank down behind the grassy mound of dirt and rock and buried his face in his hands.

What could he do? In a way, he wanted to help Gar and Curly. But he couldn't: not if he ever meant to have the respect of Piñon range. Gar and Curly were wrong; criminals. They had been almost all their lives. They had to pay.

Yet they once had been chuck and saddle mates of his. . . .

Suddenly Jim sprang to his feet and ran up behind the sheriff. "Stop all this, Jock!" he cried. "I'm going in there and talk to them! I know them! I can make

them see they haven't got a chance! Maybe I can bring them out without anybody getting hurt at all!"

"The hell you say, Jim!" snarled the lawman with sharp hostility. "I ain't sure of you. You'd likely enough get in there and swing your gun in with theirs!"

Jim gasped. "You don't think that I'd do—?"

"You haven't proven different—yet!" rasped Jock Little, as a slug whined past the tree. "Now get out of here—unless you want to turn your gun loose on that hut up there and show you're with us, not them!"

Choking back the words that leaped to his tongue, Jim turned and went back to the springhouse.

The attack kept up all morning. The posse incessantly poured lead into the walls of the hut, through the chinking, the couch-clogged window, every little hole they could see. Once there came a short, sharp yell from the hut; then a noise that sounded like someone kicking, as if hit. Yet the return fire from the port-hole never diminished, never tired, but became even more furious.

And the springhouse became the Skurlocks' favorite target. . . .

TIME and again Jim pressed his fists against his ears to shut out the rattle and roar of gunfire. But he couldn't shut out the ugly picture in his mind of what was probably happening inside the old Skurlock hut.

He knew it couldn't be less than a bullet-laced chamber of horror. Powder-smoke must glut it. And weaving through it, choking and gasping, would be Curly and Gar, creeping around the lead-splattered walls. Curly and Gar, sweat-streaked and red-eyed, cursing and triggering—trapped and helpless. And knowing it!

He knew that one of them must be hit, might be bleeding badly. He knew that no matter how bad it was, they'd keep on, never stop. Crooked and lawless though they were, they had guts, and the determination never to be licked. There

could be only one end to this battle.

The sun rose higher. The heat and light of it slanted down into the smoke-hazed grove. Jim carefully raised his head above the springhouse.

At this instant there came a scream of pain from behind the rocks and brush on his right, where Federal Deputy Al Marsh had taken up a position. For a moment there was a wild thrashing over there—and then an abrupt, significant stillness.

"The skunks!" he heard Jock Little roar. "They just got Al! How much longer can they keep this up?"

Jim trembled, closed his eyes and sank down again. He felt almost as if it were his own fault. He had known Al Marsh well, liked and admired him. And now he remembered the little family over in Wolf Basin that would wait in vain for Al's return.

It was amazing to every man under Jock Little's command that the Skurlocks could hold out so well, so gamely. Several even expressed reluctant admiration for the valiant fight they were putting up. Yet every man there, Jim knew, was desperately anxious to fire the bullets that would end their lives.

Every man except Jim Coe.

The hot afternoon wore on. There was no let-up in the assault, no peace for Gar and Curly. With the sun high and hot, Jim knew the hut must be a reeking, powder-choked inferno, each hour a nightmarish day of endless movement, of dodging, crawling, reloading, and each man undoubtedly wounded, bleeding.

A dozen times Little called to them to surrender. And a dozen times Jim heard Gar or Curly shriek back to go to hell and to come and get them!

When the sun dropped and the shadows began to lengthen, Jock Little called in Ed Price, his deputy. Together the two men crept down the slope to the shelter of the springhouse. The sheriff shot Jim a narrow, hostile glance. Then he drank deeply, rinsed his sweaty face and turned to his young deputy.

"We've got to move them out of there



"Jump!" shouted Gar. The stableman stumbled over the side of the wagon

quick, Ed," said the lawman, readjusting the neckerchief around his bleeding arm. "It's getting late and we've used up most of our six hundred rounds of ammunition. If they hold out until dark, they're apt to slip out on us.

"When we came into the hills this morning, we passed Jeb Atkinson's hay farm. Ride down there and get a wagon, plenty of hay and coal-oil. Tell him we'll pay for everything. If we can't shoot the Skurlocks out, we'll burn them out."

Jim clenched his fists and swallowed hard. This would be the end of it. A man can withstand a bath of lead, but not fire!

Jock Little's curt voice interrupted his anguished thoughts. "You got objections to this, too, Jim?"

Jim looked at him squarely. "What do you think?"

The sheriff rammed fresh shells into his gun, snapped the cylinder and eyed him condemningly. "I think you should never have come back to Piñon range. You're no good on it, Jim Coe!"

Jim flushed. He knew exactly what the lawman meant, knew that the rest must feel the same way. But how could he act differently?

DEPUTY Ed Price came back half an hour later with the wagon, hay and oil. The sheriff called in Two-Shave and the two joined Price, leaving Doc Keane

and Herb Webb to keep peppering the front and back of the hut.

The wagon was taken to a sheltered place, the hay unloaded. After the wagon was uncoupled, the coupling pole was fastened to the rear axel-tree. Oak fence rails were procured and lashed to the hind axel-tree in an upright position, the tops extending about a foot above a man's head. Large bundles of hay were roped in front of the rails and drenched with oil.

A few minutes later Jim saw the three men pushing the "go-devil" up the slope along the path, shielded by the breastworks. Nearing the hut, they swung it around and pushed it up against the wall that had no window. Doc Keane and Herb Webb drove lead into the port-holes as fast as they could fire.

With pounding pulse, Jim watched Two-Shave and Ed Price throw coal-oil over the cabin wall, then cut the ropes and let the hay down against it. Pulling the breastworks back a little, Price struck a match and set the reeking hay on fire. In an instant the hut was in flames. Two-Shave and Ed Price scurried back to their positions.

Two minutes—! Four minutes—*Five!*

The shooting from the flaming port-holes finally slackened, then stopped altogether.

"Come out and leave your guns inside!" yelled Jock Little.

Cold sweat trickled down Jim's spine. His eyes seemed riveted to the door of the hut. If he knew Gar and Curly as well as he thought—

The fiery door suddenly opened.

The next instant Gar and Curly Tom came stumbling out, slowly, defiantly, locked closely together, with blazing guns in the fists of their outside arms!

Even at this distance it was plain to Jim that Gar was supporting Curly. His right arm was under Curly's shoulder. Curly's arm was hooked around Gar's neck, his legs dragging. From the hips down, Curly was a wet, bloody thing.

Above the crackle of flames and the roar of their own guns came Gar's yell:

"All right, you rats! Give it to us now! Come out in the clear, like us, and—"

As lead from their Colts whined defiantly but futilely through the grove at unseen targets, two rifles cracked on Jim's left, one on his right, Jock Little's just a few yards in front of him.

And then, quite suddenly, there were no more guns roaring in the quiet little grove in the Pagosa Hills. . . .

WITH a cry on his lips, Jim sprang up the slope. He reached them seconds before the others crowded around.

Curly Tom was shot to ribbons. The features of his hard, young face were stiff with death, twisted with pain. Besides three other wounds, there was one directly over his heart, and both thighs had been pierced with one ball, received earlier in the fight. How he had managed to keep going all day was beyond the men of the posse.

Gar's rugged face was a wet, crimson mask. There were half a dozen superficial wounds over his big body, a bad one in his chest near the armpit, and the one just above his eye and to the side, which must have brought him down when they stepped from the hut.

"Well, Jim?" came the biting voice of Jock Little. "Anything to say about it?"

Jim straightened up slowly. There were honest tears in his eyes as he searched the powder-stained faces of the men encircling him. Two-Shave Nugent and Ed Price bit their lips and looked away. Doc Keane adjusted his smeary specs. Herb Webb, who had been hit badly in the side, was the only one besides Jock Little whose eyes didn't waver.

"What is there to say, Sheriff?" came Jim's choked voice. "They're both dead—now."

They laid Curly Tom and Gar on the floor of Jim's spring-wagon, with the body of Al Marsh beside them. After they covered them with blankets, Doc Keane administered to the wounds of the party, and said Herb Webb wasn't fit to sit a saddle.

After that they went to the barn and recovered the horses and saddles belong-

ing to the two outlaws. The saddles they threw into the wagon. The two broncs they tethered to the tail-gate.

The sun was not far setting when they left the ravine in the hills and slowly headed back for Piñon. Jim drove ahead of the others. He sat the seat of his wagon like a whip-lashed figure, Herb Webb slumped beside him, his shabby vest flapping in the breeze.

Jock Little and the rest rode a hundred yards behind, to avoid the wind-driven dust from the wagon. And behind them rose a column of smoke—spiraling skyward—the dark epilogue to a drama of twisted lives. The lives of the Skurlocks, two wild boys who Jim knew hadn't had quite as much chance as others to pick a straight pattern in life.

Back there, too, was the tragic epilogue to his first and best opportunity to win an honorable place among the men of Piñon range. . . .

AT first Gar Skurlock thought he had gone blind. His eyes were open, but he could see nothing but blackness. Someone seemed to be chopping at his head with a dull ax. Other devils seemed to be at work on his body in a dozen places with hot, gouging pokers.

He didn't move. He didn't think he could; he thought he was dead. Then, suddenly, it struck him odd that he should feel pain, could smell blood, and could hear the chopping of hoofs and the creaking of wagon wheels.

He moved his hand. It touched something soft, something wooly. It seemed to be all over him—his face, his body, his legs and arms. He pushed it a little, and suddenly there was a pencil of light on his right.

In a slow, dull, hazy way, Gar began to remember. Gradually it all came back—the fight, the fire, the blast of lead as he and Curly stepped outside. The wagon jolted again, there was the thudding of hoofs—

With startling abruptness, Gar realized that he *was* alive!

It seemed incredible. He moved his

hand to his brow, just above his left eye. There was a bleeding hole there. He traced the swollen path of pain around the side of his head, through his wet, matted hair and to a point a little beyond his ear. There he found a larger, more ragged hole, where the bullet had smashed out again after miraculously skirting around his skull.

Gar weakly lowered his blood-wet hand. He knew now why he was still alive. The bullet had struck him from an angle.

His right hand moved under the blanket. It touched the side of the wagon. His left touched twin shell belts, an empty holster, a cold hand. Gar shuddered, cursing feebly.

Carefully lifting the edge of the blanket near his head, he looked up. Outlined against the red and yellow sky were the slumped figures of Herb Webb and—and *Jim Coe!* They were just above him, on the wagon seat.

A wolfish snarl started down in Gar's throat. But he didn't utter it. Lowering the blanket, he lifted the bottom of it ever so slightly with the toe of his boot. Between the bobbing heads of his and Curly's trailing broncs, he made out a line of distant horseman about a hundred yards back—four of them.

Gar licked his cracked, swollen lips and lowered the blanket. For five minutes he lay there, thinking, planning. Then his hands went to work.

He soon found his six-gun, where it had been thrown in beside his body. He felt the chambers, found half of them empty. Making as little movement as possible, he took cartridges from his belt and thumbed them into it. Discovering his own belt almost empty, he probed Curly's and transferred as many cartridges as he could find to his own.

Gar knew he must hurry. He was sick with wracking agony and feeble from loss of blood, but the burning power of deadly vengeance flowed into his veins. His careful plan must not fail!

For a moment his hand rested on Curly's cold one. Then, flinging back the blanket, Gar stood up in the jarring bed

of the rattling wagon. He wobbled and reached out quickly. Catching the back of the seat, he fiercely jammed his gun into Jim's back.

"Keep driving, you skunk!" he yelled. "Do everything just exactly as I tell you—*both of you!*"

JIM snapped his head around the instant Gar's gun hit his spine. His eyes swelled with unbelief, his jaw sagged, and he nearly dropped the reins.

"Gar!" he cried, stunned, almost certain he was staring at a ghost. "How—? You're *alive!*"

"Shut up!" And Gar yanked Jim's gun, threw it in the back of the wagon.

Herb Webb, his bulging eyes rimmed with pain, had twisted half-around on the seat. Now he shrank back before Gar's torn, blood-stained figure. His lips trembled. He moved his hand toward his hips, but his gun and belt were in the wagon, too.

"Good Lord—*you!*" he gasped.

Dashing the trickling blood out of his eyes, Gar took quick note that Webb was unarmed. With his gun held tight against Jim's back, he screamed at the little livery owner:

"Jump, Webb, damn you! Tell the rest of them skunks back there that if they follow this wagon another yard, I'll blow the back out of Jim Coe!"

Jim shuddered with astonishment. Could this be Gar Skurlock behind him? He knew Gar had reason to be desperate, but to threaten to kill him—

"*Jump!*" shouted Gar, when Webb hesitated.

The stableman clutched his wounded side and gave Jim a quick, uncertain glance. Then he stumbled over the side of the wagon. There was a thud, a cry of pain.

Jim cursed. "Glad you're alive, Gar, but that was a helluva thing to do—"

"Shut up and hammer hell out of them horses!" roared the outlaw, fighting his weak self from the bed of the wagon to the seat. "You're only living now because I'm bleeding like hell and need you to get

me to Mina's quick. But from now on you're living on borrowed time, Jim! Take the wrong fork at the bottom of this rise, and I'll shoot you off this wagon, you dirty doublecrosser!"

Jim slammed the horses with the reins and locked his eyes with Gar's.

"Doublecrosser!" he cried. "You don't think it was me—"

"Don't lie, you skunk!" snarled Gar, above the roar of hoofs. "Nobody knew Curly and me were back except you! Like a damn fool I've always trusted you. That was because I forgot you loved Mina Owens, too. You tipped off Jock Little, and you even came to see the fun! *You* did that to Curly and me!"

IT WAS a sickening shock to Jim. He gaped at Gar, unable to believe it. Then his jaw snapped shut, his eyes narrowing with anger.

"You pitiful fool!" he cried. "If I'd wanted to do that, I could have done it long ago! You don't think I'd wait until you decided to come home and get her! Somebody else spotted you and Curly and tipped off—"

Gar dug his gun hard into Jim's side. "Shut your face, Jim!" he hissed through clenched teeth. "Your yapping turns my innerds!"

Jim shot a glance over his shoulder. The sheriff and his men were no longer in sight. Herb Webb must have spoken, and Jock Little was not the kind to have a man killed just to get an outlaw. Gar would make good his escape. He'd make it, believing that Jim had betrayed him!

Jim whipped the team along, took the right fork to the Owen hay ranch, arguing desperately with Gar every racing mile of the way. It was no use. It had been burned into Gar's brain with lead and power-smoke that the last man he had expected to betray him had done so.

The sun was down in the west, the sky bannered with red, yellow and gold. when Jim drove the wagon down the narrow lane of the Owen hay-ranch and pulled up before the low, white-boarded farm house.

"Git down!" snapped Gar, poking Jim with his gun. "The first wrong move and you get it!"

As they climbed from the wagon, a screen door slammed. The next moment a pretty girl of twenty-four, with beautiful, reddish-tinted brown hair, crossed the porch toward them.

She had the strong, magnificent build of an houri, the free stride of the range-bred, and daring, excited eyes that now sparkled as she abruptly halted on the edge of the porch, as wild and untamed as either of them. For years Jim had dreamed of a day when he might change her name.

"Gar—Jim!" cried Mina Owens with sharp, pleasant surprise. Her doeskin skirt slapping against her boots, she joyously ran across the yard. "Say! This is a surprise! What brings you two roaming dandies to my door after forgetting me so long—" Then, catching the glint of Gar's gun, his terrible, blood-streaked figure, she jerked to a halt. "Jim—that gun! Gar—what happened?"

The big outlaw rocked a little, his face wrenched with pain and fury. "Everything, Mina! he gasped. "Thanks to this skunk, Curly and me were trapped in our shack and shot to hell! Curly's dead. Get inside quick—we're coming in. This bleeding's got to be stopped before it puts me out! If your foreman or any of the hands come around, get rid of them!"

"But, Gar, what—"

"Don't talk now, girl—get inside!" Gar snapped with fierce impatience, prodding Jim toward the house. "I ain't sure I can hold the sheriff off very long!"

BEWILDERED and anxious, Mina obediently ran inside ahead of them. Ever since her father had died, when she was eighteen, she had lived in the house alone, the foreman and two hands having quarters of their own down by the creek.

Herding Jim into the tidy kitchen, Gar kicked a chair to the middle of the floor and sank down on it weakly, his eyes and gun never leaving Jim, whom he forced to stand against the wall a few feet away.

"Work fast, Mina!" Gar gasped. "I've

got to get out of here! Just stop the bleeding. Hurry, girl! Water first. And don't get between this gun and Jim understand?"

Mina quickly pumped water into a pan at the sink. Jim stood at the wall, right beside it. He could see the sharp concern, the pain and confusion on her face. If Mina had ever been in doubt as to her choice, the sight of Gar's suffering would tilt the balance forever in the outlaw's favor.

"Jim! Tell me!" she pleaded, handing Gar a tin cup of water, then turning to rip a clean table cover into strips. "The two of you—Gar herding you with a gun? It doesn't make sense!"

Jim said, "I know it, Mina. Gar's shot up and out of his mind on account of Curly. He's a hate-crazed madman, thinking I betrayed him!"

"Think, hell! I *know!*" snarled Gar, as Mina worked from the side and tenderly washed the blood from his fury-twisted face. "I'd drill you right now, but you're a handy hostage until I can clear out. Besides, I don't want any of Mina's hands piling in here. But move one inch wrong, and I'll give it to you, anyway!"

"Gar!" cried Mina, in disgust and amazement. "That's Jim—*our* Jim Coe! We were all kids together! Even if you and Curly did turn outlaw, I know Jim wouldn't do anything to hurt you if he could help it. Neither would I, Gar—ever. Now put down that gun!"

Gar spat a curse. "Don't give orders, girl! Just plug up the worst of these holes. And hurry!"

With poignant concern and skilful hands, Mina cleansed and bandaged the more serious wounds in the outlaw's head and chest. But at best she could only staunch the flow of blood. A doctor's hand was really needed—and Jim knew it.

As he watched the writhing face of the man he had known so well, he couldn't help pitying him. He felt sorry for him because he knew everything could have been different had Gar and Curly taken the right fork in the trail only ten years back.

WHILE Mina worked from the side and rear of him Gar kept his gun trained on Jim and told her everything in fierce, vitriolic words, his wolfish eyes watchfully damning Jim with every sentence. He told her of the living hell, the bloody horror, of being trapped all day in a smoke-glutted, waterless hut by range men he and Curly had never harmed and had known from boyhood up; of the vicious fire set by these same men, and of their final, disastrous blast of murderous lead.

And while Gar talked, raging on more savagely than ever about being treacherously trapped and cut down on unmolested home range by men he and Curly had known and liked and against whom they never had any malicious intent, Jim came to see the real death of the old Gar Skurlock, knowing what caused it.

The shaggy eyes of this new Gar were now really the wild, barbarous eyes of a madman. His bared teeth and curled lips suddenly reminded Jim of a wounded, murderous wolf—an injured wolf, bent on vengeful destruction!

Jim breathed a soft oath, and wondered what form that destruction would take.

"It was you, Mina!" rasped Gar, when she finished and stepped back. "This skunk and I both came back for you. But when he found out I was pretty sure you'd go back with me, he tipped off Jock Little!"

Mina shot Jim a quick glance. "Is that it, Jim?" she asked, her bright eyes showing confusion and alarm.

"Good Lord, no!" Jim told her. "Somebody who didn't want to be known tossed a note through Tol Martin's window saying they'd spotted Gar and Curly. It could have been anybody—somebody who feared reprisals from the gang."

Gar kicked back a chair. "That somebody was you, you rat!" he roared, with refreshed vigor. "Now get outside and saddle my horse! Curly's, too! *Move!*"

Jim had no alternative. Gar was desperate. He'd stop at nothing in order to carry out his vengeance.

While Gar stood swaying in the twilight a few paces away, Mina to one side,

Jim dragged the saddles from the wagon and cinched them on the two mounts. He wondered about saddling Curly's horse—until he remembered why Gar had come back to Piñon range.

Gar, pale and drawn, his forehead white with bandages, shuffled weakly to his horse and mounted. Not for an instant did his gun pull off Jim's figure.

From his saddle, the outlaw stared impatiently at Mina. "What are you waiting for, girl?" he asked. "Get in the saddle!"

"What for, Gar?" asked Mina, her breast rising and falling with rampant emotion.

Gar's shaggy brows knotted with astonishment. "What *for?*" he exclaimed, sagging a little. "You're going with me—I need you. The letters! You love me, don't you, girl?"

Jim saw Mina hesitate, then shake her head. "No—no, I'm not going, Gar. I can't! I thought it was you and not Jim, all right. But now—now I don't know. Not—after this."

Gar cursed in dismay. "What?" he cried. "You, *too?* Both of you! Everybody turning against me and Curly!" Suddenly he thumbed down the hammer of his gun. "All right, Jim! I told you you were living on borrowed time. You won't get her, see? So here's something in this gun from Curly—"

With lightning suddenness, Mina flung herself squarely in front of Jim, shielded him with her body. "Gar!" she cried. "For God's sake don't make me *hate* you!"

Jim tried to thrust Mina to one side, out of range of Gar's gun. But she clung tenaciously, fought him. Then Jim saw the gun waver in Gar's hand, saw it tilt down.

"It *is* him, then!" Gar almost sobbed with rage, leaning hard on the saddlehorn as a spell of dizziness assailed him. "But you won't have him long. I'll be back. I'll be stronger. I'll get him just like the rest. Like Jock Little and Ed Price, Two-shave, Webb and Doc Keane! Every damn one of them! In one single night I'll wipe out them and all they've

got, just as surely and in the same rotten way they burned and slaughtered Curly! Not a damn one will escape, understand? They won't be able to—not the way I'll come back. I'll make Piñon range remember the Skurlock brothers and their gang forever. They'll wish they'd never touched a single hair on Curly's head. *I'll be back!*"

With that, Gar spurred the flanks of his bronc and thundered into the gray curtain of dusk—toward the south, the Border.

Toward the Roost. . . .

FOR several minutes Jim and Mina stared mutely after his vanishing figure. Then he was gone, lost in the dark chaparral flanking the Pagos Hills.

Suddenly Mina turned and sank her face against Jim's shoulder, her hands holding tight to his arm.

"Oh, Jim! Nothing worse than this could have happened!" she whispered brokenly. "He was wild and lawless before, but nothing like this! He's a killer now, Jim—he *will* be!"

Jim put his arm around her consolingly, but he said nothing. He was imagining in full a terrible range catastrophe. One that he had his first inkling of while studying Gar's wolfish face only a few minutes ago.

He could see a malicious, vengeance-crazed Gar coming back to Piñon range. Could see Gar's men riding at his back—Luke Draffan, Ike Dolan, Cherokee Sam, Tommer and Pete French—all fierce, remorseless robots of destruction, pawns of his will, ready to strike down and destroy the men who had driven lead and flame into the Skurlock shack that day—the men, their homes, their loved ones.

Jim could see more than that. In terrifying detail, he could see the homes of all those good men on a dark, unknown night not far in the future—as they would be after Gar's attack.

Jock Little's moderate ranch along Bear Paw Creek a thing of flames; Jock lead-riddled, his pretty daughter screaming, collapsing. The lonely cabin of Two-shave Nugent, the old Indian fighter,

who bred horses—yells, Two-shave's lifeless body in the doorway, the flaming torch. Doc Keane's little cottage on the outskirts of Piñon—his wife, the lifeless medico's specs beside his body. And Ed Price's little place at the edge of town, his pretty, young wife about to become a mother, and from there to Herb Webb's—his livery stable a monument of flame in Piñon, his slug-torn body as ragged as his tattered old vest.

Blood-red and fiery would be the single night of Gar Skurlock's swooping return!

If he got to return. . . .

JIM tilted Mina's chin, looked down into her wet eyes. The closeness of her lips tempted him, making him hope anew that some day they would be his to—

His wishful thoughts were abruptly swept from his mind by the urgency of this other thought, about Gar, Gar's return.

"Mina," he said huskily, "Gar must never come back to this range. Never!"

She seemed to read in his eyes the horrible things he had just seen. "I know, Jim. I know! It would be awful. He's bad, he's lawless, a menace, and yet—yet I know and understand him so well. There's something about Gar that's good, something really fine, but—I can't help it, Jim. I hate to see him hurt!"

"It's that way with me, too, Mina. It's because we all grew up together, I guess. Gar, in a way, is a part of us, like a brother. We'll always hate to see him hurt, no matter what he is—or what he does."

"Then what can be done now to keep him from coming back? I mean—without trying to destroy him?" Mina clutched Jim's arm fiercely, anxiously.

Jim understood. He had felt that way all day down in the hills. But if he expected to win a lasting place of honor and respect on Piñon range, he knew he must subdue forever all sympathy with lawlessness—with men outside the law. Even Gar.

"Mina," he said, moving across the yard to his wagon, "no matter how we

feel, Gar must be stopped sometime, and more now than ever. We've got to face it. It's the price for wanting to be decent. I've already had to pay part of that price today."

She stared at him strangely, as if, in a hazy way, she sensed what he meant to do.

"What is it, Jim?" she asked fearfully, as he climbed to the seat of his wagon after retrieving his gun. "What are you trying to say?"

"I am saying it, Mina," he told her, soberly gathering up the reins. "Gar's got to be stopped before his gang gathers down in the Roost and he meets them. There's no picking up Gar now before he gets there, no trailing him. He's too fast—and too clever. From here I figure he'll hit some honky-tonk town, get a doctor to fix him up right, then circle around easy until he gets down to the Roost. There he'll rest up and get back his strength, while waiting for the wild bunch to trail in six weeks from now." Jim paused, stared at her closely, where she stood beside the off-wheel. "Mina, there's only one person besides the Skurlock gang who knows where the Roost is and how to get there."

Mina gasped, held her breath. Then her eyes blazed angrily. "Why—why, that's you, Jim! You're not meaning to inform Sheriff Jock Little and have him and a big posse go down there and ambush Gar when he comes in alone?"

Jim knew she would resent such a plan. But that wasn't his.

"No," he told her. "I could never do that. I saw that happen to Gar and Curly today. It was like watching a pack of good hounds running a pet fox into a shallow hole. Gar must be stopped, but not that way, especially now that he's bad hurt. It would be like asking a dozen cold-blooded strangers with spades to corner and beat the life out of your own dog because it's suddenly gone crazy-vicious and can't help itself. Sometimes, no matter how it hurts a man, it's his place to do those ugly jobs himself."

Mina's eyes widened with shock. She

understood now the thing he meant to do. She reached up, her fingers biting deeply into his thigh.

"Jim!" she cried. "You can't! You just couldn't! It's Gar—he's one of us! It's as if you were brothers! Jim, you just *can't* do that!"

Jim pressed her hand hard, warmly, seeking her understanding. "Mina, believe me, I don't want to," he said gravely. "But if it's the only way I can keep Gar from coming back, I'll have to. The lives of too many fine people on this range are at stake. I came back to be one of these people. I can't see them die because of what Gar and Curly always meant to us. It's either Gar or them."

"Jim, don't!" she pleaded. "There must be some other way! There *has* to be!"

Jim shook his head. "There is none, except to send a pack down to ambush him at the Roost," he replied. "Gar thinks I did a thing like that once, already. I don't mean to have him thinking it twice. It'll just be us two. And he'll understand. Goodbye, Mina."

"Jim!" she cried in anguished entreaty. "He might—might kill you!"

But Jim was gone. He didn't hear. The spring-wagon, with its grim burden of lifeless bodies and saddle, rattled from the ranchyard and swung across the starlit range toward Piñon.

Mina buried her face in her hands. "Oh, Jim, I know now," she sobbed. "It's you—not Gar!"

The sound of the wagon faded into the monotonous hush of the night.

A LITTLE more than a mile down trail, Jim met Sheriff Little and Doc Keane cautiously walking their mounts toward the Owen ranch. Evidently they counted on catching Gar napping.

They explained that they had had to leave Two-Shave Nugent with Herb Webb back on the trail, as Herb was hardly able to move. Ed Price had been sent into Piñon to fetch a wagon for him. Not at all surprised to find Jim unharmed and returning, they told him flatly that they weren't forgetting his and Mina's earlier

association with the Skurlocks and that they had undoubtedly made Gar's escape possible.

"Think what you want," Jim told them, somewhat bitterly in view of his private intention to do his utmost to save the lives of these very men. "Mina and I were absolutely helpless at all times. We could do nothing."

"Wouldn't have if you could!" grated the lawman sourly. "I almost believe you even knew Gar was alive in the first place. Which way did he go?"

"What difference does it make?" retorted Jim, slapping the team and starting down the trail again. "Gar can't be trailed in daylight, let alone at night. But he'll be back."

"What?" exclaimed Jock Little. He and the old army surgeon reined their mounts and sided the wagon. "What makes you so sure of that?"

"He told me," Jim said bluntly. "He's coming back with his bunch to wipe out every man that had him and Curly cornered today. And there's nothing you can do to stop him, Jock."

Doc Keane exclaimed, "He wouldn't try it!"

"You don't know Gar Skurlock, Doc. I do. But if you still figure he won't, go back and ask Mina Owens. Today has turned Gar into a mad, vengeance-crazed wolf."

"Good Lord!" gasped Jock Little, staring straight ahead into the dark with bulging eyes. "What if he *should* come back and do as you say! My daughter, she would be—" He broke off, jerking his flashing eyes back at Jim. "Snap that team up! I've got to get back to Piñon and telegraph every town within fifty miles to throw a net out for him! Move those horses, Jim!"

Jim moved them; and later that night he whipped them out of Piñon and headed for his father's Bar C ranch. It was nearly midnight when he reached there and turned the team loose in the corral.

The ranch slept, the bunkhouse and ranchhouse were dark. Only the dogs whined gladly around his spurred heels,

until he hushed them. Then, tiptoeing into the house and up to his bedroom, he rolled a blanket, filled his shell-loops, and wrote a long note to his father. That done, he lay on the bed, fully clothed, for a few hours' sleep.

AN HOUR before dawn, Jim was down at the corral. Screwing his saddle on his favorite bay mare, he slipped into leather, opened and closed the gate and was gone.

Only once did he look back. He would have liked to tell them all, to explain, for he knew what they'd think the minute it was learned Gar had escaped: Jim Coe had maneuvered it, and now he was joining Gar, was helping him even further, in some way. That's what they'd think.

But Jim couldn't tell them his plan. It would have meant giving away the whereabouts of the Roost, sending a pack down after Gar. This was his chore alone. But it was for them, all of them, even if they didn't know it now, or understand. It was for himself, and his self-respect here on Piñon range. And it was for Gar, too. For it was the only way to give Gar an even break, and yet stop him.

Someone had to do it. Someone must put Gar out of business for good. Gar—who now seemed to him like a beloved dog that has gone vicious-mad and must be put away, a dog that Jim couldn't bear to see again beaten into a corner by a pack and wiped out without a chance.

Yes, someone must do it. But someone who cared. Someone who would do it as fairly and gently and with as much of the right kind of thought as possible, painful though the task would be.

Jim shrugged, his throat suddenly choking up, and rode on. That someone could only be himself. . . .

A WEEK later, Jim came dusting out of a desert not far from the Border and rode down the single sun-hammered street of a little town called Mountain-vale.

In the heat-hazed distance, fifteen miles

to the southeast, the Cerbero Mountains penciled a jagged, purple line against the sky. In the mysterious, dark heart of them lay the Roost, the formidable headquarters of the Skurlock gang.

The major reason for the Mountainvale's existence was the presence of the only spring within twenty miles. The spring and the fact that the town was directly on his trail to the Roost caused Jim to stop there—that and the desire to know if Gar had passed through here or not.

Mountainvale was a peaceful little place, quaint and law-abiding. It was comprised of not more than about twenty homes and business places, and about seventy or eighty people, a tenth of them Mexicans. There was no need of a sheriff here. A constable sufficed, and he'd have starved on his arrest fees alone.

Nothing ever happened in Mountainvale. There was nothing of an amusing or exciting nature to be found here, the chief centers of interest being a very quiet little saloon, the blacksmith shop, the general store and the church, the latter presided over by Humphrey Hubbard and his lovely daughter Ruth. Because of its innocent, unexciting wholesomeness, Mountainvale was shunned and scorned almost entirely by the lawless element; so much so that there was hardly a man there who could have recognized an outlaw, had one ridden into town.

Luke Draffan knew this. And that was one of the reasons why, three weeks before, the outlaw had told Pete French, one of the Skurlock bunch, to meet him here at a specified time.

Late the night before, Draffan had ridden in. An hour ago he met Pete on the plank walks. Now the two outlaws stood alone at the bar in the cool, deserted little saloon, the bespectacled barkeep-owner busy out back, feeding his chickens.

Draffan stood nearest the street window. In front of his long, sleeve-gartered arms was a bottle of whiskey, in his dirty-nailed hand a glass. The deep scar in his neck seemed to pulse as he spoke:

"How long you been here, Pete?"

Pete French, the youngest and most recent member of the Skurlock gang, was somewhat of the bootlicking type. He was easily swayed, especially by an older outlaw like Draffan. He was small of feature, with buttonlike black eyes, and his manner was snake-like. The low-belted six-gun on his slender thigh was fast—and deadly.

Pete stared into the puddle of whiskey at the bottom of his glass and laughed with rollicking contempt.

"Couple of days," he replied, "and nobody the wiser as to who I am. How did you make out?"

Draffan grinned. "Good. Everything ticked off pretty up in Piñon. I told you it would."

Pete's eyes glittered. "So Gar and Curly are done!"

"Shot to ribbons or jugged," replied Draffan. "I didn't stay to find out."

"Think the rest of the gang will get hep to how it happened?"

Draffan shrugged and drained his glass. "Hell, no! That's the reason I'm meeting you here. You're going to tell them we laid over together right here in Mountainvale. When Gar and Curly fail to show at the Roost in a few weeks, and the news seeps through, they'll simply figure the Skurlocks got careless up on home range. That's when I take over and you play *segundo*. I've always had ideas of my own as to how to run the bunch."

"And how to get the bigger cut for yourself," added Pete jocularly.

"Why not? In this business, it's every man for himself. The Skurlocks were always too easily satisfied with small stuff. Always passing up banks and trains. I aim to get a damn sight more than liquor money out of this game! And I'll—"

DRAFFAN suddenly crashed his glass down on the bar-top. He was staring through the window, his heavy-lidded eyes bulging with astonishment. A tall, dusty, whip-shaped rider was dropping rein at the hitchrack outside.

"Pete!" hissed Draffan, his fingers closing over the butt of his gun. "It's Jim Coe!"

"What?" gasped the younger outlaw. "You mean the in-between jasper that used to ram around with the Skurlocks when they were kids?"

"That's him!" snarled Draffan, plainly upset. "And he saw me up there in Piñon with Gar and Curly!"

"What's he doing down here, then?"

Draffan chewed his lips. "Don't know," he admitted worriedly, his fingers nervously rubbing his gun. "Can't figure it—unless he's come down to tell the gang that Gar and Curly cashed in. This town's the nearest to the Roost. But somehow that idea doesn't gee."

Pete French, as he saw the nervous sweat oozing from the back of Draffan's neck, instantly caught some of the older man's uneasiness. "You figure he's onto your play and is riding you?"

"Don't see how he'd know!" grated Draffan, as Jim stepped out of his saddle and slapped dust from his shirt and chaps. "He'd never dope out that it was me, one of the gang. Nobody would."

"Then what's he here for?"

"How the hell do I know!" hissed Draffan with nervous impatience. "But that's what I'm going to find out!" As Jim's spurs jingled across the plank walk outside, Draffan raked the deserted saloon with his cunning, anxious eyes. Suddenly he shoved Pete toward a huge, pot-bellied stove set close to the wall across the room. "Git over there and sit on a chair behind it! Quick! Watch him close, Pete! And don't forget—Jim used to be a good friend of the Skurlocks. If he gets hep in any way, give it to him—fast! He's greased hell when started!"

Pete nodded and took his place. Draffan quickly turned back to his whiskey glass. At this instant Jim entered.

FOR a minute the contrast of the cool gloom of the saloon blinded Jim. Then he took two, three steps toward the bar—and halted.

"*Draffan!*" he exclaimed with surprise. "You—didn't expect to find you here!"

Draffan turned from the bar lazily, his face expressionless. "No? That's funny.

I was just going to say the same thing of you."

Jim's eyes narrowed. As of old, he felt the clammy chill he always got whenever he saw the scarred, black-haired outlaw. It was like knowing a ready-to-strike snake was at your back. But now, as he took another step toward the man, Jim's mind raced back, remembered something he had forgotten right after he heard it.

He suddenly stopped, his eyes glittering like frozen gems, his jaw jutting. "Draffan, this is pretty far *south*," he purred icily. "Thought you were supposed to head *north* from Piñon for your lay-over?"

Draffan gave a little start. "A man can change his mind, can't he?" he growled, eyeing Jim narrowly with his frog-like eyes.

Suddenly Jim had it. All of it. Every bit of the whole rotten treachery he had been accused of!

"Sure," he droned bitingly. "And a man can throw a rock through Tol Martin's ranch window with a dirty, double-crossing note hooked on it, too—*can't* he, Draffan?"

Color drained from Draffan's swart face. "What are you mouthing off about?" He pressed his back hard against the bar, flicked a glance from the corner of his eye toward the stove, where only Pete's legs could be seen.

"Until five minutes ago I wouldn't have known!" Jim snapped, catching that glance, wondering—

"And now?" Draffan drawled.

"Now I know I'm talking to the filthy rat who knifed Gar and Curly in the back! The rat who went south, instead of north, after it was over! The rat who, I've a damn good idea, figured from the first on taking over the Skurlock gang and the heavier cuts! It's been done before, Draffan!"

Luke Draffan turned purple around his slit-like mouth. His eyes became two glittering disks of hatred.

"You've lots of ideas, Jim," he growled. "Name the one for coming down here!"

Jim jerked a quick glance toward the

stove, spotted the tip of a peaked hat, a pair of boots. He savvied instantly, and his lips went back in a bare-toothed grin, every muscle in him tensing, waiting.

"My first idea was to come down here and stop Gar from ever coming back to Piffon range. Now—"

"What?" yelled Draffan, his eyes saucers of amazement and fear. "You saying that—that Gar's alive? You mean they didn't get—"

"No, they didn't get him, you damn skunk! That's a part of your game you forgot to make sure of, Draffan. Gar is still alive. And now my latest idea is to drag you in front of him and let him know just what kind of a—"

Draffan's taut, aching nerves snapped. He exploded.

"The hell you will!" he cried; and he drove his hand down hard to his pearl-butted gun. "*Pete—!*"

DRAFFAN'S gun was ripping out of leather when Jim's shoulder twitched. His hand couldn't be seen. The next instant Jim's holster was empty, his palm tight against the bucking back-strap of his colt. Glasses on the back-bar jumped as it roared.

The round-nosed slug smashed into Draffan a foot above his belt buckle. Every moving part of him stopped abruptly. He seemed to have been petrified. Then his head bent down and he slowly curled down over himself, like a sheet of paper held near a flame.

Jim didn't wait to see him fall. The instant after he fired, he swiveled his gun to the left, toward the stove. But that instant was a late one. Pete French had already jumped out of his chair, his fast gun flaming. Two bullets came spewing out of Pete's gun in quick succession.

Jim jerked as the first one splatted into his chest. His crashing gun drove a little hole into the stove's smoke-pipe, instead of into Pete, who was beside it. And then Pete's second slug ripped into Jim's side.

It turned Jim like a top. His legs suddenly entwined, like vines, his knees bending. Stumbling, he finished the pivot, fell

hard on his hip, but clung desperately to his gun. And now it came up, crashing, driving a lead-cored spike of flame at the smoke-wreathed figure near the stove, a figure his pain-blinded eyes could hardly see.

It was an unexpected, surprise shot. The slug screwed through Pete French's heart and mushroomed against his spine. He was dead on his spike-heels as the impact of the shot tilted him over backwards. Crashing against the stove, he knocked the lid-lifter from the top of it. As it clattered down the fat, iron belly of the stove, the young outlaw followed it down to the floor and lay still.

But Jim neither saw nor heard any of this. He was sprawled limply on his face, his arms outstretched, his smoking gun still clutched in his hand. A thread of blood began to worm out from under him across the floor.

Only Ab Dillon, the bespectacled saloon owner, standing in the doorway adjoining his living quarters, saw it. But then, Ab had seen the whole brief thing, from the moment Draffan went for his gun and Pete jumped to his feet.

The kindly old saloonman now sucked his teeth and shook his head. "My, my! Such fools! To waste God-given lives like that! Humphrey Hubbard will be sorely pained to find three who thought so damn little of each other's mortal souls! He sure as hell will!"

AND Humphrey Hubbard was. The little fifty-year-old man of the gospel was one of the first to run into the saloon. He had just left the blacksmith's sick wife across the street when he heard the shots.

Hubbard halted in the middle of the saloon floor, his kindly blue eyes staring in horror through the gun-smoke. Then his cheeks turned almost as white as the reversed collar around his throat, the expression in his eyes one of abject pity.

"The Lord forgive them," he muttered, joining the saloonman who was bent over Pete. "Who are they, Ab, and what caused it?" he asked, bending down.

At this moment Constable Glenn Foss,

young and lean and clean-looking, rushed in. Behind him came nearly a dozen townsmen, two or three curious boys, and a girl with the gentle, compassionate beauty of the Madonna.

"I don't know any of them," Ab told the minister. "These two," pointing at Pete and Draffan, "were in here first. I went back to feed the chickens, and just as I came back I saw them pulling their guns on that young feller near the door. But I don't know why."

The young constable examined Pete and Draffan, explaining that he didn't know them, either. Then he declared them dead. The girl went to Humphrey Hubbard and stood by his side.

"This is an awful thing, Father," she said, shivering a little. "How can men do such things? Have they no religion, no human sympathy and goodness?"

Humphrey Hubbard was a rare, practical man of the gospel who saw hard mankind and raw living with clear eyes, and with a profound understanding and a minimum of sanctimonious prattling.

"Ruth," he told his daughter, "men can be religious and good, yet succumb to their passions at times. Their very goodness sometimes causes them to use ungodly means to destroy what they believe to be evil. Each of these may have been good men, fighting against what they interpreted as evil."

The bare-armed, leather-aproned blacksmith who was bent over Jim suddenly lifted his face and called excitedly, "This man's still alive! But there ain't a heap of living left in him!"

Humphrey Hubbard quickly knelt beside Jim's bleeding, unconscious body. A small, saucer-eyed boy stood near his shoulder. Hubbard turned to him. "Timmy, you run to Doctor Howe's and tell him to come to my cottage at once." The minister then slipped his arms under Jim's shoulders and beckoned to the blacksmith. "Take his legs, John. We'll carry him down to my place. Ruth, you run ahead and fix the bed in the extra room."

Constable Foss touched the minister's arm. "Look, Hubbard," he said. "You

don't have to do this. You don't know this man. We can take him over to the jail and have Doc Howe do what he can for him over there."

Hubbard's eyes glowed with the joy of doing as he carefully moved toward the door with his share of the burden. "Foss," he said, smiling, "your soul needs to do a little more growing. Who the man is doesn't count. What does count is what is done for him when he's in trouble. A clean bed and a good roof are but small things to offer."

Constable Foss flushed. There wasn't a soul in Mountainvale who didn't love the slight, silver-haired minister, each man trying in his own way to follow his pastor's simple, generous teachings.

The young constable moved closer. "Reckon you're right," he said. "Here—let me carry your end!"

HUMPHREY HUBBARD'S neat little cottage was down a shady side lane. Jim's bloody body was carried upstairs to a cheerful bedroom and a clean bed. A few minutes later came Doctor Howe, a tall man with sharp, alert eyes and a white goatee. He instantly went to work.

Ruth, gentle and quiet, assisted him. For two solid hours they toiled over the dangerous wounds in Jim's chest and side. Jim did not regain consciousness.

The sun lowered. Ruth pulled the sheet up over Jim's form. Doc Howe rolled down his sleeves, frowning, and turned to Humphrey Hubbard, who stood in the doorway.

"He's got a chance," said the medico, "but he's in bad shape. Hard to say when he'll come out of that coma. The bullet in his side went through cleanly. But the troublesome one is the one in his chest. Can't locate it, and any more probing right now would be too dangerous. Infection, you know. When he comes to and starts to move or talk, he's quite likely to have hemorrhages." He turned to Ruth, smiled, and picked up his case. "You're a better nurse than I am a doctor, Ruth. I'll be back in a few hours."

The street was flushed with sunset as

Hubbard and Doc Howe slowly walked back to the medico's home. It was quiet and cool, and everyone was indoors eating supper. Suddenly Hubbard and the medico stopped, stared down the street to where it blended in with the range.

At first the plodding, jaded horse didn't seem to have a rider. Then a man's legs could be seen dangling down its sides. Hubbard and Howe ran forward and caught the bridle of the lathered animal.

"Good Lord!" cried the doctor.

Hubbard saw the face of the man and his own paled. A prayer formed on his lips.

"Why, he's practically fleshless—nothing but bones!"

The rider seemed more dead than alive. His arms were locked tightly around the neck of his horse. He was hatless, and there was a thick, dirty, red-stained bandage around his head. His big-boned face was emaciated, gaunt as a skull, and thickly bearded. His eyes were closed, and sunken and dark-rimmed. Thorn-shredded clothes barely clung to his fleshless frame, exposing three or four wounds that were raw and festering.

As Doc Howe reached up and caught his thin arm, the cracked, swollen lips stirred. "Wa-water!" With that, the man slipped like a limp rag into the medico's arms.

As a number of men ran forward, Hubbard quickly lifted the legs of the withered stranger. "We'll take him to my place, the same as the other," he said. "It saves you from traveling to two different places, Doctor. Ruth or me can sleep on the couch downstairs."

Howe's profound admiration for the little minister rang in his voice. "You're doing too much, Hubbard," he said. "Let someone else take this man in!"

Hubbard shook his head and led off toward the cottage. "Nobody can ever do too much for a fellowman in need. There is joy in it. Come, Doctor. We're wasting breath needed for our task."

Doc Howe shrugged, took a firmer grip under the shoulders of the pitiful stranger. "Hubbard," he said, "if you'll excuse the language, I'd say you're a damn fine man!"

Hubbard grinned and said, "Didn't hear your language, Doctor. Just your heart."

No one who followed them to Hubbard's cottage knew the stranger. When Ruth saw him, she gave a choking cry, her eyes deep with pity.

"Put him in my room," she said. "It's right next to the other one's, and it will be handy for Doctor Howe."

The crowd went no farther than the Hubbard gate.

LATE that night, and half an hour after Doc Howe left, the emaciated, horribly wounded stranger regained consciousness for a little while.

His sunken, bloodshot eyes stared around the room with confusion and wonder and pain. And the first object his staring eyes accosted was a large portrait of Christ. Hung on the wall just beyond the foot of the bed, it stood out sharp in the yellow lamplight.

His bewilderment increased upon seeing the lacy white window curtains and a low, mirrored bureau, upon which lay some feminine toilet articles. Then a sweet, delicate perfume reached his nostrils—and he saw Ruth.

For a long time he stared at her thoughtful young face. He seemed especially attracted by her curly, soft brown hair and warm, glowing eyes.

His voice was very low and very weak. "Where—am I? Who are—are you?"

Ruth went quickly to him and gently laid her hand on the side of his freshly bandaged head.

"You must be very quiet," she said, soothingly. "You are a very sick man."

"Where am I?"

"You're in Mountainvale, and in my room. I'm Ruth Hubbard. My father is the pastor of the church here. What is your name?"

A glint of fear flicked into the man's eyes, and died out. "M—Mesquite. Just Mesquite."

Ruth touched the thin shoulder beneath the sheet. "All right, Mesquite. And now, no more talking. The doctor says that it is a miracle you're still alive, with all those

infected wounds. It's going to take a long time for you to get well."

Mesquite stared at her strangely, as if in his whole reckless life he had never seen a woman. Not a woman like her.

At this instant there came a sharp, delirious voice from the next room:

"Gar! Gar—you can't come back! Piñon range d-didn't do it. Don't come back, Gar! I don't want to hurt you, Gar—!"

Mesquite looked anxiously at the girl standing beside his bed. "Who—who is that?" he asked weakly.

"It's the man in the room next to this one. He's a stranger to us, like you. He's as badly wounded as you are, maybe a little worse, and very delirious. Two men shot him in the saloon this afternoon before he killed them. I'll—I'll have to leave you now and go to him."

Again Jim's raving voice rang through the cottage:

"Don't come back, Gar! Mina and me, we—Gar, we were kids together! I wouldn't have done that! Remember when—" There was a short pause, then more fiercely: "Gar! Gar, it was Draffan; Draffan. I tell you! *He* betrayed you! He told Jock Little. He wanted to take over the gang. Gar, you can't come back—!"

The sharp muscles in Mesquite's gaunt face stiffened. His cracked, purplish lips thinned, then curled back.

"—Gar, it's not Piñon range—it's not me! You can't hurt us! I won't let you! It's Draffan. Draffan! Gar, I killed him! Pete French, too. Don't come back, Gar! I don't want to kill you, too, Gar. For God's sake, Gar, please don't come back! I—I—"

Jim's voice thinned out, died. There was a heavy silence, broken only by the midnight whirl and buzz of insects.

Mesquite's sick, suffering eyes weakly swept the room. They paused on the head of Christ, blinked with consternation, passed on, then flicked back to the picture again. There was something in that face, something he had never seen before. Gar wondered about it.

His lips stirred and his pain-racked body twitched. At last he fell asleep, mum-

bling, as though confused and annoyed by the ravings from the next room.

A WEEK passed. Almost hourly, the delirious, pleading voice of Jim filled the Hubbard cottage. The doctor was there day after day, exerting his skill to the utmost on both men. Hubbard gave of himself unsparingly, alternating with Ruth day and night in watching the two patients.

At first Mesquite didn't seem to want to recover. He lost more flesh than ever. Then, under the constant attention and soothing presence of Ruth, the gentle manners and cheerful philosophic talks of Hubbard, he seemed to change, to come back—but very slowly.

He never talked much. He just kept following Ruth and her father around with his eyes, liking their talk, their kind ways. When they left him, he would stare at the ceiling, his brows knotted, as if thinking hard, painfully.

One day after the first week, Jim finally came back to clear-sightedness and sanity. He was pale and gaunt, his body wasted. Ruth was at the side of the bed, and his first question came anxiously from his lips:

"How long have I been here?"

Ruth smiled and said, "This is the tenth day. And you'll be here many more. I'm afraid you'll have to stay in this bed at least another three, four weeks or so. And after that you must be very careful for a while."

Jim jerked, started to rise up, then sank back with a moan of pain. "Four weeks!" he said. "I can't! I can't, do you understand? I've got to get out of here! I've got to stop Gar—"

Ruth quickly pressed the tips of her fingers to his lips. "You've got to stop thinking of this man Gar, whoever he is. You and Mesquite are alike. You both talk too much, for a pair of men whose lives Doctor Howe has just barely saved."

"Who's Mesquite?" asked Jim.

Ruth told him, then insisted that he rest and calm himself, because of the danger of hemorrhages. Hubbard came in then. After telling them who he was, Jim stared at them with wonder. He was certain that

never before had he seen two people more generous and good. When they left him, his thoughts instantly snapped back to Gar Skurlock, and the dreadful task that lay ahead.

FOUR more weeks! He'd been here a week, and a week on the trail. That would add up to six weeks, at least! Why, by that time, the gang would have gathered at the Roost, met Gar, and started for Piñon range to wipe out Jock Little and the rest!

"Hell, I can't stay here!" he thought with frantic feverishness, and he struggled to rise again. "I've got to get to the Roost while Gar's still alone! Before he starts back! I've got to get out of here even before that. I *must*! If I don't, I'll have killed Jock Little and the rest just as if I'd driven the lead into them myself!"

With that searing thought burning his brain, Jim suddenly sank back weakly on his pillow. The next instant warm blood rushed into his mouth. The first of his hemorrhages had attacked him.

He had a number of them during the weeks that followed. Then, at last, they stopped. But his strength came back so slowly. He fretted and the days kept slipping by, one by one. More frequently than ever he turned his eyes toward the bureau drawer where he knew his belt and gun had been placed. Somehow he must find the strength to get up and leave!

Ruth he came to think of as being a living Madonna. She was the sweetest woman he had ever known, the sort of woman the whole world instantly loves.

She often talked to him about Mesquite, the man in the next room. Color always mounted in her cheeks, and her eyes would sparkle. Now and then Jim could faintly hear her and Mesquite talking together. And with the passing days and weeks, Jim realized he was eavesdropping on the birth of a romance.

It made him think of Mina Owens. It made him dream. And in thinking of Mina, he remembered more clearly than ever his reasons for returning to Piñon range. He had come back to take his place among the

fine men of that range, to win their respect and good will, to prosper and be accepted as worthy of them all. But now—

Now he must lie here on his back while Gar Skurlock and the remnant of his gang crushed them!

Each passing day was a nightmare of physical and mental torture. A thousand times he saw Jock Little and the others wiped out. And as the days turned into weeks, he became frenzied. Yet his stubborn determination not to betray Gar, not to send a pack in for him, kept him from telling Ruth and Hubbard the situation. It was his chore alone.

When the third week passed, Jim could stand it no longer. He knew he must, at any cost, get to his feet, get a horse somehow and reach the Roost—and Gar.

For a whole night he lay awake, planning it, and hoping that he would be in time.

With the first flush of the following dawn pinking the walls of the room, he weakly threw back the covers. Ruth and her father were still sleeping. Jim had on one of Hubbard's night shirts, and as he swung his legs over the side of the bed, he stared at them with amazement. They were as thin as a broomstick!

He soon found them weaker than straws. Three times he sank to his knees before he finally managed to keep erect, holding on to the bedpost. In the next room, Mesquite, who had lain awake all night listening to Jim tossing, heard him, and instantly seemed to know what Jim was about to attempt.

Wobbling drunkenly across the floor, Jim reached the closet where his washed shirt, pants, boots and spurs had been placed. With his senses reeling, his breath coming in gusts, he sat on the edge of a chair and painfully pulled on his clothes. He hated to go this way, but he knew they would only stop him from going, if they caught him.

Suddenly, just as he pulled on his last boot, the weak, hoarse voice of Mesquite broke the stillness of the cottage:

"Say, Jim. Listen to me, Jim! Are you awake?"

JIM, startled, jerked as though pricked with a pin. Mesquite was awake, had heard him! He would give the alarm, spoil his plan!

At first Jim wasn't going to answer. Then he realized the uselessness of that. Mesquite knew he was awake. The best he could do would be to answer and pretend he was still in bed.

"Sure, Mesquite. Why?" he called back softly, in much the same way that he had conversed with the patient in the past two weeks.

"Want to ask you something," came Mesquite's hoarse voice. "Been thinking about it all night. Been wondering if you're the same Jim Coe that knows Gar Skurlock, the outlaw. Are you?"

Jim's foot sank down hard and suddenly into this boot. He looked sharply at the thin partition through which Mesquite's voice came so plainly. He was tense, puzzled. Why should Mesquite wonder about a thing like that?

"Yes," he replied, remaining on the edge of the chair until the room stopped spinning. "I'm that Jim Coe."

"Then I guess I should have told you this before, Jim," came Mesquite's voice. "You see, I met Gar in a pretty little town some weeks back. He was a mess, shot up pretty bad, nearly dead. He'd been running, hadn't eaten or seen a doctor in a week. Some wonderful people in that town took him in. He told me later that he'd never met people like them in his whole life."

Jim came to his feet slowly, his eyes staring in fascination at the thin wall between him and Mesquite's room. He staggered a little, moved toward the bureau. Gripping its edge, he reached for the drawer where his gun was kept.

"—There was a beautiful girl there who was like a saint," the voice of Mesquite continued. "She had such a fine father, 'most anybody would feel like a skunk in comparison. You listening, Jim?"

JIM could hardly breathe. His heart kept hitting his ribs like a sledge. He grabbed his gun, took a weaving step toward the hall, like a man in a trance.

"I'm—I'm listening, Mesquite," he said.

From his bed in the other room, Mesquite looked at the frilly white curtains, at the picture on the wall, at the bureau and the feminine things upon it. His shaggy-browed eyes were shining, his features wrenched with anguished appeal. He heard Jim take a faltering step, bit his lips.

Mesquite went on, slowly: "While they nursed him and treated him like a son and brother, Gar found out that his old friend had discovered that it was one of Gar's own gang that doublecrossed him. It seemed that Gar meant to kill this old friend and a lot of others when he got strong again—"

Jim wobbled out into the hall. He was soaked with icy sweat, sick and awfully weak. But not a word of Mesquite's did he miss.

"—but hearing the truth changed Gar," Mesquite's voice continued. "And the ways of the girl kinda changed him. And her father and his talks.

"Gar said he couldn't explain it. He didn't know what it was, but he got to thinking different, cleaner. He told me he felt ashamed. Said he could understand now what his friend had meant when he told him he hadn't liked what he saw on the wrong side of the fence."

There was another pause, a long moment of heavy, tense silence. Then:

"Jim, you won't believe this, but Gar Skurlock has sworn to go straight for the rest of his life. He wants to be able to hope that some day he can tell this girl he loves her. He wants to stop feeling ashamed and dirty. He wants his old friend to forgive him—"

But Jim no longer heard the weak, hoarse voice of Mesquite. He stood leaning against the wall, next to the door to Mesquite's room. Desperately, he sucked air into his tortured lungs. He was filled with amazement and joy, unable at first to believe his ears. Over him came an old familiar feeling. It was like the mysterious, magnetic pull of the Pagosa Hills, only now it seemed to be pulling him into Mesquite's room.

For a moment longer he stood poised

near the door, hesitant, cold, almost afraid to go inside, yet anxious to. Then he stumbled inside.

He jerked to a swaying halt two yards from the bed. His lips parted, his jaw sagged. His astonished eyes swept to the pale, gaunt face of the man lying under the snow-white sheets and his pounding heart almost stopped.

"Gar!"

The man on the bed stared at Jim anxiously, at the six-gun dangling from Jim's hand.

"Yes, Jim," Mesquite said. "It's me—Gar."

But it wasn't, Jim thought. This wasn't the Gar Skurlock that had raced away from Mina's! This man was thin, hollow-checked and penitent. There were no snarling lips or red, vicious lights of a vengeance-crazed wolf in this man's eyes. There was contrition in them.

The gun slipped from Jim's fingers, thudded to the floor.

"Gar, I can't believe it!" he said, stumbling weakly to the side of the bed and sinking down upon it. "You're so—so—"

"I can hardly believe it myself, Jim," Gar replied hoarsely. "But it's happened just the same. Funny. Curly and me never had anything like this. There's something about this room, and about the people here that—"

"I know," interrupted Jim, seeing it all right there in Gar's eyes. "I've felt the same thing all along, too, Gar."

THE outlaw laid his thin hand on Jim's thigh. "Jim," he said, "you once said something about patterns of living. I think I've found a new one, a better one for me. One, I guess, Curly and me never had a good chance to think much about, or even to see. To start it off, will you sort of forgive me for—well, everything?"

"The things you've done weren't against me. There's nothing for me to forgive," Jim said.

"Thanks. But if it hadn't been for you coming down after me and queering Draf-fan, then getting shot up and raving about

it all, I don't think even Ruth or her father could have kept me from going back to Piñon. I guess I still need a lot of forgiving."

"Forget it. But is it true, then—about Ruth, I mean?"

Gar's sunken eyes glowed. "Yes," he replied. "But she doesn't know exactly who I am—yet."

"Who you are will never make any difference to them," Jim said. "They're above all that."

"I know it. And just because of that, I know what I must do first before I can speak to Ruth the way I want to."

"What's that, Gar?"

The big outlaw looked squarely, unflinchingly into Jim's eyes. "Jim, I'm going to give myself up. The years won't be too many before I can come back here. You see, Jim, I want to feel clean, so I can come back to Ruth and the kind of living they believe in. Sounds impossible—coming from me—doesn't it?"

Jim took Gar's hand and gripped it hard. "Nothing is impossible when you're taking the right trail," he said. "I only found that out after I definitely got on to myself, Gar. You see, after what happened up at your hut, it looked as if I was through on Piñon range. And there at Mina's, it seemed that even she was lost to me. But now—well, I guess I can go back to both of them—and stay."



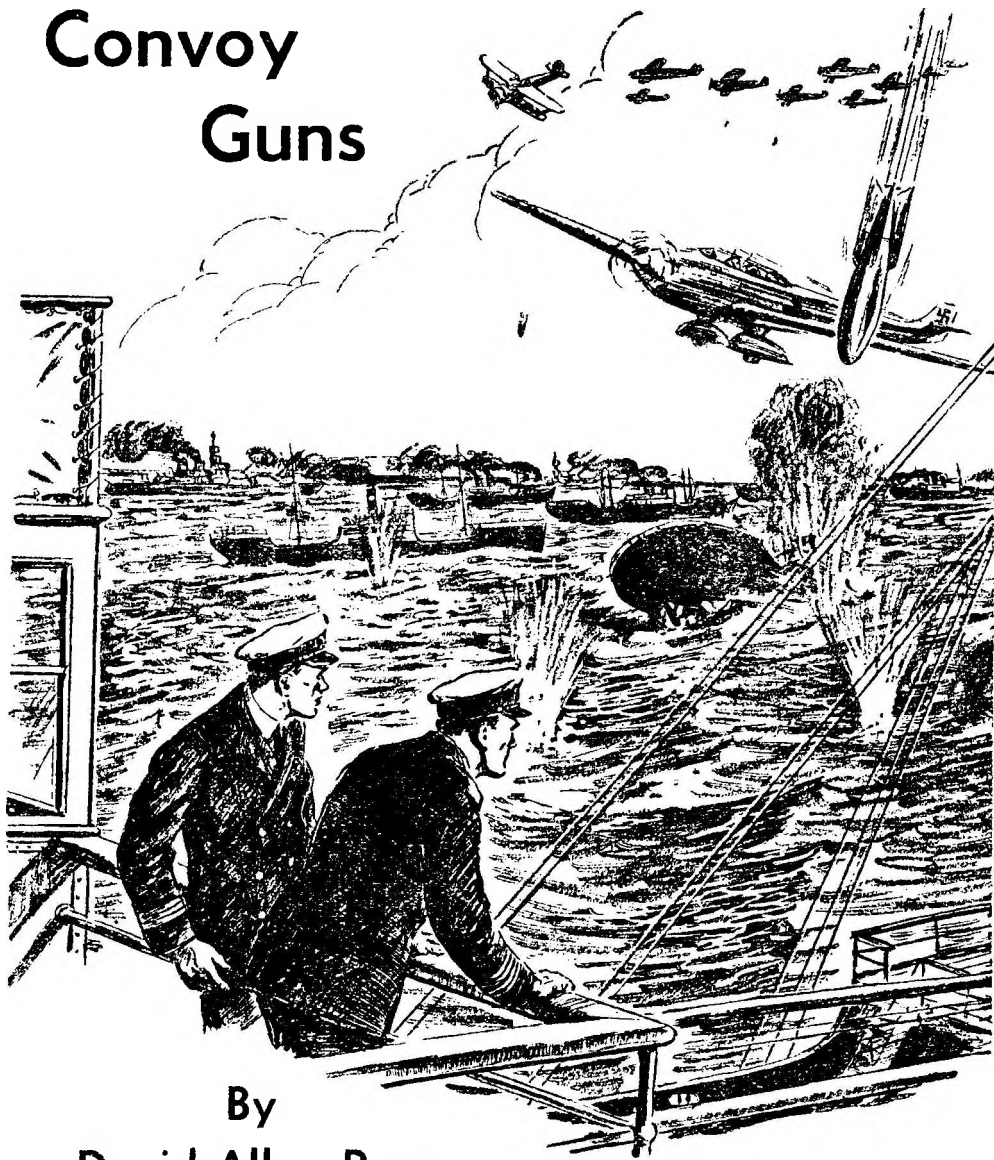
Ruth

For a moment neither of them said anything. They just gripped hands and looked steadily and understandingly into each other's eyes. They seemed oblivious to everything except themselves and their renewed friendship and trust.

At least neither of them was as yet aware that Ruth and Humphrey Hubbard were standing in the doorway watching them, with sudden and complete comprehension.

(The End.)

Convoy Guns



By

David Allan Ross

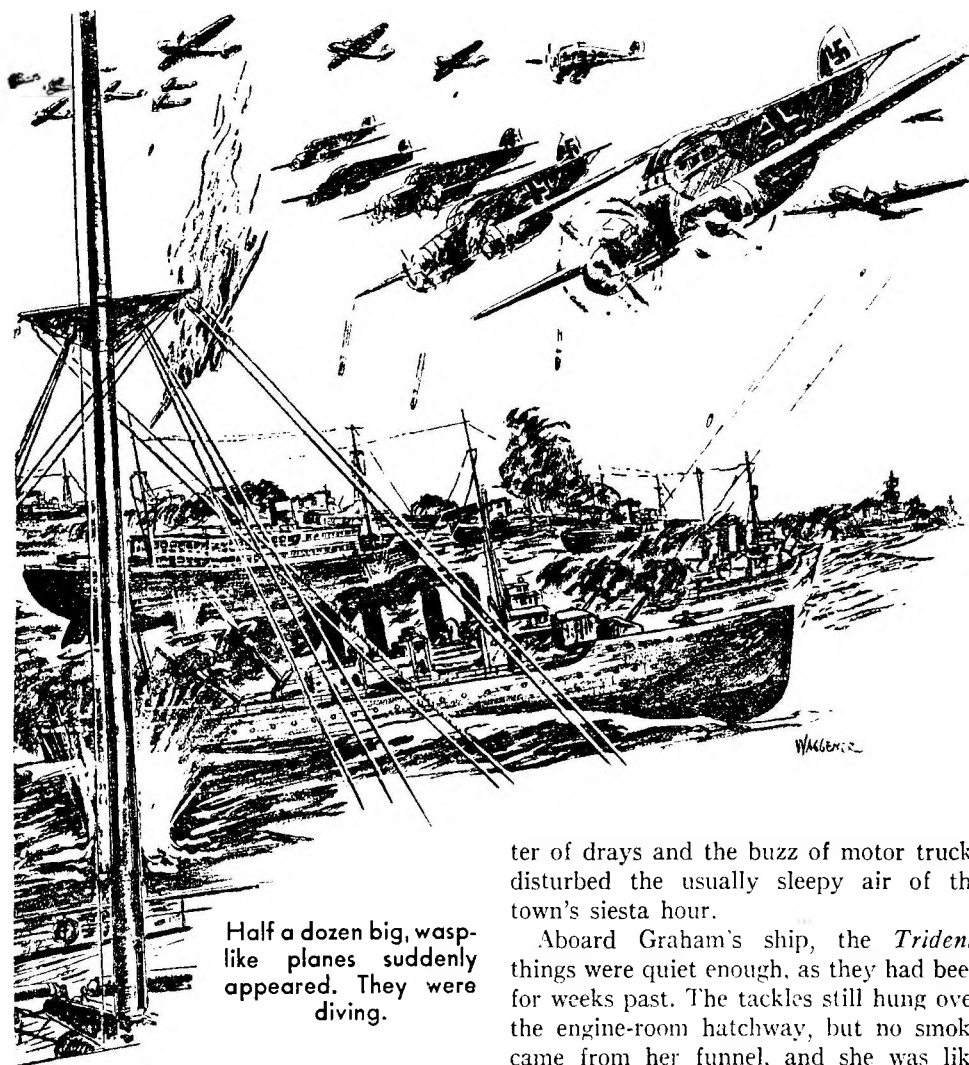
WHEN the steward tapped lightly on the door, leaned in, and said, "Lunch is ready, sir," Captain John Graham glanced up from a paper he was studing with a troubled frown, and nodded.

"Thanks, Wilson. I'll be down in a minute. Tell the others to go ahead."

When the steward had gone, Graham smoothed out the cable and read it over

again, for about the twentieth time. It had come aboard an hour ago, and though by now he knew every word of it by heart, he still could not believe it. With a fatalistic shrug, he slipped it in his pocket and went on deck.

The almost purple water of the Gulf of Palermo stretched out to the horizon. In the middle distance a squat, raked Italian cruiser lay at anchor. A dirty, tall-funneled Greek freighter was slogging her way eastward, evidently in ballast, for the



Half a dozen big, wasp-like planes suddenly appeared. They were diving.

tips of her propeller blades could be clearly seen churning over under her counter, while her wall-sides were so high that she looked all out of proportion. Inland, Palermo simmered under a blazing Mediterranean sun, the white houses shining, while the dark green of the terraced olive groves rose up toward the sleepy blue of the sky. It was a lovely and peaceful picture, yet over it, as over just about everything else in these days of war, there seemed to hang a strange, uneasy tension. Farther down the quay, the winches of a ship chattered as she unloaded bales of cotton, and on the rough pavement of the docks the clat-

ter of drays and the buzz of motor trucks disturbed the usually sleepy air of the town's siesta hour.

Aboard Graham's ship, the *Trident*, things were quiet enough, as they had been for weeks past. The tackles still hung over the engine-room hatchway, but no smoke came from her funnel, and she was like a dead ship, dirty and grimy, nodding at her moorings. Almost two months ago she had limped in, her turbine rotor stripped, and there had been nothing for her to do but stay here until a new rotor could be sent out from New York. She could get no dockyard facilities, so that her own engineers had had to attend to the installing of the big rotor.

Graham went through the smoking room, down the companionway and into the dining saloon. The officers were already eating their lunch and he took his seat at the head of the table after a nod to his officers. On his right was Casson, the first mate; on his left McKnight, the chief

engineer. Down the long, narrow table the ranking diminished; second mate and second engineer, third mate and third engineer, all the way to little, pale-faced Flint, the Marconi operator, who, like all radio operators, was something of an outcast. Being appointed by the radio company instead of the steamship company, and living in their own private world of tubes, transmitters, dots and dashes, such men were a race apart, neither fowl, flesh nor good red herring, as far as the rest of the ship's company were concerned.

"Chicken soup or beef broth, sir?" the steward asked.

"Broth," Graham said, unfolding his napkin. "Well, Mr. McKnight, how is it coming?"

"We'll warm her up and turn her over," McKnight answered, "by sundown. Ye can tell the agents, sirrr, that we can be sailing for New York in the mornning."

"I wish I could," Graham answered.

THE others glanced up at him, surprised. For two months they had lain here in Palermo and they were heartily sick of it. They wanted to get under way, to get back to the United States, to do anything at all, to see a little action. Their tempers were short and they were getting on each other's nerves. The constant rumors of war activities, of the nearness of war in the Mediterranean, added to their troubles, so that there wasn't a man aboard the ship who wouldn't have given half a year's pay to see the Statue of Liberty looming up over the *Trident's* port bow.

"Curried rice or baked lamb, sir?" the steward inquired.

"Curry," Graham said, and fumbled in his pocket for the paper that had bothered him all morning. He glanced down the table again, cleared his throat, and said, "I received a rather extraordinary message from the Owners this morning. I haven't seen the agents yet, so I don't know any details, but I'll read you the cable."

He coughed, unfolded the paper, and read, "New York, May Sixteen. Due to

delay in sailings and present emergency in Mediterranean have transferred ownership of *Trident* to *DeGroot et Cie*. Stop. Our agent at Palermo will inform you all details. Stop. Harrington—Marine Superintendent."

There was an astonished silence in the saloon. Graham handed the cable to McKnight and turned to his curry.

"All our worrk for nothin', then," McKnight said disgustedly. "We sweat oor guts out, and some Belgians come along an' take her overr. Losh!"

"That means we'll be shipped back to the States right away, then, sir?" the second mate asked.

"I'm not so sure of that, Mr. Dwight," Graham answered. "From the tone of the cable, it seems to me that we'll be expected to stay on. However, there's no use talking further about it until I've seen the agents. The only thing we do know is that the *Trident* has been transferred to some Belgian company. The rest of it will have to wait."

THERE was not long to wait, for the agent, a rather jaundiced American from Cape Cod, came aboard half an hour after lunch, while Graham was changing into his shore clothes. Skandle, the agent, brought with him a large batch of papers and a small, pale-skinned man whom Graham disliked on sight.

"Well, Captain," Skandle said, when they were in Graham's cabin, "you've heard the news, I suppose? Sold her out—lock, stock an' barrel. To the Belgians."

"I got a cable this morning," Graham nodded.

"Yeah. I have all the dope here," Skandle said. "Want you to meet Mr. Barthals here. He's representing this Belgian line—*De Groot et Cie*. Guess you'll take your orders from him, from now on."

Skandle sipped his whiskey and soda.

Barthals' hand was limp and clammy. He had a small, thin mouth and little blue eyes. His accent seemed to Graham to be German, rather than Belgian; but of course Flemish was similar to German in its thick, guttural tones.

"I'll take orders from Mr. Barthals?" he said. "I don't quite get that. They may have sold the ship, but I'll be damned if they've sold me and my crew! What arrangements are made for us!"

Skandle riffled through his papers. In spite of the heat, in spite of the fact that he had lived in Italy almost twenty years, he still insisted on wearing a heavy black serge business suit, a stiff collar and bow tie, and he sweated profusely, puffing jerkily on his cigar, as he pulled out a type-written sheet.

"Under terms of said agreement," he read off drily, "the present master, officers and crew of the vessel are to remain aboard and to operate her for the time being. They will be paid a war bonus, and arrangements are being made to return them to the United States at completion of the present voyage. In the meantime, they are to place themselves at the disposal of representatives of the new owners, as shall be designated."

"Well, I'll be damned!" Graham grunted. "What the hell do they think we are? A bunch of damned sheep?"

"It's all legal, Captain," Skandle answered, shrugging; "checked, signed, sealed and delivered with the blessings of the Marine Superintendent, the Board of Directors and the U. S. Shipping Board. God bless 'em each an' every one! You can walk out if you want to—you ain't prisoners, you know. But the President's declared an embargo on U. S. shipping, and so have the British. The Italians are holding their ships to see what'll happen next. You'll wait a long time, a *mighty* long time, for transportation back home. This new outfit wants you to take this ship to Alexandria, pick up a cargo that's waiting there, run it up to some British port, and deliver the ship at Antwerp. After that, you're through. You'll be taken home in style and on full pay. Meantime, you'll all be on War Risk pay, which is about double. Try that on your bazooka, Captain. If the tune don't sound good, say the word and I'll make what arrangements I can."

"I'll have to put it to the officers and

the crew, of course," Graham said slowly.

"Ve need nodt to add, Kapten," Barthals broke in, "that our Company vill also pay a satisfactory bonus to all hands. Dis cargo iss of importance, and ve cannot get oder crew now."

Graham shrugged. "I'll put it up to the others, gentlemen," he said. "More I can't do."

"Also," Barthals added, "from Gibraltar on ve shall travel mit a British convoy, so there vill be no dangers. And I myself will come with you."

"Hm!" Graham grunted. "Very kind of you, I'm sure. Well, gentlemen, I'll let you know. That's all I have to say now. And I don't mind telling you I don't like it!"

AS HE had been afraid, the officers and crew were willing enough to stay with the ship until she reached whatever destination her new owners might require. The prospect of doubled pay and a bonus was pleasant. The idea of leaving her and cooling their heels in Palermo indefinitely was not, and they were already anxious for some activity.

Once matters had been arranged, the papers were filed, the registry changed, the words "New York" were painted out under the ship's name on the counter and "Anvers" substituted, and the ship got under way.

From the start, Graham knew he was going to have trouble with Barthals. After inspecting the accommodations, the pale-faced man took over the largest passenger cabin and proceeded to make a complete nuisance of himself. He was a dirty, insolent little man who had an unpleasant habit of grinning in a thin-lipped, sneering way whenever he spoke. He had apparently never heard of a toothbrush, and if he knew what a bathtub was for, he evidently considered it a quite needless refinement. The weather remaining hot, all hands found it advisable to stay to windward of him when he was around.

He pestered the life out of the steward. He had to be served coffee and toast in his cabin in the morning. An hour or so

later, he entered the dining salon with a dirty bathrobe tossed over his pajamas and a cigarette dangling from his mouth, and settled down to the business of breakfast. He refused to eat with the officers and had his meals whenever he felt like it. He spent a good deal of time sleeping, either on deck or on a settee in the smoking room. Occasionally he got up enough energy to climb to the bridge, where he leaned against the rail, picking his teeth and burping.

On the second day out Graham heard sharp words coming from the bridge and hastily went up there. The first mate and Barthals were facing each other, Casson pale with anger, Barthals leering as usual.

"Kapten," Barthals said, indicating Casson with the point of a frayed toothpick, "that man iss insolent. I vant him punished."

"What's all this about, Mr. Casson?" Graham asked. "What's happened?"

"By heaven, sir," Casson answered bitterly, "it's bad enough to have to see him hanging around here, but I'll be damned if I'll stand by while he spits on the deck!"

GRAHAM cleared his throat. Aboard any self-respecting ship, her decks are sacred—especially the bridge and lower bridge. Yet Barthals was the Owners' representative and Graham had to use tact. While he was trying to figure a way out, Barthals deliberately spat again, barely missing the Mate's foot. Hastily Graham stepped in between the two men, just in time to prevent the infuriated mate from going to work with his fists.

"Mr. Barthals," he said shortly, "I don't know how you manage things in your country, but as long as I and my crew are in charge of this ship, we'll run her American style. There's plenty of water around the ship to spit in—if you have to spit. And I'll thank you to stay off the bridge from now on. It interferes with the proper handling of the ship, and it's against the rules."

"Here," Barthals said quietly, still leering, "I make the rules. I am in command.

I do as I wish. If you do not punish that man for his insolence, Kapten Graham, I shall see that he is punished—in due time."

Graham's fists clenched. He took a step toward the little man, his eyes blazing. Barthals drew back a step and stopped grinning.

"Get off the bridge, Mr. Barthals," Graham snarled, "and stay off! There's no one in command but me. The sooner you get onto that, the better off you'll be!"

Barthals shrugged and went, his eyes glittering.

Graham said through clenched teeth, "If I don't knock the smirk off that little rat's face before we're through with this voyage, Mr. Casson, it'll be because my guardian angel is working overtime."

He took a glance around and went back to his quarters. Like most modern freighters, the *Trident* was well-equipped in this respect, the captain being provided with a comfortable sleeping cabin, bathroom, and a room officially known as the Captain's Office, but which Graham facetiously referred to as his boudoir. It was a comfortable room, with a thick rug, shaded lights, a large desk, a safe to hold the ship's papers, a settee and two armchairs, besides a modernistic coffee table which Graham himself had provided. The room opened into the smoking room, and also had a private doorway onto the lower bridge deck. As a rule, Graham kept it locked while he was out, but he had run on deck hastily to find out what the argument was about, and had not bothered to lock the door. When he went back he stopped short, gaping. Barthals was lounging in his best armchair, smoking one of his cigars. He had his feet on the coffee table, and as Graham entered he pressed the button for the steward.

"Mr. Barthals," Graham said, "get out of here! And don't come in again unless you are invited—which I doubt whether you ever will be!"

Delicately Barthals flicked ash from the cigar—onto Graham's rug.

"Sit down, Kapten," he said affably.

"I am afraid you do not quite understand."

"I—I *what?*" Graham gasped, taken entirely aback by the man's insolence.

"Dis ship is now under Belgian registry, yes? She operates therefore under Belgian law. Und you haff signed Belgian papers for dis voyage. Therefore, *you* also operate under Belgian law. Yes? My owners haff put me in charge of dis ship. Therefore, Kapten, I do as I wish, go where I wish—and I obey no orders."

He leaned back complacently, grinning up at Graham. What Belgian law might be concerning the privileges and rights of officers he had no idea, and for a moment he was puzzled. There was a tap on the door and the steward looked in.

"Did you ring sir?"

"No," Graham answered, "but as long as you're here, Wilson—just hold that door open a minute."

He strode over to Barthals, jerked him upright, and shoved him, squealing in outraged protest, to the door. Then he put his foot where it would do most good and shoved hard. With a howl of frightened dismay, Barthals shot across the smoking room, fetched up against the after bulkhead and subsided on the floor.

"Thank you, Wilson," Graham said. "That's all, for now."

THE run to Alexandria was made in a little over three days. It was easy enough to see that there was something brewing. Normally, the Mediterranean is crowded with the shipping of all nations, yet on this passage Graham sighted only two vessels; a Greek collier, and a small Turkish tramp, both of them evidently headed for home as fast as they could make it, smearing up the turquoise sky with muddy, smudgy trails of smoke. There seemed to be an almost constant line of warships, however, mostly British and French, stretching clear from Malta to Port Said. They were so frequent that the *Trident* was almost never out of sight of a destroyer or light cruiser. Cruising planes frequently wheeled overhead, sometimes dropping low to inspect the *Trident* as she plodded toward her destination.

Twenty miles out of Alexandria, a British destroyer ran alongside the *Trident* and ordered her to heave to. An officer on the destroyer's bridge hailed to warn Graham that he was entering minefields, and gave him a course that would take him into port close inshore.

"There's an open channel there," the officer shouted, "but watch out for floaters. They're supposed to go dead if they break adrift, but you can't be too sure about it. If you sight any floating, pop 'em off with a rifle, like a good chap, will you?"

Graham acknowledged, grinning. The officer talked of "popping off" a mine containing more than half a ton of high explosive as casually as you'd speak of winging an old tin can with a .22 rifle! He put the ship on her new course, cutting directly inshore, and ordered all hands on deck, save those who had to remain below.

IT WAS edgy work, conning the ship close in shore and knowing that within a half-mile of you the sea was alive with floating death. He had the ship at half-speed, and warned the crew to keep their eyes peeled. With all the mates on the bridge and the larger part of the crew lining the rails on lookout, the ship edged her way along the shoreline. Someone dropped a hammer on the steel foredeck, and everyone in the ship jumped.

"Should pick up the pilot pretty soon," Graham muttered. "I wouldn't want to sail this way very long!"

"Wait till we get into the North Sea, sir," Casson answered grimly. "They say the mines are so thick there that you could walk from England to Holland on them. I suppose—"

"Bridge ahoy!" came a shout from the bows. "There's something black floating awash ahead, sir!"

Graham climbed to the top of the wheelhouse and took out his glasses, scanning the dazzling, leaping sea. Presently he made out something bobbing up and down a quarter-mile on the port bow. It was barely awash, but when he got it in focus, there was no doubt that it was a mine. He could even see the horns.

The steward was standing on the lower bridge, watching. Graham tossed down his keys and shouted, "Wilson, go to the locker in my cabin and fetch up two rifles and some ammunition."

Although the ship was steady enough, the mine was a difficult target. It bobbed up and down, sometimes altogether invisible. For ten minutes, until his eyes ached from the glare, Graham banged away, while Casson was wasting ammunition alongside him, cursing lustily every time he missed.

"Used to be a pretty good shot," he muttered, "or thought I was, anyway!"

"Once more," Graham said. "Hit the bull's eye and win a *seegar*!"

As he spoke, Casson fired again. A huge white column of water leaped high in the air. Before it had subsided, the thunder of the explosion came to them. For a moment the two men stared at the place where the mine had been, then glanced at each other rather awkwardly.

"You know, Mr. Casson," Graham said slowly, "I knew those mines were nasty beasts, but I never realized they'd blow off like that."

They returned to the wheelhouse, silent and thoughtful. A short time later, the pilot boat appeared. As it was coming alongside, Graham said, still remembering that terrific blast, "When we leave Alexandria, Mr. Casson, we'll have all boats swung out—just in case."

"I was thinking the same thing, sir," Casson answered.

A FULL cargo of crude rubber, brought up from the Dutch East Indies, was awaiting the *Trident* when she docked in Alexandria, and loading was started immediately. Graham noticed that Barthals ducked ashore the moment the ship tied up, and hoped that the miserable little man would change his mind about making the rest of the voyage. He was disappointed. On the sailing day, Graham had just returned aboard the *Trident* with his clearance papers, after a visit to the British authorities and the United States consul, when Barthals arrived, grinning more

sourly than ever. He was accompanied by eight men, by the new owners' agent, and—of all things to complete Graham's misery—a girl.

The agent, Lefevre, differed from Barthals in being excessively tall and thin, with a bald head, sunken cheeks and a beaked nose. In other respects he did not differ, being a sloppy-looking person with food stains on what had once been a white suit, and an unpleasant twist to his mouth which was not improved by a livid scar that stretched from his mouth to his left ear.

"Captain Graham," he said, "I have had complaints from Mr. Barthals concerning your conduct and that of your officers. My owners will not tolerate this. Mr. Barthals stands in the position of supercargo. He has the owners' full confidence and trust. He will be in complete charge aboard this ship."

"Mr. Lefevre," Graham answered shortly, "I don't know or care what the Belgian rules are about these things. But I do know this: I'm master aboard my own ship. If I can't be, if I have to be interfered with when I'm at sea, just say the word and I and my crowd will go ashore at once."

"But my dear Captain," Lefevre protested, "that is impossible! You have all signed on for the voyage! You can't legally desert the ship now!"

GRAHAM shrugged. "We'll take the matter before the British authorities, gentlemen. And I'll remind you that the British also recognize the final authority of a ship's master when she's at sea. You can take it or leave it!"

Barthals sputtered up for a blow-off, but Lefevre silenced him.

"I'm quite sure that all this is just a misunderstanding, my dear Capitan," he said. "Mr. Barthals is only interested in seeing that this cargo reaches its destination safely. He has no desire to infringe on your authority."

"You have my terms," Graham answered. "I'm master here—absolutely and finally. Barthals stays out of my quarters

and he stays off the bridge. And if I catch him spitting on my decks again I'll put him to work with a bucket and a swab and make him clean up. You have my word on that. Now—who are these new men and that girl?"

"The men are Belgians who were landed

Gibraltar, where the British will give you instructions. We have arranged for you to join a large British convoy which will see you safely into England. After that, you will receive further instructions. Good luck, and a prosperous voyage."

They shook hands. Barthals went out with the agent, and for a while they stood close together, Lefevre stooping consider-



Barthals stepped into the wheelhouse, followed by three men. They were all armed

here after their vessel struck a mine," Lefevre answered. "They're being sent home aboard this ship. They are all capable seamen and will no doubt be of use. The girl is an American. She was unable to get passage aboard any other ship, and so she is going to England with you, and sailing from there to New York."

"Well, I suppose that's her business," Graham said. "And now, since the tug is coming alongside and the pilot is aboard, we'll be taking in the gangplank in a short while, sir."

Lefevre nodded. "Very well, Captain. You understand that you are to put in at

ably. There was a good deal of hand-waving and jabbering which Graham did not understand. Then the two men laughed in a way that made Graham feel goose-pimplily, shook hands, and Lefevre went ashore.

"You know, sir," the first mate said, coming up just then, "there's something about this business that seems queer to me. I don't like Barthals, I don't like the looks

of that agent feller, and I like still less the looks of those men who are to go with us. They're about as fine a bunch of sullen plug-uglies as I've ever seen. And for ship-wrecked men, they've quite a downright pretty selection of baggage. It must have been a nice, polite sort of sinking, to give them time to break out a sea chest and a lot of suitcases!"

Graham laughed. "You're getting jumpy, Mr. Casson. I don't think we need worry about them. And you'll be glad to know that I put it pretty plain about Barthals' position aboard ship."

THE passage to Gibraltar was uneventful—or almost so. For the first three days out, Barthals sulked in his berth, while the men he had brought aboard kept together, spending most of the day hours lounging and smoking around the number four hatch. Because they were a surly, bad-tempered lot, could speak little English, and got on the crew's nerves, Graham arranged for them to have their meals at "second table" in the petty officers' mess, after the bo'sun, quartermasters and the rest had eaten. Barthals protested that his men ought to have first table, a protest which Graham did not even bother to answer.

The girl, Laurel Raymond, also kept to her cabin pretty much for the first two days. She was a dark-haired, pretty girl with a neat figure and hazel eyes that had a somewhat mysterious look to them. Apparently she wished to be left alone. Graham was rather surprised when, late in the afternoon of the second day out, she knocked timidly on the door of his "boudoir," for she had shown no desire to have any contacts with him or the officers.

"Captain Graham," she said, "do I have to have my meals with that horrible little man, Mr. Barthals?"

"Not if you don't want to, Miss Raymond," Graham assured her. "I can arrange with the steward to serve your meals whenever you want them—in your cabin, if you wish."

"But that would be too much trouble,"

the girl said. "I don't want to be a bother. Couldn't I eat with you and the officers?"

"Certainly—we'd be delighted to have you. Barthals hasn't been bothering you, has he?"

"Not—exactly," Laurel said. "It's just that he sits there and—sort of *leers* at me. And he makes disgusting noises when he eats. Besides, he's so dirty!"

"You're not telling me anything I don't know," Graham said sourly. "It was just that we thought you wanted to be left alone."

Laurel shrugged. "I'm sorry if I seem unsociable. You see, my Dad and I were on a world cruise. He died of a heart attack in Karachi. I—well, I didn't have the heart to go home alone. I'm the last one of our family. When the ship was ordered to turn back at Port Said, I went on to Alexandria, determined to find a ship to take me to England."

"But why England. Miss Raymond?" Graham asked. "You must know the war is getting rapidly worse."

She nodded. "I do know. Maybe you think I'm silly. All my life I've never done anything to amount to anything. Dad had—quite a lot of money. Now I have it. I don't care about it much. I'm sick of the life we lived at home. Newport, night clubs, Sun Valley—all that stuff. After he died, I made up my mind to do something useful. So I'm going to England and offer my services in any capacity that will be of use."

"Well," Graham said, "I wish you luck."

THE ship had passed Malta and was south of Sardinia. Here the war vessels were more in evidence than ever, including a number of Italians; but merchant ships were evidently a curiosity, judging from the interest displayed in the *Trident* by every ship they passed, and by occasional air patrols. The ship was making her usual sixteen knots through a gray, flat sea. On the lower bridge, Laurel sat in a deck chair, reading, and Graham was walking the starboard bridge wing.

Suddenly the girl dropped her book and stood up, staring across the water.

"Captain Graham!" she called. "What in the world is that thing sticking up out of the water?"

Graham jumped. There had been a report in Alexandria of a German U-boat operating out of a secret base along the Spanish coast. He hopped to the rail, and made out the object Laurel was pointing to. It was about a half-mile distant. In its appearance, it might have been a mooring post—only no one sets up mooring posts seventy-five miles from the nearest land. Also, it was slowly moving, and there was a slight feather of foam around it.

Graham had naval reserve training, and he knew what to do in case of submarine attack, but he didn't know whether this particular submarine intended to attack him or not. Admitting that it might be a German, it might also be English, French or Italian, in which case it was either simply observing him, or going about its own nasty, secret business. As luck would have it, this was one of the few times since leaving Alexandria that there had not been a naval patrol in sight. Graham called the first mate out of the wheelhouse.

"Tell Sparks to raise a British or French warship," he said. "I don't know who that chap is, but I don't feel very happy with him poking around under our keel like that. We're a belligerent vessel now."

LAUREL was standing at the rail, watching the periscope. Aft, Graham could see the men who had come aboard with Barthals, staring at the unpleasant, sinister-looking object and arguing among themselves in low voices. The *Trident*, which had considerably more speed than the submarine, was drawing up with her when Graham, on a sudden uncontrollable impulse, whirled and bellowed, "Hard a-port! Hard a-port, there!"

The ship swung in a wide circle, presenting her bows to the submarine. Why he had issued the order at that moment, what sixth sense had warned him, Graham neither knew nor cared, but it saved the ship. She was barely halfway on her swing when he saw the trail of the torpedo. It was streaking toward them at over forty-

five knots, and flashed past little more than fifty feet on the quarter.

"Mr. Casson!" Graham shouted. "Tell Sparks to send out the SSS!"

His jaw was set angrily. He jumped for the wheelhouse and took over the wheel himself. The submarine, seeing her first shot had missed, was moving off to starboard in what seemed to Graham an insolently leisurely fashion. She was shifting over for another shot, because the *Trident's* new course would bring her athwart the submarine. Graham was not prepared to let that happen, however. He spun the wheel, heading the *Trident* directly for the U-boat. Its periscope disappeared. Graham held course, hoping that it might still be within reach of his keel, but after a couple of minutes he took his original course.

It was unpleasant to think that the submarine was skulking around somewhere nearby, getting ready for another shot. The advantage Graham had was that the *Trident* was considerably faster than the submarine when the latter was submerged. The disadvantage was that if the U-boat surfaced and opened fire with her deck gun, he was helpless and defenseless. This idea had just occurred to him when the lookout hailed, "Periscope—port bow, sir!"

Graham headed up for it again, but this time the sub's commander meant to give him no chance to try any ramming tactics. The conning tower seemed to pop above the surface like a cork. The ugly-looking gun broke water as men tumbled out of the conning tower and ran for it. With long-practiced efficiency, they had the weapon swung around and had fired a shot almost before Graham could make up his mind what to do next. The shell screamed above the *Trident* and plunked into the water a quarter mile to starboard, throwing up a ragged geyser. In desperation, Graham put his ship about and headed once more directly for the submarine. He was somewhat astonished at the result, for the gun's crew scrambled back to the conning tower faster than they had come out.

"Well, I'll be damned!" Graham exclaimed. "I thought those lads were supposed to be tough!"

"Maybe they are, sir," Casson answered. "Take a look over there!"

CASSON pointed eastward, and Graham saw the real reason for the submarine's action. Three destroyers were racing up. The smoke streaked in a flat drift from their funnels, and there was a great white roll of foam under their flared bows. The daylight blinker aboard one of them began to jabber, but neither Graham nor anyone else aboard the *Trident* could make anything of it. Graham, guessing that they wanted him to stand clear, did so.

The three destroyers fanned out abreast as they hurtled toward the submarine's location. They reminded Graham of hounds coursing a rabbit, and his hands clenched on the bridge rail as they reached the approximate location of the submarine. From the squat stern of each destroyer, three black objects suddenly rose in a low, lazy arc.

"What ever are those, Captain?" Laurel Raymond asked.

"Depths charges," Graham answered. "Watch!"

The nine depths charges, which looked exactly like fifty-gallon paint drums, plunked stolidly into the seething water astern of the racing destroyers.

"But nothing's happened!" Laurel said. "Is that all—"

She broke off. The water where the charges had fallen suddenly bulged upward until it looked like a row of rounded hills. The hills boiled, sank a little, then, from their centers, there burst incredible fountains of white water, that leaped progressively higher in jet after jet, broke into feathery rifts of spray, and subsided. At the same moment, the whole fabric of the *Trident*, which was more than a mile away, seemed to shudder.

"There goes another bunch," Casson said tensely. "Lord, I'd hate to be in that submarine, sir!"

"But how do they know if they've hit it?" Laurel asked.

Graham laughed grimly.

"They don't *have* to hit her. If she's within three hundred yards of one of those

things when it goes off, she'll just"—he slapped his hands together—"like a busted paper bag. It's the concussion."

One of the destroyers circled around, slowing. In a minute, the others followed her. After what seemed like a confabulation between them, the three ships set off again in the direction from which they had come.

The hatch between the *Trident's* radio room and the wheelhouse slid open and young Flint shoved a paper through.

"Message from the destroyers, sir," he said.

Graham took it and read it aloud: "Proceed on course. Submarine destroyed."

There was an audible sigh of relief in the wheelhouse. Turning, Graham glanced aft. Barthals was standing at the rail, his hands clenched on it until they were bloodless, staring at the slowly widening patch of oil and flotsam marking the submarine's grave. The little man's face was contorted into a mask of malevolent fury.

THE British authorities in Alexandria had warned Graham that he must stop in Gibraltar for a contraband check up, and the warning struck him as amusing when, five miles off the Gibraltar harbor, he was flagged down by a patrol boat and ordered in. It was obvious enough that he would have had to stop, whether he intended to or not, for the patrol boat had her guns cleared and, by the general look of things, intended to use them if necessary. It was fortunate that the ship had already been cleared for a British port and was to join a British convoy, for otherwise she would have been laid up for full cargo examination. As it was, the officer who came aboard as soon as the ship was anchored got rid of matters quickly enough.

"We don't bother Allied ships," he told Graham, lounging in Graham's "boudoir" with a whiskey and soda. "The fact is, we know pretty well what ship is carrying what—and even where she's carrying it just about as soon as she clears."

"I've heard that you're pretty efficient," Graham admitted.

The young officer grinned. "We surprise people sometimes. You see, we have con-

suls, trade agents, and our own businessmen operating in just about every port in the world. They hear things, of course; in their clubs, in pubs and barrooms and shipping offices. Suppose some English trader in Java knows a ship is clearing for Trieste with a general cargo. He hears, through his clerks, or in some other way, that she has secretly loaded two hundred tons of tin at the bottom of number two hold. She plans to slip it past the blockade and run it into Germany. Our man reports this to the Consul."

"Then your navy seizes it, I suppose," Graham said.

"Not at all. You can't seize neutral ships in foreign waters. The consul reports to contraband headquarters in London. They report to us. Presently the ship comes along. Her captain is all smiles. Nothing contraband. Everything shipshape. Manifest certified by the British consul, and all that. He offers us a drink—which we take—and when we've drunk it, we say, 'And now, Captain, you can carry on—just as soon as you have unloaded that two hundred tons of tin you have hidden at the bottom of your number two hold!'"

Graham laughed. "I can imagine how they feel! I'm glad you haven't any tabs on us. Well—"

THE door opened and Barthals appeared.

He was freshly dressed and shaved, and for once looked positively clean. "Goot morning, gentlemen," he said affably. "I am vundering when we can get under way?"

The Britisher glanced inquiringly at Graham, who said reluctantly, "Lieutenant, this is Mr. Barthals. He's a representative of the owners in Antwerp."

The two shook hands. Barthals said, "I hope all arrangements are made. We would not wish to lose the convoy, Lieutenant."

"Quite so," the Englishman answered. "Well, I've given Captain Graham his instructions. You're all clear to carry on now. The convoy will get under way tomorrow noon, and I warn you that, if you miss it, you'll have to return here and get fresh clearance papers."

He shook hands with Graham, bowed to Barthals, and went out.

"Now, Captain," Barthals said, "we should check on the instructions, yes?"

"Mr. Barthals," Graham answered shortly, "I was given sealed orders, to be opened when we join the convoy. For the present, we'll get under way."

Barthals shrugged. "My dear Captain, we are cleared now. What difference could it make, that we should open the instructions now? Come, come! Let us read what it says, and get under way!"

His eagerness, his unusually polite manner and his greedy eyes, irritated Graham.

"I've already put the instructions in my safe," he answered shortly, "and they're going to stay there. When they are opened, Mr. Barthals, I'll do the opening and reading, and no one else. The orders are strictly confidential, and for me alone. Is that clear?"

Barthals' eyes flickered toward the safe. He licked his lips, shrugged, and said, "Very well, Captain. As you say."

FOR two hours the *Trident* remained at anchor. Barthals summoned a boat and went ashore, dressed in a new white duck suit and sweating profusely. When he came back an hour later, he paused for a few minutes to speak to one of the men who had come aboard with him at Alexandria, then went to his cabin. He looked pleased with himself.

Laurel Raymond appeared presently, wearing white shorts and a light blue sweater, and carrying a camera. Graham saw her pass his "boudoir" door and called out, "Just a minute, Miss Laurel! I wouldn't take that camera on deck."

She came in, surprised, asking, "Why not?"

"Because there's a war on, and this is a naval station," Graham answered. "However, sit down and let me get you a long, cool drink. You look as though you could use it."

"I could," she admitted, pushing her hair back; "it's hot enough. You know, Captain Graham, ever since we left Alexandria, I've had a funny feeling."

"The heat, no doubt," Graham said, ringing for the steward.

"No, it isn't that," the girl answered. "It's that nasty little Barthals man."

It wasn't Graham's business to talk to one passenger about another—something, he had learned from bitter experience, that always led to trouble. He merely said casually, "Well, the voyage will be over before very long. And we'll soon be out of this heat."

Laurel sipped her drink thoughtfully. "He's a Belgian, isn't he?" she asked abruptly.

"Yes. Why?"

"I just wondered. His stateroom's next to mine, you know. I could have sworn, last night, that I heard him talking German to some one. I know German well."

Graham started a little. Then he answered carelessly, "You were no doubt mistaken. Flemish and German sound quite similar. The same guttural tones."

"I suppose you're right," she answered. "We have a cargo of rubber, haven't we?"

Graham nodded.

"I was just thinking," Laurel said, "how the Germans would like to get hold of it. Seems they're desperate for rubber."

Before Graham could answer, the steward knocked on the door and handed in a cable.

"Just came from ashore, sir," he said.

Graham read the message, and growled. It was instructions from the Belgian owners to place himself entirely under Barthals's orders until the ship contacted the British convoy. It puzzled Graham, as there seemed to be little purpose in it. Within twenty-four hours, they would join the convoy somewhere at sea, so what possible good it could do Barthals to have any say in the matter now, Graham couldn't see. Laurel, seeing him preoccupied, went out. She had hardly left when Barthals appeared, smiling from ear to ear.

"So," he said, "you received Owners' instructions?"

"I have," Graham said sourly.

"Then we will get under way immediately, and you will please to hand me the orders given to you by the British."

"We'll get under way," Graham retorted, "but the orders will stay where they are. They were handed to me, as ship's master, in strict confidence. Neither you nor anyone else aboard the ship will see them, now or any other time."

He backed Barthals out into the smoking room, locked the door of his "boudoir," and went up to the chartroom.

THE mates were already standing by on the bridge, and at Graham's signal the anchor cable began to grind through the hawse pipe. When it was up and down, Graham shoved the telegraph to "Slow ahead," saw the anchor broken out, and, after clearing the harbor, went back to the chartroom, where he found Barthals, poring over the chart.

"You know the position at which we are to join the British convoy, Kaptén?" Barthals asked.

Graham nodded, and was surprised that Barthals did not even ask him what the position was. Instead, he said, "Before making that position, you are to proceed at full speed until you reach the position I have written down here. You will reach it about nightfall, and when you get there, you will heave to. Is that clear?"

Graham looked at the position. 14 20 7 West, 36-30 North. He marked it off on the chart, and said, "No, it isn't clear."

"You remember your orders from the owners, Kaptén," Barthals said.

Graham shrugged. He could see no sense in doing what Barthals ordered, but he did have the cable from the owners, and presumably there was some reason behind it. He said shortly, "Very well," and laid off the course, giving it to the First Mate.

THE *Trident* lay to, rolling slightly in the long Atlantic swells that swept in from westward. In his "boudoir," Graham was having a cup of tea and some crackers before turning in for a few hours sleep. He had a feeling of uneasiness. He knew there was something screwy going on either aboard the ship herself or in connection with her, but he couldn't for the life of him put his finger on it.

It hardly seemed probable, as he had first suspected, that the new owners planned barratry—deliberately sinking the ship in order to get the insurance. If they had any such plans in mind, they would hardly go to the trouble of purchasing an almost new, costly ship and putting a very valuable cargo aboard her. They would select some old vessel, bought at scrap prices. And in any case, war insurance rates would make any such venture unprofitable. Also, a Belgian-owned concern would hardly be trying to pull anything that would help their enemies. Graham concluded that his dislike of Barthals, and his natural nervousness, sailing under war conditions, had affected his judgment. Most likely he was making mountains out of molehills. In any case, he was a neutral. The best thing for him to do was mind his own business, complete his job, and get back to the United States as soon as possible.

He refilled his tea cup and switched on the short wave radio. A torrent of Italian gushed out of the receiver. He shifted the dial and heard a deliberate, British voice saying, "This is London calling. We are now bringing you the news of the day—"

On the deck outside there was a sudden scuffle, and a shout. Graham jumped for the door leading to the deck and stepped out. The ship was without lights, and it was a moment before he saw, in the light from the doorway, two men scuffling and slugging at each other. The second mate's head appeared over the bridge rail, and he snapped, "Below, there! What the devil's going on?"

Graham jumped for the two men, grabbing one by the collar and dragging him away. Then he saw that they were two of the silent, sullen-looking strangers brought aboard at Alexandria.

"What's going on here?" he demanded angrily. "What are you men doing up here?"

The second mate had run down and was holding the other man. He said, "One of 'em came running up from below, sir, with the other after him. The next thing I knew they were scrapping on the deck."

"He steal money from me," one of the

men snarled, "I chase him. I kill him—pig!"

"He's lie!" the other retorted. "He make troubles all the times, pretend I steal—"

"Both of you go below," Graham snapped. "I'll attend to you in the morning. And if I find you up here again, you'll suffer for it. Now get going!"

"Crazy foreigners!" the mate muttered.

"We're lucky we haven't had more trouble with them," Graham answered. "Everything all right, Mr. Dwight? I'm turning in for a spell. Call me at once if anything unusual appears. And keep your eyes skinned. I don't like this business of lying to at night, without lights."

HE WENT back to his office, and gulped down his tea, which was cold and bitter. Then he turned in. Once they joined the convoy, he would have little enough sleep, for it is tricky business keeping stations in a big convoy, especially at night. In a moment he was asleep.

He woke up presently, feeling stupid and logy. His head ached, and his mouth felt like hot cottonwool. He switched on the bulkhead light and looked at his watch. It was almost four in the morning, which meant that he had slept six hours. Getting up, he got a drink of water, wondering at the dryness of his throat and the throbbing of his head, and stepped into his office for a cigarette.

The steward, in cleaning up the tea tray and tidying around, had drawn back the heavy curtains over the portholes, and as Graham glanced idly out of the port, he saw a pin-point of light appear briefly in the darkness somewhere to starboard. Alarmed that it might be a vessel approaching, and that the *Trident* lay athwart her course, he went out on deck, peering into the dark. There was no light visible, however, and he wondered if he had been mistaken. He was about to go up to the bridge when he saw another light. This time it was a momentary, flickering gleam, and it was very close to the ship. For a moment he was puzzled. Then he realized that he had seen a light reflected on the back of a wave, from the ship herself.

Barefooted, he walked softly aft to the rail and peered down at the deck. Between him and the midship deckhouse, which contained the funnel and engine-room casing, was a comparatively short well deck in which was the hatch of the number three hold. Forward of the deckhouse were two kingposts which also served as ventilators. As he watched, his eyes slowly growing accustomed to the darkness, he saw a faint, rapid flicker of light, which now and then reflected on a wave.

The light seemed to come from the narrow space between the starboard kingpost and the deckhouse!

GRAHAM slipped down the ladder to the well deck. His bare feet made no sound on the steel deck, and he was pleased with that—until he stubbed his toe against a ringbolt. The ring made a clatter, and in spite of himself he let out an audible gasp as the pain shot through his foot. The flickering light stopped abruptly, and he thought he saw a shadowy figure move for an instant. If so, it had evidently entered the starboard alleyway, for it disappeared almost at once. He plunged aft, hopping the sill of the alleyway, and peered around.

There was no one in sight. He walked down a short distance, and looked in through the engine-room door. There was a hot, oily smell, and the quiet sougling of the ventilators. Below him were gleaming steel ladders and catwalks reaching down to the bowels of the engine room, and he could see the turtle-backs of the turbines and the big, arced casing of the reduction gear. Almost immediately below him the second engineer stood by the throttle wheel, marking up the engine-room log, and no doubt thinking that the last ten minutes of his watch were going pretty slowly, as they always do.

"Below, there, Mr. Patterson!" Graham hailed. "Did you see anyone pass around here just now?"

Patterson looked up, startled, and shook his head. "No, sir. No one who shouldn't be here."

Graham walked forward again. The crew's galley was just forward of the en-

gine-room trunk, reaching from alley to alley, with a door on each side. Both doors were open. There was a bucket of freshly peeled potatoes on the deck and a pot of soup simmering on the coal stove, but the cook was not there. Graham realized that the mysterious person—if Graham had not imagined him—could have ducked through the galley to the port alleyway and gone forward—or aft—without being seen. In any case, he had gone to cover by now. Graham padded forward again and climbed to the bridge. The third mate was on watch there.

"Did you see any lights around, Mr. Gaynor?" Graham asked.

"I thought I saw one, somewhere off to starboard, sir," Gaynor said. "It was there only a second—I wasn't even sure I saw it."

"Seen anyone sculling around the decks? Anyone who shouldn't be there?"

"No, sir. It's sort of hard to see anything at all, in this darkness."

Graham suddenly tensed. "Listen! D'you hear anything?"

What little wind there was came from north west. As the two men listened, they could make out a faint muttering sound somewhere off the starboard bow. It faded in a little while.

"What the devil was that, d'you suppose, sir?" Gaynor said.

"Diesel engine, by the sound of it. Keep your eyes skinned, Mr. Gaynor. Let me know at once if you hear or see anything suspicious."

He went down to the alley opening into the passenger cabins, which were on the port side. The ventilator in the door of Barthals' cabin was open. He could hear the placid snoring of the man. Snoring could be faked, of course. And Barthals had had time to sneak back to his cabin, assuming *he* was the one who had been sending flash signals. But it didn't seem to make much sense. If Barthals had any information he wished to send out, he could easily have done it when he was ashore in Gibraltar, and he certainly knew no more now than he had known then.

Shrugging irritably, Graham returned to

his bunk and his interrupted sleep, glad to notice that the headache and the heavy feeling had disappeared, but puzzled by the whole set-up.

AT EIGHT o'clock, when Graham joined his officers for breakfast, the steward handed him a note from Barthals, authorizing him to proceed and to make contact with the British convoy.

By noon the head of the convoy was in sight—a triple line of freight ships of all sorts, sizes and ages, ranging from a big, three-funneled liner, gray-painted and with six-inch guns mounted astern, all the way to a rag-tag of assorted freighters, tankers and colliers in the rear. A light cruiser headed the column, a flotilla of destroyers guarded the flanks, and the flotilla leader brought up the rear. Graham estimated that there must be almost a hundred vessels in the entire convoy. The smoke from the ships' funnels made a ragged, brownish smudge clear to the horizon.

As the *Trident* neared, a destroyer raced for her, whirled around almost under her counter, and came in close. The *Trident* had already made her number, and the officer on the destroyer's bridge hailed, "Station last in the starboard line. And look sharp, old man. We're getting under way immediately!"

Within an hour, with the huge convoy on the move and seeming to cover the entire visible area of water, Graham went down to his "boudoir," locked the door, and opened his safe, taking out the sealed orders handed him at Gibraltar. He was about to open the heavy envelope with its heavy black imprint, "O.H.M.S."—On His Majesty's Service—when he stopped, holding it to the light. There was something queer about the look of it. He wondered if it could possibly have been tampered with, but the seals were intact, and he supposed he was mistaken, so he broke the seals and opened it.

THERE was nothing unusual or unexpected in the general orders. All ships to maintain stations assigned. All ships to obey promptly and strictly any orders given

by the commanders of the escort vessels; to show a hooded white sternlight, so screened as to be invisible save from a point directly astern. Masters were cautioned to permit no other lights whatsoever above decks at night—not even a match or cigarette. The only thing that did surprise Graham was that, while some of the ships would leave the convoy when close to Southampton and Liverpool, the main body was to steam up the Irish Sea and around the tip of Scotland, instead of going through the Straits of Dover, which would have been the closer course for ships heading for Hull, Newcastle and Aberdeen. However, he supposed that the British Admiralty had its reasons for the detour—most likely that such a big convoy would interfere with the passage of troop and supply ships between England and France across the narrow, turgid waters of the Straits, already cluttered with mines, submarine defenses and patrols.

It was edgy, unpleasant work, keeping stations in the convoy. In fair weather there was nothing to it, of course, but there was little fair weather, after they passed Finisterre. There were rain squalls, clumpy, sloppy cross seas, and plenty of fog. The fog was the worst of all. At such times, each ship was instructed to trail a marker buoy astern, to prevent the following ship from losing station and running up on her. But sometimes, with the fog so thick that you could hardly see your own foremast, it was no easy matter to keep the marker buoy in sight.

It was an eerie feeling, to Graham and everyone else aboard the *Trident*, to cruise along in a heavy fog, with no siren blowing, knowing that all around you were others ships silently creeping through the mist, knowing that only a slight miscalculation aboard one of the ships would send the whole column into howling confusion. It was annoying, too, to have to keep the speed down to ten knots. The *Trident's* normal speed was sixteen knots, and some of the bigger ships ahead were capable of twenty-two or more. But a convoy has to adjust its speed to that of the slowest ship, and the slowest ship, a Norwegian

tanker, was all but shaking her rivets loose, trying to keep up.

It wasn't so bad at night, unless the weather was thick, for you could see the stern light of the ship ahead; but even so, lights at sea are tricky, especially when you stare at them until your eyeballs prickle. To prevent any danger of running up too close to the ship ahead, Graham had one of the mates take the angle with his sextant every fifteen minutes.

NO SORT of radio communication was permitted to any of the ships, in order to prevent enemy vessels from locating the convoy by means of direction finders. So it was only by the increased activity of the escort destroyers that Graham and the others knew when they were in the submarine danger zone.

Graham and Laurel were on the lower bridge, studying a faint line to eastward which was the coast of Wales, when three of the destroyers on the starboard flank of the convoy suddenly fell out of line, converging on each other and stopping. In a rough triangle, bow to bow, they bowed and nodded at one another for some minutes, daylight blinkers chattering, like three spinsters meeting after church. Then they veered off, racing away at full speed in line abreast.

"What in the world are they doing?" Laurel exclaimed. "They act as though they were playing a game, or something!"

Graham laughed. "They are. A rather grim one. They must have heard a submarine."

"*Heard it?*"

"Yes. They all carry sound detectors. When they hear a submarine, three of them get together like that. They get three bearings on the sound, one from each ship. That gives them a triangulation—locates the source of the sound. Then they set off and drop depths charges over that point, and it's pretty tough on Mister Submarine."

Even as he explained, great columns of water leaped up astern of the destroyers. A moment later they heard the explosions. The destroyers gathered again, snuffing

around like hound dogs, before racing back to their positions in the convoy line, their daylight blinkers flickering excitedly. Laurel laughed.

"They're cute, aren't they?" she said. "Like puppy dogs, scampering around! They look as though they were having fun!"

"I dare say they are," Graham answered drily, "but I doubt whether the chaps in the submarine think so."

"How much longer will it be before we reach port?" Laurel asked.

"About four days—if we don't run into thick weather off the north of Scotland," Graham said. "It's bad water, up there. And I wouldn't be surprised if they take us pretty well north of the Orkneys."

"I suppose we're pretty safe now, though," Laurel said, looking at the brilliantly sparkling water, scarred by the long, writhing wakes of the convoy.

Graham shrugged. "Probably. The most dangerous place is probably the east coast of Scotland, when we'll be subject to air raids. That's the time when you'll have to stay in your cabin."

Laurel grinned, making a somewhat impertinent face.

"*Maybe* I will," she said. "I'm not a sissy, you know. If there's any excitement, I'd like to see it."

Graham grunted. "You're not a sissy—but you're not bullet-proof, either."

"Neither are you!" she retorted.

GRAHAM began to think that he had been wrong in expecting the eastern Scottish coast to be a danger point. The big convoy plowed its way north of the Orkneys, molested only once by a single German Heinkel, which dropped two bombs a long way from any target and made off toward the Danish coast in a flurry of sharp white shrapnel bursts. There were two or three submarine scares, but still no sign of any serious German attempt to break up the convoy.

"Most likely," the chief engineer remarked, "the Heinies are too well occupied in Flanders to be consarned wi' the likes of us."

"They don't use subs and battleships in Flanders, do they?" the third engineer asked innocently.

McKnight wiped his mustache and turned a deliberate stare on his assistant. "Muster McGonigle," he said ominously, "have ye finished re-bushin' yon feed-pomp I mentioned this mornin'? It would be a more prrrofitable occupation than dis-putin' wi' your elders!"

When Graham went on deck early the following morning, there was a light mist over a gray, choppy sea. The convoy was somewhere to the eastward of the Firth of Forth, slogging along at its usual deliberate pace, and while the larger vessels made nothing of the chop, the destroyers were smothering their bows. Graham noticed Barthals on deck, with a pair of field glasses. It was the first time in three days that the man had left his cabin, and now, dressed in a long, bulky overcoat, he was studying the eastern sky.

Very faintly, Graham heard the remote buzz of a plane. He tried to find it, but it was lost somewhere in the chilly haze. As he climbed to the bridge, the drone grew louder and he saw that aboard a nearby destroyer the anti-aircraft guns were being manned.

"Up there, sir," the second mate said. "You can just see her through the mist."

Graham made out the shape of a plane, flitting very fast among the clouds. She was much closer than he had expected, and with his glasses he could clearly see the swastika on her wings. The second mate whistled.

"Wow! Look at that baby go!"

THE plane circled, while anti-aircraft guns aboard the escort ships began to chatter and shrapnel puffs that looked like balls of cottonwool suddenly blossomed all around her. She wheeled again, darting upward in a great zoom and headed for home. One of the escort destroyers, in answer to a flickered signal from the flotilla leader, turned eastward and opened up, seeming to dissolve as she blended into the gray mist and sea.

The Mate had come on the bridge, at-

tracted by the gunfire. "Another submarine?" he said.

"I don't think so," Graham answered. "Only one of the destroyers went. Maybe on reconnaissance."

They waited a half-hour, but as nothing further happened they went down to breakfast. Little Flint, the radio operator, came in late and slipped apologetically into his place. He had had a pretty soft berth of it on this voyage because he had not been permitted to use his instruments. He glanced around at the others, cleared his throat, and said to Graham, "I think there's something in the wind, sir."

"What do you mean by that, Sparks?"

"Well, sir—you know none of the ships have been using their radio. But for the last hour there's been a regular babble of code going on. I can't decipher it, of course—secret stuff. But that light cruiser at the head of the convoy has been jabbering away like mad with another ship, and with a shore station."

"Hm," Graham said. "Probably getting instructions for bringing the convoy in-shore."

Sparks, rather disappointed, having hoped that his news would excite the others, said, "Yes, sir. That's probably what it is."

Laurel came in, apologizing for being late, and took her place between Graham and the Mate.

"Mr. Barthals must have been having nightmares last night," she said. "Usually all I can hear from his cabin is snoring, but all last night he was diddering around and muttering to himself, and singing."

"Eh?" Graham exclaimed. "*Singing!*"

Laurel swallowed some oatmeal and nodded soberly. She glanced rather sharply at Graham and said, "Yes—singing."

The officers chuckled. McKnight speared a chunk of ham, downed it, and said, "'Tis a man's privilege to raise his voice in song once and a time, but it surprises me that yon little sneering greasepot has the spirit to do so. Ye might know, Miss Laurel, that I hae somethin' of a baritone, myself, when the spirit touches me."

"You're sure you don't mean when

you've touched the 'spirit', Mr. McKnight?" the mate inquired maliciously. "I remember one time in Brooklyn—"

"Gentlemen," Graham broke in hastily, having heard the Brooklyn incident before, "it's too early in the morning for arguments!"

The others finished up their meal, excused themselves and went about their assorted duties. Although Graham, as a matter of courtesy, usually remained with his passenger until she had finished, he started to get up now, because they were closing the land and he wanted to be on deck. Laurel stopped him.

"Captain Graham," she said, "do you know what Mr. Barthals was singing, this morning?"

"I haven't any idea—unless it was 'Home, Sweet Home.'"

"Well, it wasn't," Laurel said. "It was the German marching song, 'We sail against England!'"

WHEN Graham went on deck, all his officers were on the bridge, and all were staring into the sky to port. Barthals was still on the lower bridge. Further aft, the men he had brought on board in Alexandria were crowding the rail. For a moment Graham was puzzled. Then he heard a weird, insistent hum, a sound not quite like any other he had ever heard before. It was a quivering, penetrating noise that came from somewhere overhead, from the grayish drive of clouds, and yet seemed to come from all around. Graham went up to the bridge and said, "What's up, Mr. Casson? What's all that noise?"

"I don't know, sir," Casson answered, "but it sounds to me like airplanes—and lots of 'em. I saw a mass air flight of our American army planes once—hundreds of 'em, flying in formation—and they sounded just about like that."

Graham looked down the long, smoking lines of the convoy. There seemed to be no excitement or any particular activity, though with his glasses he could see men on their bridges, all watching the eastern sky. Some of the escort destroyers had left the line and could be seen off to port.

Graham had a prickly sensation down his spine—the same sort of feeling you get when a heavy thunderstorm is brewing and you are waiting for the first flash of lightning, the first roll of thunder.

Sparks appeared with a message. It was a general signal for all vessels of the convoy to stand by for an air attack, and to keep crews under cover as much as possible. Graham ordered his own men off the deck and sent all who were not needed on the bridge below.

The weird, concentrated buzz was louder now. It had a menacing, savage quality about it. The planes were still invisible, somewhere in or above the clouds. But you knew they were there. You knew that when they came they would try to blow you and your ship out of the water, and you knew—and this was the part Graham disliked most—that you couldn't fight back. You could do nothing but hang on grimly and hope for the best.

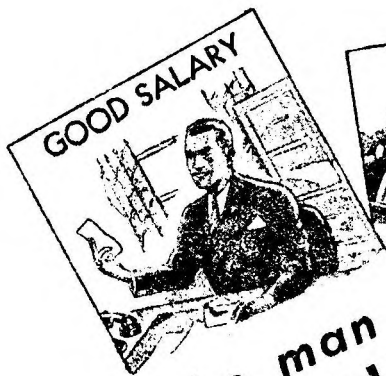
Casson suddenly pointed.

HALF-CONCEALED among the clouds, a line of small planes appeared, traveling at an amazing speed. They swooped down toward the convoy, spreading out somewhat. From the escort ships came a sudden frantic chatter, interspersed with heavier explosions. The chatter came from the multiple anti-aircraft guns, which the British call Chicago pianos. The heavier sound came from the high-angle turrets of the destroyers.

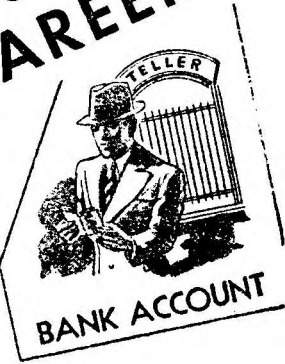
The air around the planes was suddenly peppered with light smoke bursts, looking like freckles against the gray clouds. The planes wheeled and dived, but held their course—all save one, which suddenly seemed to come apart in mid-air, and plunged howling into the sea. To Graham's surprise, the rest carried on, passing over the convoy, headed westward.

"Scout planes, sir," Casson said. "Probably going ahead to run interference for the bombers, in case the British send out attack planes."

The droning of dozens of great engines made the air quiver now. The gunfire had stopped, though off to port it could be



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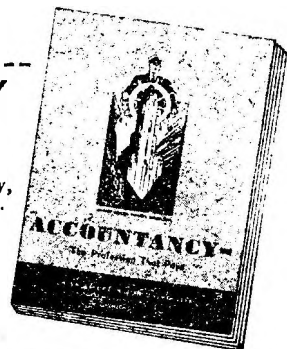
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heard where some of the destroyers were evidently attacking other planes, in an attempt to drive them off before they reached the convoy.

"I wish they'd come and get it over with," Graham muttered.

Just as he spoke, the clouds seemed to part. Half a dozen big, wasp-like planes suddenly appeared. They were diving.

Graham's breath hissed inward as he saw them, for one seemed headed straight for his ship. It was hurtling down at a steep angle, and at an incredible speed, just as the others were doing. Instinctively Graham started to duck, then grinned, half-ashamed. If they were hit, it would do him no good to duck. If they weren't hit, there would be no need to.

He and Casson stared at the hurtling plane, spellbound. Smoke-bursts popped all around it as the escort ships poured shells at it in an endless stream. Seen from the bridge of the *Trident*, it was no more than a small black spot, and Graham realized for the first time what anti-aircraft gunners are up against. Moreover, he guessed it to be moving at over four hundred miles an hour—probably closer to five hundred.

It seemed to be almost on them now. Suddenly it seemed to jerk a little, and then to zoom upward, hurtling directly above the ship. But just as it jerked, a black speck detached itself from the plane's belly and plunged downward.

CASSON'S hands were clenched on the rail, bloodless, and his shoulders were hunched. His eyes seemed to be riveted on the black speck. To Graham, it seemed as though the speck was screaming directly at his head. He was holding his breath, and the back of his neck ached, though he was not aware of it. Then the speck was gone. Something flashed overhead. Just halfway between the *Trident* and the ship to starboard, a column of water leaped high, as the bomb plunged into the sea. Graham let out his breath in a long sigh, with an involuntary, "Wow!"

"I suppose," Casson said, "that a man gets used to that sort of thing—in time."

"If he doesn't become a nervous wreck first," Graham said drily.

Not all the bombs missed. Somewhere ahead in the line, there was a great burst of smoke and flame. A Norwegian freighter reeled out of line, the better part of her upper-works blown to pieces, clouds of smoke pouring from her. She almost climbed aboard of the ship to port before she lost way and began to list sharply to starboard. A few men could be seen struggling to lower a lifeboat.

Even as Graham watched, a plane came roaring down, machine-guns blattering. The men on the freighter scattered, darting aimlessly about, like terrified rabbits attacked by a buzzard. Some of them fell down and lay still. The rest jumped overboard.

Graham suddenly realized that hell had burst wide open. Another wave of dive bombers was roaring down on the convoy. Some of the pursuit planes were wheeling and diving over the ships, spraying everything in sight with machine-gun fire. Bomb spouts seemed to leap up all around the *Trident*, and once in a while he heard explosions which told of hits.

The destroyers were laying down smoke screens, darting here and there, with their guns yammering frantically and great clouds of smoke billowing in a long trail from the smoke-screen apparatus, while they tried to fight off the attack and still keep their frightened charges in some sort of order. In a rift of smoke, Graham saw a destroyer with most of her stern blown away, blazing flames and smoke. But her forward guns were still firing.

There was hardly a square foot of visible sky that was not pocked with shell-bursts. Graham saw that British planes had come up from somewhere. There were dogfights going on everywhere, the planes writhing and twisting around each other, guns blazing. There was a shrill howling sound from somewhere overhead. A big, four-engined bomber came plunging down within fifty feet of the *Trident*, trailing a comet-tail of black smoke. She sheered off both wings as she plunged into the sea, but the body remained afloat momen-

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tarily. Graham could see, in the top gun cockpit, a limp figure hanging over a gun, with half the head shot away. A hatch opened and a man appeared, teetering and clutching at the door sides. He stared up at Graham. His mouth was wide open, and he was apparently screaming something, but in the colossal noise of the battle it was impossible to hear anything. In a moment the man let go, dropped into the sea, and promptly sank.

Graham shuddered. As long as he lived, he would never forget the ghastly, insane horror on the man's face, caught in that brief glimpse.

IT SEEMED that the confusion, the noise, the bomb fountains and the smoke could get no worse—but they did. New ships had evidently come out from the Scottish coast, for in a rift in the smoke Graham saw three British light cruisers race past astern, their upperworks literally twinkling with gun-flashes. Another plane came screaming down. It seemed to burst apart as it hit, leaving nothing but a patch of floating wreckage. Out of the dense smoke emerged the gutted hull of a tanker, blazing from end to end. She was so close aboard that Graham had to shift course hurriedly in order to avoid her.

The smoke was now so thick that Graham had lost all sense of direction and had no idea of his position with relation to the convoy. The only thing he could do was to hold his designated position and speed, keep a sharp lookout, and hope for the best. All around him were the lurching, bewildered freighters, the scuttling, spitting destroyers and light cruisers. The thunder of bombs and counter-fire was now so great that it was impossible to tell how the battle was going. He was isolated and helpless in the middle of a hell that was much worse than anything he had imagined. It was so immense—and so stunning—that he had long ago stopped being afraid or anxious.

He went into the wheelhouse, where Casson and the second mate were. As he did, three figures appeared from below.

Before Graham had any inkling of what was happening, Barthals stepped into the wheelhouse, followed by two of the men he had brought aboard in Alexandria. They were all armed with heavy pistols.

"What the devil's this?" Graham demanded. "What do you think you're doing, Barthals?"

One of the men walked over to the wheel, thrust the astonished quartermaster aside, and took the wheel over. The second man covered the others within the house. Barthals, grinning, stepped to the telegraph and slammed the handle to "Stop." He turned, looking at the outraged officers, the gun held steadily on them. His mouth was twisted into a thoroughly unpleasant leer. He stepped over to the Mate, slapped him sharply across the face, and spat.

"You don't like peoples spit on the deck, hey?" he demanded. "Vell, how do you like that? *Und* that? *Und* that?"

"Steady, Mr. Casson!" Graham warned, his own voice trembling with fury. "Hold her steady, man!"

"*Und* you also, Kapten Graham," Barthals added. "You say if I spit on the deck, you make me clean it, *ja*?"

He seized a piece of cloth, tossing it at Graham's feet.

"So—Kapten. *You* clean it. *Und* if you do not, I shoot you. Do you understand?"

Casson gasped, "No, sir! By God, don't do it!"

"There are times, Mr. Casson," Graham answered drily, "when discretion is the better part of valor. This is one of the times."

With three guns held on him, Graham went down on his kness and cleaned the deck. It was humiliating and revolting, but it gave him time to get his wits about him. When he was through he stood up, carefully placing the rag on top of the flag locker.

"Now, Barthals," he said calmly, "suppose you tell me what all these high jinks are about. You're in the middle of a British convoy, within thirty miles of shore. You realize you're committing an act of piracy?"

BARTHALS chuckled. His small eyes flickered around the wheelhouse. He snapped some orders at his two assistants, in German. They clicked their heels in that precise, wooden manner which bespoke long military or naval training, and Barthals, after a mocking bow to Graham, went out without bothering to answer. Graham started to follow him, but one of the armed men stepped in front of him, shoving the pistol into his belly. The man's eyes were cold and impersonal. He would, Graham realized uncomfortably, shoot him down as calmly and unemotionally as Graham himself would step on a cockroach—and think no more of it.

"Mr. Casson," Graham said, "I don't know what this is all about, but my orders are that you'll hold your temper and your fists. These men have the upper hand, at the moment. When we find out what it's all about, perhaps we can do something. In the meantime, we hold our horses. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir," Casson answered stiffly.

GRAHAM looked out the windows. The smoke and mist were thicker than ever, but the battle seemed to be passing ahead of them. The air still quivered with the endless thunder and rattle and howl of guns, bombs and planes; but with the *Trident* stopped and rolling lazily in the light swell, the convoy and the attackers seemed to have passed on, leaving the one-time American ship to her own devices—or, at least, to Barthals', whatever they might be.

The whistle of one of the speaking tubes peeped thinly. It was the tube from Graham's "boudoir." One of the armed men stepped over to it, listened, said, "*Ja, mein Herr,*" and turned to Graham.

"You will go to your quarters, Kapten," he said stiffly, and escorted Graham out, down the bridge ladder to the door of the smoking room. There, another of Barthals' men, armed with a rifle, permitted Graham to enter the "boudoir."

Barthals was sitting at Graham's desk. He had opened the safe and had the ship's papers spread out before him. He

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said indifferently, "You may sit down."

"Very good of you," Graham said sourly.

Barthals swung around. His short, pudgy legs heardly reached the deck.

"You do not seem to appreciate your situation," he snapped. "This ship is now under my command. I have armed men on the bridge, in the engineroom, and keeping your crew under guard."

"I don't see what good it will do you," Graham answered. "I suppose you're German. I should have figured it all out before, but I guess I was fooled."

Bartals nodded. "*Ja*. You were fooled, as you call it. Just as the British and all the rest of them were fooled. Germany needs rubber. We had this cargo in Alexandria, consigned to Belgium, but we didn't know how to get it to Germany. Und then we got the idea—we would bring it in under British convoy!"

He laughed. He called, "Heineke! Come in here!" When the armed guard outside entered, he said, "Find that stupid steward. Tell him to bring me a bottle of whiskey, und soda—*schnell!*"

"*Ja, mein Herr.*" Heineke clicked his heels and marched stiffly out.

"You're not a naval officer, Barthals—or a sailor?" Graham inquired casually.

"*Nein,*" Barthals answered. "I am an agent of our Leader. I lived many years in Belgium. It was through me our German authorities bought the Belgian ship company, secretly. We buy an American ship—no one suspect an American crew of working for Germany, *ja?* So we get our cargo. We join the British convoy."

GRAHAM nodded. Barthals was scattering ash all over his rug, and he had his heavy boots on Graham's coffee table. Graham was burning up inside. But he spoke casually, as though the pirating of his ship was nothing of great importance. Barthals was in a boasting mood, and Graham hoped he might find out something useful. The whiskey arrived, and Barthals poured himself a large dose of it without offering Graham any.

"*Ja,*" he said complacently, "you are,

as you say, fooled. You are also a fool, Kapten. I thought you were smarter."

Graham shrugged. "Reckon you're right," he said indifferently.

"You did not even know," Barthals added, "that I put a drug in your tea cup the night we left Gibraltar. I have two of my men pretend to fight outside the cabin. You ran out leaving the door open, and I slipped in and put some drug in your tea. While you slept, I came in, took your keys and opened the British naval orders. The same night I transmitted the course the convoy was to take, gave it to a German submarine which was waiting for us at the position I ordered you to heave the ship to at. Our air force was waiting for this convoy. It is now being destroyed."

"Very clever," Graham said, "*very* clever. You've fooled me right along. And this ship?"

"As soon as the convoy—or what is left of it—has gone far enough ahead," Barthals answered, pouring himself another drink, "you will lay this ship on a course for Cuxhaven, in Germany."

"What about us?" Graham inquired. "Don't forget, the entire crew of this ship is American."

Barthals shrugged, grinning. "That, my friend, is for our authorities to decide. What happens to you I do not know—or care."

There was a knock on the door. The sentry looked in and said "The fraülein wishes to speak with Kapten Graham, *Herr.*"

"Send her in," Barthals ordered, and Laurel appeared.

SHE looked pale and frightened, and stared at Barthals in amazement. "Captain Graham," she said, "what is all this about? Who are these armed men? Why is this ship stopped?"

"I'm sorry to say," Graham answered, "that we seem to have been captured by our friend Barthals and his merry men, who turn out to be Germans."

"I knew it!" Laurel said. "I knew there was something wrong with him! Why didn't you *do* something? Why do you sit

there now, letting him get away with it? Are you a coward? Are you *yellow*?"

Her eyes flamed with contempt. Graham shrugged, and Barthals, grinning, said, "The Kapten is a man of discretion, *Fraülein*—even if he is, as you say in America, very dumb. He knows better than to do anything, because that wouldn't be safe for him—or even for you."

"You wouldn't dare to touch me!" Laurel snapped. "You—you dirty, contemptible, horrible little—*beast!*"

Barthals flushed. "We are Germans!" he growled. "We are not like the sentimental English and French swine. To Germans and Germany, nothing matters save the Fatherland and the Leader."

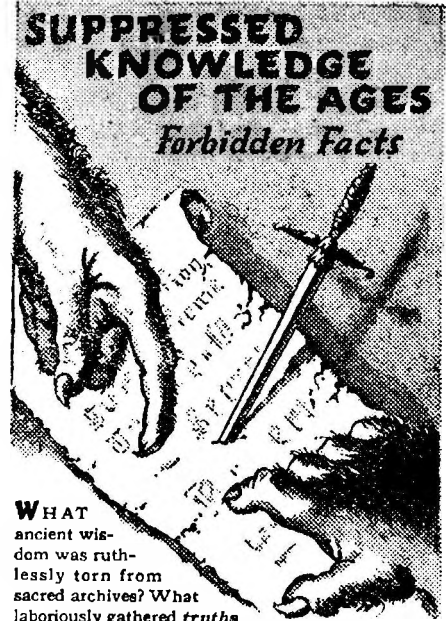
"He's quite right, Laurel," Graham drawled; "he'd shoot you with almost as much pleasure as he would me or Mr. Casson. Now run along to your cabin—and stay there. When we reach Cuxhaven, I'll get in touch with the American consul and see you're taken care of."

With an angry exclamation, Laurel turned and stormed out.

"Now, Kapten," Barthals said, "I think it is time enough. You will get under way and lay your course for Cuxhaven—at full speed. If any enemy ship challenges, you will say that you became lost from the convoy and are in no trouble. Do you understand? If you attempt to make an alarm, you will be shot."

"I understand," Graham said shortly. "And now will you take your feet off my coffee table? I paid twenty bucks for it, and it's personal property. It doesn't go with the ship."

WHEN he went back on deck, the sea was still heavy with mist and smoke. From somewhere to the south and west, the rumble of gunfire could still be heard, but the battle had already passed on. Graham went into the chart room and laid off the course for Cuxhaven under Barthals' watchful eye. Then he went to the bridge and gave the new course. The turbines set up their faint whine; the propeller kicked up a swirling greenish smother of foam under the stern, and the ship swung off



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on her new course. Graham explained briefly to Casson just what had happened, and what was to happen.

"There's no sense getting excited about it, Mr. Casson," he finished calmly. "After all, this isn't our war. If the Germans have outsmarted the British, that's up to them. Our job was to take the *Trident* wherever her new owners wanted her taken and turn her over. If they want to take her to Cuxhaven, that's their business, and our job is to take her there."

He was speaking loudly and deliberately, making sure that Barthals and the armed guard heard him, and ignoring Casson's stare of astonished indignation. He added, "You'd better go aft and explain things to the rest of the crowd. Tell them everything's all right—that we'll be in the hands of the U. S. consul within another thirty-six hours, and back in the good old United States within a month. We don't want any trouble. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir," Casson answered through set teeth, and disappeared down the companionway.

At Barthals' instruction, Graham had the radio room locked and sent the bewildered Sparks to his cabin.

"Now, Mr. Barthals," Graham said, "is there anything more you want me to do? If not, I'll go below and turn in for a spell. It's been a pretty tough day and I'm anxious to be on deck tonight, as I suppose we'll be steaming without lights."

He could tell from Barthals' expression that the man was delighted with the way Graham had taken the whole affair. The German was positively affable as he assured Graham that nothing more need be done, and even went so far as to thank him.

"I take it that I can continue to use my own quarters until we dock in Cuxhaven?" Graham said.

"Certainly, Kaptent!" Barthals assured him. "We will call you if anything develops while you are asleep."

GRAHAM returned to his quarters. He had never been angrier in his life. Having his ship literally pirated right under his nose was bad enough. Having to kow-

tow to Barthals was worse. Still worse was the surprise and contempt he read in the faces of his officers and men and Laurel. But he knew there was nothing to be gained—and everything to be lost—by starting a row. Nine armed men could easily handle thirty-five unarmed men.

He noticed that Barthals had taken his two rifles and the revolver, which were the only fire-arms aboard the ship. His papers had been gone through pretty thoroughly, and were scattered around on his desk. But Barthals, evidently believing that everything was under control, had taken nothing but the British convoy orders, which, presumably, might be of value to the Germans.

Graham poured himself a drink and sat down at the desk to figure things out. He wasn't particularly interested in the political significance of all this business. Whatever his personal feelings on the subject might be, he was officially a neutral, and he had been right in reminding Casson of the fact. If any international rights were involved, they were a matter to be settled between the diplomatic authorities of Germany and the United States. As master of the *Trident*, it was Graham's chief job to prevent any trouble between his own crew and the Germans, to keep the incident from becoming worse than it already was.

But where Barthals was concerned, Graham was anything but neutral. He disliked the greasy little man more than he had ever disliked anybody in his life. As far as he was concerned, there was a personal war going on between him and the German, and he had not the slightest intention of allowing Barthals to run his ship into Cuxhaven as a prize of war, if he could possibly prevent it.

The trouble was, he had no idea how he could prevent it. Cuxhaven was little more than thirty hours' steaming distance. There was no sense trying to recapture the ship. To do so would certainly cost the lives of some of his crowd, even if he was successful, and he had no desire to have their deaths on his conscience.

He riffled idly through the papers on his

desk, cursing stolidly. Try to get a message to some Allied warship? It was impossible. Barthals would be on guard against anything like that. Try to open the sea-cocks and scuttle the ship? Impossible, too, for Barthals had armed guards in the engine room. Scuttling was a too-familiar tradition of the German navy to let them overlook that idea. He supposed that in a novel, they would find a way to drug the armed men and recapture the ship—but this wasn't a novel. This was the *Trident*, with a very alert armed squad aboard, suspicious of every move. There was, as far as he could see, nothing at all he could do.

HE GLANCED through the papers again. There was nothing important or interesting among them. He turned over some consular papers handed him at Gibraltar, and noticed a sheet of onionskin paper stuck to the back of one of them—the kind of paper used in making multiple carbon copies. Idly he glanced at it—and stiffened. It was headed: *Complementary Information*—caution to all mariners in North Sea area.

Graham grabbed a pad and noted down some figures—he was familiar with the North Sea and did not have to go to a chart to verify them. He glanced at his watch and noted the time, estimating the ship's approximate position by compass course, speed, and time. Then he pressed the button for the steward and ordered up some tea.

While he was waiting for the tea, he scribbled on a scrap of paper the words, "Come back in thirty minutes. Find out who is on bridge and where other officers are. Write it down and pass it to me."

The armed sentry at the door kept an ear bent as the steward brought the tea tray in. Graham said, "Thanks, Wilson. Everything all right?"

"Yes, sir."

"All right—here, wait a minute. There's a fly or something in this cream pitcher."

He thrust the scrap of paper in the pitcher, keeping his back toward the sentry, and handed the pitcher to the steward,

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who stared at him for a second in surprise, then, his eyes widening in comprehension, said, "I beg pardon, sir. I'll get some more at once."

Barthals came in. He looked as satisfied as a cat that has just eaten the canary and drunk a pint of cream. Graham could almost hear him purr. He itched to smack the smirk off the man's face, but with luck he could do better than that, before another dawn. Instead, he invited Barthals to join him in a cup of tea.

Barthals laughed, "No, no, Kapten. That is a drink for pigs—English pigs. I prefer whiskey. We do not get good whiskey in Germany any more."

"Like it, myself," Graham said casually. "I acquired a taste for it in the India trade. Well, I'll be going on deck in a little while. I don't suppose we'll have any trouble now. Must have run past the British patrols, eh?"

BARTHALS nodded. "I am glad you are a sensible man, Kapten. I was afraid we might have trouble. It would be unfortunate if we had to shoot some Americans, *ja?*"

"I think it would," Graham answered drily. "However, I want no trouble. I'll be glad to get this ship to Cuxhaven, get in touch with our consul, and have the business over with."

The steward came in to fetch the tea tray. He stumbled, upsetting the cup, and fell against Graham.

"Clumsy fool!" Barthals snarled. "Look where you're going!"

"Yes, sir," Wilson said stiffly, and went out, leaving a tightly folded scrap of paper in Graham's hand.

Presently Graham excused himself and went into his bathroom, locking the door. He opened the paper, on which was written, *3rd Mate on bridge. Others in cabins.* Graham disposed of the paper and went out.

Barthals said, "I will sleep on this couch in your office tonight, Kapten. I believe you will not make trouble, but it does not do to take chances, eh?"

"I suppose not," Graham answered in-

differently. "Do as you like. I'm going on the bridge for a spell."

He already had another note prepared. The German guard in the wheelhouse was watching everything closely, and Graham said, "Everything under control, Mr. Gaynor?"

"Guess so, sir," Gaynor answered sourly. He didn't like the new set-up, and his tone was surly.

Graham glanced out and said suddenly, "What's that, off to port?"

As everyone—including the German—peered out of the port windows, Graham thrust his note into Gaynor's pocket, winking.

"Thought I saw a ship off there," he said. "I must have been mistaken."

IT WAS very difficult, during the next few hours, for Graham to keep up his pose of disinterest and to act as he normally would. What he had done was to give his deck officers orders to have the course shifted two degrees every thirty minutes, and to try, as well as he could by means of numberless little notes slipped here and there, to warn his crew to stand by for trouble and to stay awake all night, without letting the guards know anything was in the wind. He was afraid every minute that the Germans would catch up with the notes, or that they would notice the shift in course. He hoped that, apparently not being experienced sailors, they would not do so.

He estimated that midnight or shortly after would be the zero hour. In spite of himself, he was shaking with excitement and tension. In spite of the fact that Barthals seemed to have satisfied himself that everything was in order, the man followed Graham around like a dog, vaguely suspicious. At midnight, when the watch was changed, Graham went below for a snack.

Laurel was sitting in the smoking room. She was apparently reading, but Graham could see that she was jumpy; and though she kept following the lines of the book and turning the pages, he guessed she couldn't tell what she was reading. She

looked up at him when he entered and he managed a light wink.

"You are going to sleep now, Kapten?" Barthals said rather hopefully, following Graham into his "boudoir."

"Not yet," Graham answered. "I don't like this business of sculling around in dangerous waters at night, without lights. Anything can happen."

"Ja. Ja, that is so," the German agreed, eying the comfortable settee rather disconsolately. His eyes were darkly circled and puffy.

Graham forced himself to eat a sandwich and drink some coffee, pretending to be nonchalant, while Barthals eyed him and went to work again on the whiskey bottle. There was a bulge in the man's right pocket which Graham knew was an automatic pistol.

Something crashed outside. Graham jumped a foot from his seat and Barthals leaped up, cursing, reaching for his gun. He flung the door open, and they saw Laurel picking up a heavy glass ashtray she had accidentally knocked over. Graham laughed.

"You're nervous, Mr. Barthals," he said.

The German mopped his forehead and glared at him without answering. Graham lighted up a pipe and returned to the bridge, followed by Barthals, who now kept his hand in his right pocket and watched every motion Graham made.

"Everything all right, Mr. Casson?" Graham asked.

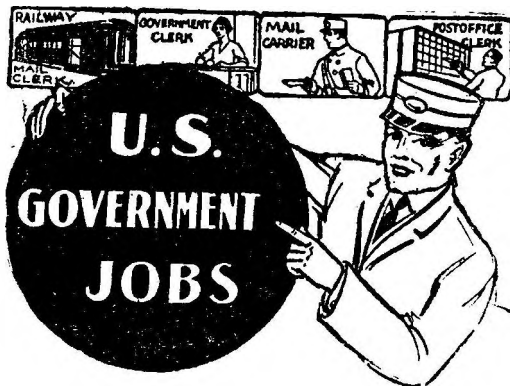
"Everything all right, sir," the Mate answered.

"We should be in Cuxhaven around ten in the morning," Graham said. "I'll be glad to get there."

He leaned against the bulkhead. He was sweating, and his heart was pounding. He wondered if the British information had been wrong, or if he had copied the figures wrong, or if his dead reckoning had been wrong. By this time—

Barthals walked over and glanced at the binnacle compass.

"Gott in Himmel!" he snarled. "What is this? What have you done? What course are we on?"



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GRAHAM stared at him in pretended astonishment, a cold feeling wriggling down his spine. "For Cuxhaven, of course," he said. "What d'you expect?"

"This is not the course!" Barthals exclaimed. "We are three points off—three points and more! What is this? Is this a trick?"

His face was pastry-white. He jerked his gun out, glaring at Graham, who shrugged.

"I'm afraid you're not much of a navigator, Barthals," he said. "What do you want us to do—aim the ship straight at Cuxhaven? There's a strong tide running, you know. If we didn't make southing, we'd fetch up in the middle of the Skagerak, instead of Cuxhaven. That's why we're steering south of our course."

"You lie!" Barthals said hoarsely. "This is some trick! I've thought all night you were acting queerly! You—I will kill you! I will shoot you!"

"Don't be a fool, Barthals!" Graham snapped, but the German raised his gun, his face distorted with fury.

Even as Graham leaped aside, it happened.

The whole ship seemed to jump out of the water. A staggering shock slammed down her length and she heeled sharply to starboard. There was a thunderous explosion that seemed to be almost under the bridge. The glass in the wheelhouse windows shattered into slivers.

THE shock threw Barthals and the guard to the deck, along with Graham and the mate. Only the helmsman, holding the wheel, stayed upright. Like the rest, he had been warned, and as Barthals rolled over and tried to scramble up, the gun still in his hand, the helmsman stamped on his wrist. Barthals screamed. There was an audible crack of bones as the helmsman snatched up the gun. The guard was half up, fumbling. The helmsman snapped a shot at him and the man toppled slowly over on his face.

Graham and Casson were already scrambling to their feet. The ship was pitching wildly, and had already heeled over slight-

ly. Casson snatched up the dead guard's gun, while Graham, taking the helmsman's pistol, turned on Barthals, who was clutching his wrist and moaning.

"Sure I'm dumb!" Graham snarled. "But fortunately not too dumb to lead the ship into a recently laid minefield which the British consul kindly informed me of in his instructions! Come on, Casson—let's go! Lights first!"

Casson snapped on the deck lights at the main panel.

Already the ship was in confusion. The mine had blown a huge hole in her, just about her number one hold. She was down by the head and listing to starboard. From aft, the crew were streaming out. Graham saw a German guard running forward, and snapped a shot at him. The man toppled, screaming. Another guard appeared, knelt and fired a burst at Casson, who ducked behind a ventilator and started firing on his own.

Taken aback, and evidently bewildered, the guards hesitated for a moment, uncertain what to do. The moment was long enough. Graham's crew appeared, armed with knives, hatchets, wrenches or anything else handy, and for a few minutes the well deck abaft the bridge was a crazy confusion of tangled bodies, a bedlam of assorted curses, howls and screams.

Then it was over. Disorganized and panic-stricken, the five surviving Nazi guards threw down their guns, yelling for mercy. Shrilling blasts on his whistle, Graham managed at last to bring his crew to order.

"Lifeboats, men!" he shouted. "And look lively about it! The ship won't last long!"

They hardly needed to be told that. The foc'sle was already under water, the stern lifting ominously. Graham saw the Germans effectively disarmed, hustled Laurel aft to a lifeboat, and hurried back to the wheelhouse. Barthals had got to his feet and was leaning against the bulkhead, nursing his wrist.

"You'd better hurry," Graham said. "She won't stay afloat much longer."

Without answering, Barthals moved

stiffly to the door and down the ladder to the lower bridge deck. Then, before Graham could stop him, he suddenly lurched to the rail and, with a last defiant scream, hurled himself over into the icy, surging water. . . .

IT WAS three hours after dawn, while the lifeboat crews were stolidly rowing toward the English coast, more than two hundred miles westward, when a British light cruiser sighted them and took them aboard. Graham made his report as short as he could.

"It was lucky I noticed that report warning shipmasters about the new minefield you Britishers had laid," he said in conclusion. "We Americans aren't at war with Germany, but I sure had a major war against Barthals. Well, he's dead now. I think—"

"We were looking for you," the British commander said. "They tried the same stunt with another ship, but we caught her in time."

"How'd the convoy make out?" Graham asked.

"Well enough—considering the mass attack your Nazi pal arranged for us. We got all but three ships in safely. Our chaps downed fifteen of their planes, too."

He stood up, grinning, and held out his hand. "Want to congratulate you, old man. It was a damned smart piece of work you did. And it must have taken nerve."

Graham drew a long breath. "If you only knew, Commander—if you only knew!" he said, with a grim smile.

Laurel was on deck, shaken and pale. Graham told her, "The commander says an American ship is due to pick up Americans in Ireland in three days. In two weeks you'll be back in the United States."

"Yes," she answered, "and I think I'll go. It'll be kind of lonely at home without Dad, but—"

"I'll be going on the same ship," Graham said. "Maybe we can sort of share our sorrows."

The girl looked up at him, and slowly smiled.

"Maybe we can," she said. "You've been

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splendid, Captain. I'm—I'm darn proud to know you. And darned proud of you," she added.

Graham smiled. He had no words to answer her—none just then that would sound sensible. But there would be days at sea. . . .

(*The End.*)

Adventure Cove

Outside Help

By

Joe Brennan

I NEVER for one moment thought that I was fool-proof to being frightened, but I used to sometimes believe that it would take a pretty lusty scare to break down my usual composure. And I found my experience of the "horrifying variety" in the most unusual of places—the surf. It brought home to me the fact that no man can predict exactly how brave he will be under any given circumstances.

My home is on the cliffs just south of the Palos Verdes Hills, overlooking the Pacific Ocean. The bay here serves as just about the best salt water swimming a fellow could ask for—and just make out that I don't take a crack at it daily! I take a $\frac{5}{8}$ th mile swim every morning from the front of my home down to the Redondo Pier and back. I say "every morning," but I really mean every morning when the water is devoid of porpoises.

Well, to make a fat story thin, when I first came down here in February I used to brave the cold water, ordinarily around fifty-two degrees at that time, and make the swim in leisurely fashion, with no thought of anything other than my stroke and the substantial breakfast awaiting me at the house. Today it's something else again, and I'll tell you why.

Last month I was swimming along parallel with the shore, some hundred yards out, in an endeavor to break my usual time of twenty-five minutes for the $\frac{5}{8}$ th mile. My wife, who was on the beach clocking me in the trial, had raised her hand each time five minutes had elapsed; it gave me some conception of what progress I was making—a sort of gauge. Her hand had already been up for the fourth time, indicating that the twenty-minute period had been reached. My position offshore told me that I might not even tie my usual time. In fact, I felt sure that I would fall short of it, because the particularly choppy sea had already taken a pretty heavy toll of my strength. On the basis of my usual progress, I was still about five and a half minutes from my objective—the shore and home.

Raising my head high enough to take a quick glance at my wife, who I figured must be thinking that I had already had too many birthdays to be indulging in record-breaking of any kind, I was surprised to see that she was pointing in my direction. I couldn't imagine what she had in mind. I soon found out.

Of a sudden, as I was barreling myself along through that brine, a terrific disturbance in the water just below me made my body twist and turn as though some great explosion had come to pass underneath. All kinds of thoughts went tumbling through my mind. I slowed my crawl stroke down slightly and looked deep into the water as I rolled for another sweeping arm pull. Yoiks! A long gray body came sliding out of the depths, slithered past me and fairly made the water boil; again its huge displacement of the water made me bob like a cork. I know that it wasn't over ten feet long, but at the moment it appeared to me to have the dimensions of the *U. S. S. California*.

A momentary paralysis swept over my body as I tried to wrestle with my ebbing wits to convince myself that these local waters harbor no dangerous sharks. I don't know what success I was having with that line of thought, but it didn't get far, because in that split-instant, the water

churned just to the left of my shoulder, and a great shiny knifelike dorsal fin cut the water and raced a few feet, only to submerge again, out of sight. In my fright, I gagged on a mouthful of the vile water.

Immediately another sharp dorsal fin juttled ominously up to my right, hissed through the water and disappeared back of me. My legs and arms were tightening up, and I was trying to fight off a wave of panic that threatened to swamp me. My arms wouldn't seem to act, my legs felt as stiff as planks; I guess it was simply a fear of digging down into that monster-infested water with them. I wanted to be high on the surface—above it, if possible. My one paramount sensation, my one driving obsession, was simply to climb out of that water. I wanted to get up out of it—like climbing out of a snake-haunted cellar. I wanted to run, fly, jump—anything, just so long as I might get away from those terrifying slippery bodies that were breaking the water around me. Ice water pounded through my veins.

Then I really caught the works.

I THOUGHT I'd lose my mind when everything churned directly below me and one of the great gray forms flashed up and all but lifted me out of the water. I've never been frightened in my entire life like I was right at that moment; it was a nightmare—only stark, and real!

In frenzied fashion, with panic in my heart and frozen terror in my brain, I struck out instinctively for the shore. The fast-whirling torpedolike things continued to stay with me—under me, at my side, ahead of me, in back of me. I plowed for shore as though I had an outboard motor propelling me. When I finally got well into the breaker line, where it was comparatively shallow, I hardly had the strength to walk, my tongue was hanging out like a red necktie, and I was wheezing like a leaky accordion.

"Hurrah! Twenty-three minutes!" shouted my wife.

THOSE words almost made me choke with resentment. Her cheers didn't

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thrill me one little bit; I had the feeling of having been laughed at in my terror. Even after she explained that the life guard had told her that harmless and playful porpoises have the odd habit of swimming with—and sometimes bumping—people, I still couldn't quite join in the laugh. My scare had been just a little too real—and too recent.

Okay; so I'm told that porpoises never attack a swimmer. That's all right by me; it *listens* swell. But imagine the additional blow I suffer now when I hear that my wife won't even give me credit for the twenty-three-minute record I set! She pops off to the effect that I had *outside assistance* on that swim!

A Race With Death

By

John McMinds

"I'M AFRAID I can't do anything for him," the doctor announced, drawing away from the gasping form of my eleven-year-old-son. "The whole Baxter family but Andy is down with the same thing—Botulism." He turned his weary face to me. "Did your son eat over there yesterday?"

"Yes," I admitted. "He had dinner with his friend Jimmy. He said they had some of those string beans Mrs. Baxter's friend in the States shipped up." I glanced again at my suffering son. "Doc, isn't there anything you can do? That stuff's fatal!"

"Nothing—without anti-toxin. And that's a hundred and thirty miles away, in Anchorage." Suddenly his eyes glowed.

"John," he said slowly, "you fly supplies in here from Anchorage—"

"I get it!" I burst out. "I'll fly my son to the hospital!"

The doctor put his hand on my shoulder. "You could," he said, and his voice was grave. "But what about the Baxters? They'll die."

I looked at the pale face of my son, his throat muscles contracting spasmodically in an effort to swallow, his nostrils spread wide in a desperate attempt to breathe. Then I thought of Andy Baxter, the mine superintendent. He'd be looking at his wife—at Jimmy—the same way I was looking at my son—and wondering.

We had both brought our families into this wild, isolated territory for a summer's vacation while the mining work was carried on. The camp was located on the south-eastern shore of Klutina Lake, right on the northern edge of the Chugach Mountains. Now, with almost certain death threatening our loved ones, one hundred thirty miles of the northeastern tip of that wild, inhospitable range separated us from Anchorage and medical aid. Only a plane could help us.

"Will I have time to make it both ways in this weather, Doc?" I asked. "I haven't been able to fly for a week because of storms in the Chugach Mountains."

"If you get back within four hours, there's a chance," he said. He scribbled on a piece of paper. "Here, take this to the hospital. It'll get what we need."

I needed no more urging. In twenty minutes the pontoons of my monoplane left the surface of the lake, and I was heading into the thick weather atop the Chugach.

Ordinarily it would take me about three hours and a half to make the trip to Anchorage and back, but now, with those storm warnings ahead, I was doubtful.

Uneasily I looked out the cabin window, down at the rough, broken terrain where a forced landing would be too horrible even to think about. I knew the safest thing to do would be to cut straight south to Valdez, then follow up the coast. But I also knew that would be an hour or two longer, according to the weather. And hours right then were terrifically important.

Resolutely I set my course southwest, straight across the northeastern tip of the range—the straightest and shortest route to Anchorage. I was fully aware that there were no lakes, no rivers upon which to land if anything went wrong. But more lives than mine were at stake.

OFF in the south, along the coast, dark clouds formed a thick, ominous wall. Directly ahead, there were scattered clouds, but certainly no indication of the weather I soon hit with a jolt that nearly tore the stick from my hands.

A terrific down-draft gripped the plane and plunged the ship down, down, until, with a horrible shudder, it let go. The pon-toons just skimming the treetops.

I could feel the sweat on my hands, hot, sticky sweat, as I worked the ship back up to a safe altitude. And it *was* work, too. Buffeted by cross winds, up-drafts and down-drafts, the ship tossed around like a cork in a waterfall, every wire and brace creaking and groaning in heavy protest.

I had one thing to be thankful for, even though my arms were aching from the strain of keeping the ship on an even keel and somewhere near her course. There was no soup—yet. I could still see. But off in the south that bank of clouds was creeping inland, whipped along by a coastal gale.

When I sank through the overcast and sat down on the choppy waters at Anchorage, I was so tired I felt like I'd just completed a non-stop flight around the world. But in twenty minutes I had the anti-toxin stowed safely in the cabin, the gas tanks full, and headed into the on-shore wind that was whipping the water into plunging whitecaps.

The words of Dave Brennar, the friend who'd gassed the ship, kept running through my mind as I jockeyed the plane clear of the docks. "It's suicide to fly through that mess," he warned.

But I knew, too, that I would be almost the same as a murderer if I didn't try it. I had to get through—for my son—for the Baxters.

Up again, and almost immediately into the overcast. Once more the desperate struggle began. Setting my course northeast, I used every trick I knew to get all the altitude I could, and to keep the ship headed straight. At ten thousand the air was clear again, but more turbulent than ever.

And then I saw something which turned my blood cold. Directly ahead, racing along

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in the grip of a mighty wind, that cloud bank was cutting squarely between Klutina Lake and me. How deep the storm was, I had no way of telling. If it overran the lake, my hopes of ever getting down safely were shattered.

A quick, desperate glance due north was enough to convince me that I couldn't fly around that dark mass of destruction. And getting over it would be like trying to climb a rainbow.

Every muscle tense, I made sure my belt was fastened securely, then headed straight for that wall of clouds.

IT WAS like smashing into a heaving sea. The darkness and the rain crashed down around me with battering force. The up-drafts tossed the ship with uncontrollable fury, while the roar of the motor was nearly drowned by the din of the rain.

Then, suddenly, less than ten minutes after I hit the storm, I broke through into smoother air. But the rain kept coming, whanging away at the ship with a fierceness that was almost savage. The clouds pressed close, thicker and darker than ever.

But with smoother air, I could do a little figuring. So far, I had been able to stick to my course. But now, with no contact with the ground, it was impossible to determine my drift in this storm. What if I were thrown too far north and overshot the lake? Without hesitation I swung the nose a few degrees to the south to make up for the drift.

In about ten minutes I should be over the lake. And if I didn't break through the clouds—what then?

My hands were clammy on stick and throttle as I waited, squinting ahead, trying to pierce the waterfall in front of me.

I glanced at my watch. Five minutes. I tried to swallow to keep the dry tightness from closing my throat. I *had* to come down! If I rode out the storm, it would mean a forced landing, anyway—if I had enough gas to last it out—and a forced landing in the wilderness would mean death—for me, and for those waiting for the precious stuff I carried.

Three minutes. . . .

I forced myself to ease off on the throttle and shove the stick forward. The lake had to be below me, or one of the many crags would make a quick end of everything.

The storm was worse at lower altitudes and I had to fight against a terrible fear to keep the nose of the plane down.

Suddenly the bottom dropped out of everything as a down-draft caught the ship. This was *it*. This was the end! I hung against my safety belt, waiting.

But the end was not yet. There was a sudden, blinding flash, and the dark clouds had disappeared. At the same time, the ship shuddered out of her terrific downward plunge and headed straight for a hillside.

I didn't have time to think. I r'ared back on the stick and jammed the throttle wide open. The ship stood on her tail, quivering in every joint under the terrific strain. The hillside swept past, not five feet below.

I could feel the plane quivering, ready to stall. I had to nose her over. The top of the hill swished by beneath, but I wasn't high enough to clear a jutting clump of trees. There was a jarring crunch; the plane lurched, then came around into her dive down the opposite side of the hill.

I let out the breath I'd held for what seemed an hour. Off to the left was the gray, rain-churned surface of Klutina Lake.

Swinging along the shore, I soon made out the cluster of tents and cabins that was home. I swung out and back into the off-shore wind, settling down to land.

The plane hit the lake smoothly enough, but immediately after, there was a rending crash. The ship skewed around, ducked her nose, and before my head smashed against the instrument panel, I remembered that bump at the top of the hill. A pontoon had been crushed.

The next thing I remember, I was lying in bed in my own cabin, the smiling face of Doc Evans bending over me.

"The anti-toxin is working fine!" he exclaimed. "They're all recovering beautifully." Then his face clouded. "But I'm afraid your plane is a wreck."

I sighed and held my aching head.

"So am I," I replied weakly. "But I've still got my son!"

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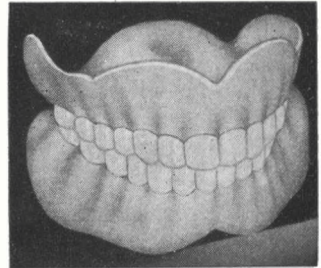
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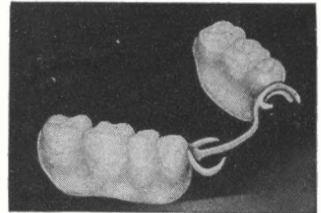
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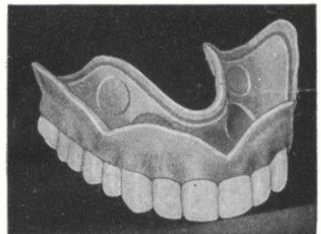
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