HOT SADDLE-BAGS—A Complete Novel—FRANK C. ROBERTSON

Short Stories

February 10th

Twice A Month

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Flat-Top and . . . . . .

SPLASH BOMB CHAMP

by

Jackson V. Scholz

Behold! he sees what no human eye has glimpsed since the beginning of time

He might have stepped from the frame of a Rembrandt painting, this bewigged figure of a man so patiently making lenses and squinting through them.

Night after night, like a child with a new toy, Antony van Leeuwenhoek, seventeenth century Dutch shopkeeper, hurried home to place anything and everything under his microscope: the brain of a fly, rain water, a hair, pepper, a cow's eye, scrapings from his teeth.

Then one day, behold! he sees what no human eye has glimpsed since the beginning of time. Fantastic "little animals", thousands of them to a pin-point, dart and squirm as he gazes.

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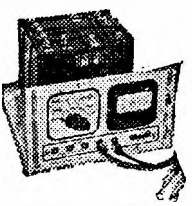

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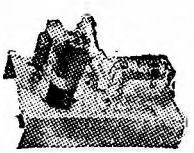

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M. DELANEY, *Secretary.*
D. McILWRAITH, *Editor.*
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BIGGEST AND BEST—TWICE A MONTH

Stories

latest stories—no reprints

FEBRUARY 10th, 1944

Except for personal experiences the contents of this magazine is fiction. Any use of the name of any living person or reference to actual events is purely coincidental.

The Story Tellers' Circle

The Falcon at New Britain

WITH the news that's been breaking recently in the South Pacific, it looks as though Jackson Scholz got his flat-top *Falcon* out that way just in time to go to work at Rabaul. We'll bet his character, Lieutenant Commander Monty Brett—featured along with the *Falcon* in this issue's "Splash Bomb Champ"—is calling his shots out there around New Britain right now.

Scholz was in the Naval Air Arm in the last war but, even so, says he had to do a good deal of research for this yarn. Times and planes have changed "just a bit" since World War I, he informs us.

Writes Mr. Scholz:

I'm afraid that if I depended upon my own naval aviation background, the technical details in SPLASH BOMB CHAMP might be a trifle rickety.

In World War I, I fought in the battle of Miami and Pensacola, and flew such balls of fire as the old N-9s, H-boats, F-boats, and something, which for want of a better name, the fellows called a Gyrene. It was a double pontooned biplane with a four-cylinder Hall-Scott motor which throve on castor oil, but didn't seem to care for it after it reached an inky stage. Then it would spray the black stuff back across the pilot and his passenger, until they looked like a pair of end men.

In those days, when you called the propeller a "stick," you came pretty close to the truth. They were made of wood with cooper sheeting tacked on the tips to keep the spray from nicking them. Even so, a couple of good rainstorms would chip them up pretty well.

In the little F-boats, the pilot and his passenger sat right down in the nose of the thing, where they could dabble their hands in the water if they wanted to. Their heads stuck up with no protection whatsoever from the wind. The idea was to keep your mouth closed, because if you opened it, the wind got in and ballooned it out. The idea, also, was to keep out of rainstorms with the F-boats—or with the big H-boats, for that matter. Getting caught up there in the rain was just like having someone hurl gravel in your face.

I doubt if many of us, then, had enough imagination to visualize the power houses which are taking to the air today. The Corsair, for instance, with its two thousand horse power motor would have been too much to grasp. If we had a couple of hundred horses in our nose, such as the good old Hisso, we thought we were right up there in the big leagues—which, in fact, we were.

Jackson V. Scholz

Ex Bookkeeper, Slave Trader, Etc.

LIKE old New York and old New Orleans, old San Francisco was a dream town where almost anything could happen, and frequently did, and we know that for some time Seabury Quinn—amid the hecticality of Washington today—has been chewing the cud of a plot in which the hero would be a New Yorker of the days when St. John's Park was a swanky residential section, not the site of a N. Y. Central freight depot. He'd thought tentatively of having him become a pirate or something improbable like that, when it so happened that Quinn was reading Asbury's Barbary Coast for his own amusement and was struck by the possibilities of

(*Concluded on page 6*)

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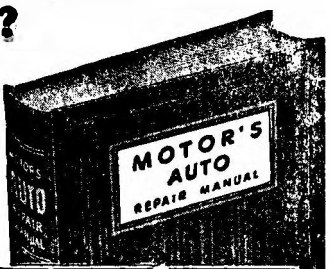

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The Story Tellers' Circle

(*Concluded from page* 4)

a story set in the pre-gold rush days of San Francisco, preferably before it had changed its name from the original Yerba Buena.

"It's not at all unusual for me to begin a story without the faintest idea of how it's going to end," writes Quinn, "or even what incidents will take place after the first one or two which I already have in mind. So it was in the case of "The Black Wolf Bowls." When I started with El Lobo Negro (whom I first intended calling El Tiburon Negro—the Black *Shark*) sitting under the rowan tree I had no idea that he was going to turn out a native of New York, or that he'd been in the slave trade, or shanghaied, or anything like that. His story took me almost as much by surprise as it did the Mother Superior when he told it to her. And that's a fact!

"The only deliberate bit of plotting in the whole thing was that concerning the kidnaping of Maria de la Luz. The story of the girl who's been immured in a convent against her will, and rescued by her lover, is old as any hill on Staten Island. So I deliberately took that time-worn theme and gave it a reverse English by having this girl taken from the convent with force and arms and against her will, and rescued to the end that she might return to her cloister. The rest of it largely wrote itself.

"I can't claim factual basis for the story. Indeed, I can't claim anything out of the ordinary for it. It's just a development idea that sort o' took charge of its own destiny and rounded out itself once I'd started writing. Every writer has had that experience, but few laymen will believe them when they tell of it."

Seabury Quinn

Of Course Bombs Aren't Scarey

HERE'S the letter—well, most of it—that came with the Adventures All item in this issue:

I have read your magazine for quite a few years, and have often thought of sending in a contribution to your "Adventures All" department, but a combination of inertia and diffidence has prevented it from happening before. At present, however, I am in the army, and in San Francisco, which is a combination to put anyone short of Rockefeller in financial difficulties—and I and Rockefeller have nothing whatever in common. The result is the mess of typing errors which I have inclosed. It may not be good as I write it, but when it happened, it was good enough to scare me out of seven years growth—and I grew quite a bit in seven years. Anyway, here it is, and I have my fingers crossed—fifteen bucks looks bigger than the map of the Pacific right now.

Pvt. Wallace Murcray,
Bomb Disposal Headquarters,
San Francisco

In The Mail

SHORT STORIES, INC., 9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York 20, N. Y.

Dear Sirs:

My husband has been reading SHORT STORIES for years, I think it's a lousy magazine but he thinks it's the best, so I am buying him a year's subscription for a Christmas present. Please see that he gets it.

Signed (Mrs.) Thos. H. Barry,
633 McKinley Pky.,
Buffalo 20, N. Y.

Overseas Mail

UNDER this heading in each issue of SHORT STORIES we plan to publish letters from men in our armed forces overseas. For each one we use its sender will receive a $25.00 war bond. Won't you send us one? We cannot guarantee to return unused ones, but we want representative letters showing what is happening to our young men in their greatest adventure.

Address the Editor, SHORT STORIES, 9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York 20, N. Y. Do not send original letters; have them copied.

This interesting travelogue is from Corporal Ivey from North Africa, and was sent to us by Mrs. Josie Baker of Midlothian, Texas, who would like to share it with SHORT STORIES *readers.*

Dear Sister:

Have just come back from a very interesting trip through the Holy Land, a trip I was very fortunate to get to make. It would cost anyone thousands of dollars to make it in peace time. I will try and tell you a few of the places I visited.

I made the journey by plane, train and bus. We left the airport here at 7:30, a party of thirty-one—four of whom were nurses. They acted as our pilot, so you can guess just how smooth the ride was. One minute we were climbing, the next we were sideways, but we got a big thrill out of it.

We arrived at Tel-Aviv, a town located on the Mediterranean, went to a hotel, washed up and went sightseeing that afternoon. The next morning we left by bus at 8 o'clock for Jerusalem, arrived at 12 o'clock, had lunch, then went to the top of Mt. Olive overlooking the old and ancient city of Jerusalem. There we had group pictures made with the city in the background. You should see the wall around the city. It is 38 feet high, about 2½ miles in length, has 34 towers and 8 gates.

From the mountain we went to the Garden of Gethsemane, there where Christ prayed the last time before he was nailed to the cross. Next was the wailing wall. At this wall the Jews meet and pray on every Saturday. Many thousands visit the place. From here we went to the city of Jericho, located near the Dead Sea. It's a thrill to swim in a place like this. I was in water fifty feet deep and you float like a cork. The water is so salty, nothing can live in it. From there we visited Jacob's well, near the city of Jericho. By this time the day was almost gone, so we returned to Jerusalem. We spent the night there.

Next morning we were up early and on our way again. This time for the city of Bethlehem. Here we visited the place of Christ's birth, Rachel's Tomb and from here we went to the city of Haifa. There we spent the night in a very nice hotel on the seashore. The next morning at 8 o'clock we went to Tiberias, and the Sea of Galilee, then to the River of Jordan. Here we went swimming again in the Sea of Galilee and River Jordan. From there we returned to the city of Nazareth.

We visited a Jewish settlement, one of the most interesting places I have ever seen. Here I had the first sweet milk I had in 14 months; and needless to say how good it was or the amount I drank. From there we returned to the city of Tel-Aviv, ending our trip through the Holy Land.

I wish you people at home could have

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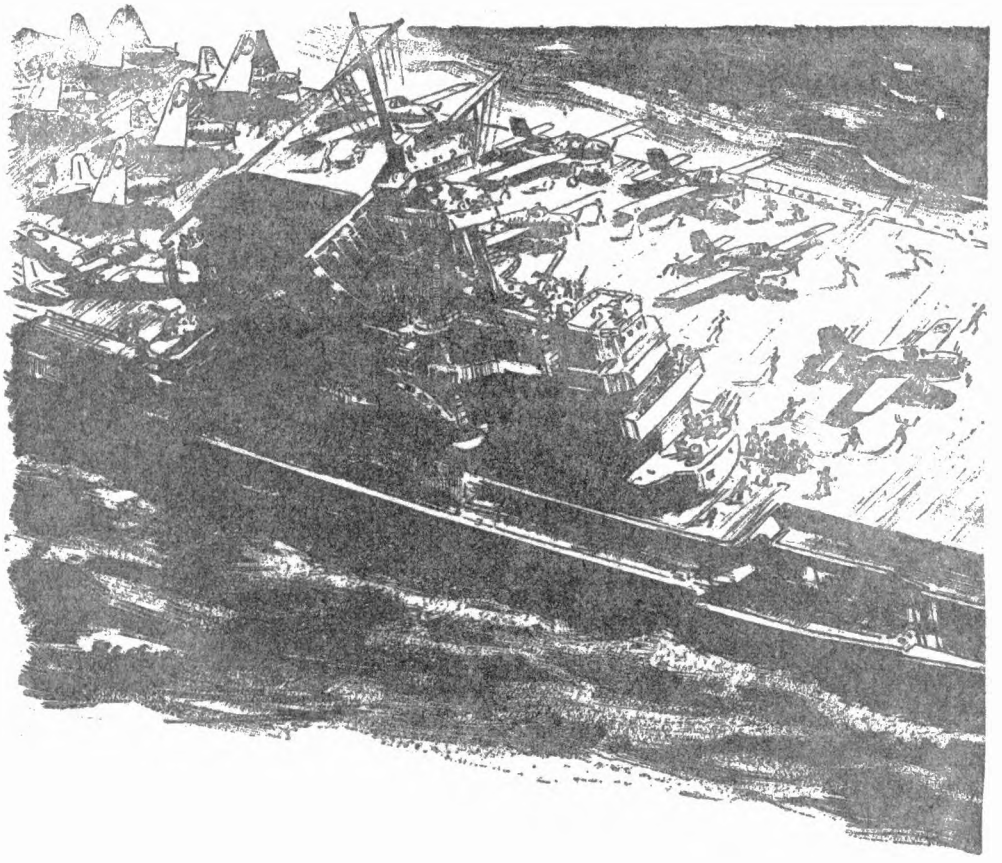


SPLASH BOMB CHAMP

By JACKSON V. SCHOLZ

Author of "Lightning in the Sky," etc.

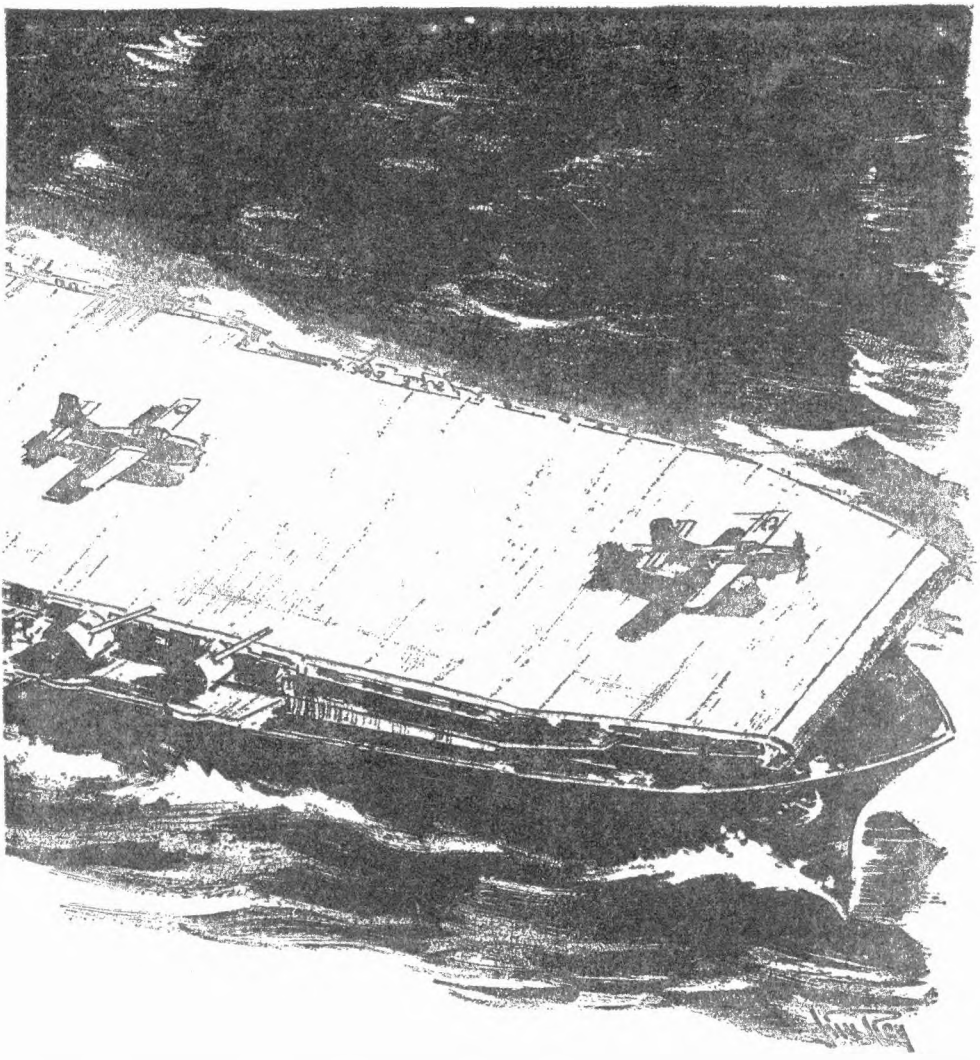
I

WHEN "battle stations" were sounded, early in the afternoon, Monty Brett was stretched out on his bunk. He wasn't sleeping. He was trying to untangle some of his snarled thoughts.

The clamor of the gong in the steel corridor outside his room brought him upright with a force which scraped his head against the springs of the bunk above. He cursed dutifully, but his feet hit the deck without delay.

As the latest replacement on the flattop, *Falcon,* he had seen no action yet, not even a practice hop. He moved fast, grabbing his life jacket, helmet, goggles and plotting board in a series of swift motions. He was running out the door when the loudspeaker bellowed, "Man your battle stations!" He grimly hoped that this alert was genuine.

He raced along the corridor, meeting a few other pilots who were heading in top speed in the same direction, toward the ready room. He could hear the subdued thunder of many motors warming on the flight deck.



In the ready room the feeling of breathless hurry was replaced by an air of business-like efficiency. Brett found an empty chair, and the other chairs filled rapidly. Most of the men, intent as they were upon the job at hand, had time for friendly nods or excited, pleased grins in the directions of their flying mates, but it was noticeable that no such expressions of recognition were tossed toward Lieutenant Commander Monty Brett. Such glances as there were were impersonal and speculative for the most part. Some were openly antagonistic.

Brett didn't miss them, despite the fact that his attention was riveted to his plotting board. He didn't actually see the looks, but he could feel them, just as if someone were peppering him with small sharp darts.

The flying data was coming down from air-plot. The "talker" took the information through his ear-phones, and repeated

it to a sailor who transferred it swiftly to the big blackboard. Brett, in turn, transferred the necessary dope to his plotting board—wind direction and velocity, weather conditions above the target, his own point option, and the course which the carrier *Falcon* would take when the planes had left. When the men had finished writing, Commander Gregory said briefly:

"Our scouts spotted a small Jap task force heading in the direction of the Fijis, one heavy cruiser, three destroyers and a small carrier. When they found they were spotted they turned and headed north. With luck you can intercept them."

A moment later the loudspeaker summoned, "Pilots, man your planes."

The exodus from the ready room was swift and orderly. On the great nine-hundred-foot flight deck the planes were crowded toward the stern in what looked like a hopeless jumble. The wings of the dive bombers overlapped, and the wings of the torpedo bombers were folded above the pilot like the wings of a great bird. The motors had been cut to eliminate the danger from the whirling props while the pilots found their planes and climbed aboard.

Brett knew exactly where his SBD should be—to starboard, ahead of the torpedo planes. There would be no escort of fighter ships today. The target was too far away.

Monty Brett was tall and rangy. He moved with a loose-jointed gait which was deceptive in its accuracy. There was no waste effort as he wove his way among the closely packed planes on the flight deck.

The lines of his face were clean-cut, sensitive. He could be hurt—easily—a fact which was perpetually disguised by an overlying shell of hardness. His eyes were hazel, wide-spaced, with the steady look of a man who never hedged a bet, and who would never step aside an inch from the course he knew to be the best, despite whatever consequences might arise. He would never compromise with duty.

The set of his jaw confirmed this. It was solid, without arrogance. His lips were full, well formed, and did not deserve the grimness stamped upon them. They were the lips of a man who liked to laugh, but who had had small opportunity in the recent past. They had been stiffened by the relentless, constant pressure of a great responsibility.

His dark hair was prematurely sparse. He chose to believe that it had been partially worn away by his flying helmet during the three thousand hours he'd spent aloft. Whatever the reason, it heightened his forehead, and made him appear older than he really was. He was only twenty-eight.

He reached his "Dauntless," ducked under the wing, and came up beside the cockpit. He shot a casual, curious glance toward the back cockpit, wondering what sort of men had been assigned to him as radio-man and gunner. The shock of recognition froze him to an instant of immobility. Of all the men in the U. S. Navy, *his* rear cockpit man would have to be Ray Carter, radio-man, first class.

THE surprise of the meeting did not seem mutual. Carter, apparently, had known who would be his pilot. There was a hard, sardonic humor in his gray-green eyes, but the lines of his face were wooden with restraint. It was a handsome face, almost too handsome. There was strength there, plenty of it, but the strength, as Brett well knew, was not the strength of discipline. It stemmed from a devil-may-care fearlessness, a complete belief in himself and the assurance that his background and his breeding were impeccable.

The dismay in Monty Brett's expression was brief as a flash of light. He knew, however, that Ray Carter hadn't missed it. Carter's long-lashed eyes glittered with quick challenge.

"Hello, Carter. This is a surprise," said Brett.

"Yes, sir," said Carter, non-committally.

Brett stepped to the wing, swung a long leg into the cockpit, and settled himself in the seat. The plane captain, Murphey, also on the wing, swiftly adjusted Brett's radio headpiece, and plugged it in. Hopping back to the deck, he engaged the long crank, and waited for the first order. It came almost immediately, through the big "bull horn":

"Prepare to start engines!"

Murphey started to grind upon the crank. The whine of the energizing wheel began to grow in volume.

The bull horn bellowed, "Stand clear of propellers!"

The energizing wheel was howling now, joining its tone to those about it.

"Start engines!"

Brett pulled the starting toggle. Murphey stepped back and grabbed a fire extinguisher—just in case. This was a ticklish moment. The big motor coughed, cleared its throat, then caught. Brett grunted with relief as the sharp roll of its exhaust told him that everything, so far, was Jake. He checked his instruments and controls while waiting his turn to take off. Then things began to move with the coordination of a watch.

THE flight officer on the bridge had the red flag up, "Prepare to launch!" The *Falcon* was already driving hard into the wind. The first dive bomber taxied up to the starting line, and the flight officer raised the white flag, which automatically transferred authority to the launching officer on the deck.

The latter was equipped with a white baton. He moved it in a swift circular motion, and the ship on the starting line revved up its motor. Suddenly the baton held steady, pointing straight ahead. This was the final signal. With brakes released the bomber lunged forward for the take-off.

WITH mechanics upon each wing-tip, Monty Bretts' big ship was soon upon the line. His pulse was pounding steadily and strong. He was strangely calm, despite the fact that he'd looked forward to this moment for so long—his first real combat hop.

When the launching officer's baton snapped forward, Brett released his brakes and let 'er roll. The three blades of the big prop grabbed the air like a screw biting into wood. The prop was set at full low pitch, and the accelerated forward movement plastered Brett's back against the seat. In another few seconds he was in the air. He held straight for several hundred yards, then banked gently to the right, in order to relieve the following plane of his propeller wash. He started his climb toward the meeting place three thousand feet above.

Once there the thirty-six planes of the dive bomber squadron split up into four "divisions" of Vs, each division containing three "sections" of three planes each. Brett flew at the point of the second section of the first division. The skipper, Hal Farrel, a two-striper, led them in a climb. Brett went on oxygen at ten thousand feet. The squadron leveled off at eighteen thousand and headed for its target.

Relieved of the tension of the take-off, Brett could feel the presence of the man in the cockpit behind him, and his presence there was not conducive to relaxation.

Brett had been a dive bomber instructor at Pensacola—the best. The gold braid higher up had regarded him as indispensable. The kids he taught had regarded him quite differently. They hated his guts.

Brett's skill with water-filled practice "splash bombs," was fabulous, and he could teach the things he knew. He had taught them with a blunt impersonal savagery which had made them stick. He had made dive bombers—good ones. His record was impressive.

So was his record as a tyrant among the men he'd taught. Brett knew it, regretted

it, but got some satisfaction from the fact that his teachings had saved many men and planes. At least a half-dozen of these men were flying with him now.

Ray Carter, for example. The catch here was that he'd washed Ray Carter out for a commission. Had reported him as allergic to discipline, needlessly reckless, intolerant of fundamentals.

Later, Brett had managed to get himself assigned to combat duty, a tough uphill battle all the way. They hadn't wanted to let him go. Yet here he was. And here was Carter. Cozy.

Jane Hall, a navy nurse, and ensign, was in the picture, too. Triangle stuff. She had been stationed at Pensacola, too. Carter had known her in private life. Brett had met her at the base, and had gone completely overboard. Carter probably believed that Brett, by stalling his commission, had sought to wipe out competition. Nice mess.

Yeah, any way he looked at it, he was on a spot, and it wasn't the sort of spot from which a guy could alibi himself if anything went wrong.

He'd bawled hell out of some of the men who were flying with him now, because they'd missed their practice targets. These same men had, since then, had their chance at living targets. Brett hadn't. Nor had he flown through ack-ack, flack, nor smelled the stink of tracer bullets.

The skipper, Farrel said, "Heads up! Target! Form echelon of sections to the left!"

II

BRETT obeyed the order, swinging across to take his place in the stepped-up line of bombers. With the maneuver finished he strained his eyes for a sight of the Jap warships. He saw the thread-like wake of the boats first, then the ships themselves, like tiny water bugs on the surface of the ocean.

The Zeros had undoubtedly left their flat-top by this time, and would be climbing hard for altitude. Brett waited for his nerves to dance. They didn't.

Farrel said, "First and second divisions take the flat-top. Third division, the cruiser. Fourth, destroyers. Prepare to attack!"

Ack-ack was coming at them now, jarring closer as the Jap guns figured out the range. The squadron leader peeled off in his dive. Five more peeled off before Brett's turn came.

He heard Carter open up with his pair of .30 calibers in the back cockpit. The Zeros had arrived. Brett saw the red balls of tracers, and felt the impact of bullets on his wing. He didn't even glance in that direction. His concentration on his target was too perfect.

He pulled the charging handle of his bomb, peeled off when his turn came. His movements were automatic, and precise. He adjusted his throttle, moved the prop to high pitch to prevent windmilling, let out his perforated diving flaps, and glued his eye to the rubber mouthpiece of his telescopic sight.

The flat-top already had one bomb hole in its flight deck. The water about it was churned to a froth by near misses. It was circling in a panic. Brett aimed for the stern to stop that foolishness.

He was fully in his dive, now, almost vertical. He studied the wind circles and the cross lines on his sight with calm detachment. He kept the "pipper," the tiny bubble, in exactly the right spot, exactly where he wanted it. He did it without thinking, making tiny automatic adjustments on his stick and rudder.

Something slammed against his leg. His target swerved, but he brought it back, dead center. A Zero went howling past him. Brett knew, then, a Nippo slug had hit his leg. So what? The leg still worked.

Four thousand feet—now three. He didn't have to watch the altimeter. His finger curved gently about the release button on his stick. Twenty-five hundred feet! He pressed the button.

A gust of air was waiting for him. It hit the ship and skidded it to one side. The timing of the gust was murderously accurate. No power on earth could have prevented the wide deflection of the bomb. Brett knew where it would land—harmlessly to starboard of the carrier.

He hauled the stick back violently, not giving a damn just then if there were a dozen Zeros on his tail. He felt the pressure of the pull-out, but it didn't black him out. It never did, another reason he had been a good instructor.

No Zeros jumped him. He was lucky. He spiraled to six thousand feet before he remembered his leg. He glanced down, then, and found he had a nasty gash. He said through the interphone, belatedly.

"Did they get you, Carter?"

"Yes, sir, a little. In the leg."

"Bad?"

"Not very." Then, as an afterthought, "Did they get you?"

"Yes. Also in the leg. Can you stop your bleeding and dust it with sulfa powder?"

"Yes, sir, I can manage. Can you?"

"I think so."

Brett had himself fixed up by the time they headed toward the *Falcon*. No need to use their option points, there were no Jap planes left to tail them. The Jap flattop was sinking. The cruiser was listing badly. One destroyer was down. The other three, though badly mauled, were managing to get away. Four bombers had been lost. The price was cheap.

THE pilots seemed to think so. They kidded back and forth. An ensign named Seth Hammer said:

"Hammer to Brett. How did you make out, Mr. Brett?"

Hammer was a former student.

Brett took an instant to control his voice, then said, "Missed a mile."

"Tough luck," said Hammer. "Now if you'd only had a water bomb instead of—"

"Shut up, Seth!" Farrel's voice cut across the air, but not before Brett had heard a few appreciative chuckles, enough to tell him what he knew already. His former students had him where they wanted him. Carter, in particular, Brett knew, was enjoying himself now. Brett's eyes were bleak behind his goggles.

WHEN he and Carter were sent to a base hospital at Auckland, Brett had to admit the irony of the situation, the fact that his and Carter's lives were running, now, in such close parallels.

He didn't know the half of it, however. He found Jane Hall at the hospital, stationed there. It was a great discovery, and all of that, but the days of his recovery were not as carefree as they might have been.

He'd never been too sure of Jane to start with, and now with Ray Carter on the spot again to offer competition, Brett felt that his own style, clumsy at the best, was cramped.

He did his best, however, but never found the nerve to make an issue of it, to call a showdown, and find exactly where he stood. He had one final chance, but muffed it, under the distraction of a new and potent worry.

Jane popped into his room one day and broke the exciting news that she had just been transferred to the hospital ship, *Flanders*. It had happened bang, like that—she was about to sail—she only had a second—and didn't Brett think she was a lucky gal?

"Hell, no!" yelped Brett. "Those hospital ships are dangerous."

"So what?" she demanded.

"—I don't like it," spluttered Brett.

"But I do and—I've got to rush. Here." She kissed him quickly and hurried from the room.

That part would have been okay, except that Brett had the unsettled feeling that she was tearing off to kiss Carter good-by too. He slugged his pillow with his fist, "Damn!" then settled down to some real

worrying. Jap subs were nuts about defenseless hospital ships.

Two weeks later he was fit for duty. So was Carter—and there it was again, that paralleling of their lives. They were both sent back to the *Falcon,* and Brett braced himself with a poker face for what he believed was waiting him.

He hoped they'd razz him, kid his shirt off. He could have taken that—in fact, he would have welcomed it. The trouble was, they didn't. They accepted him as if he'd never been away. They were polite and courteous, too damned polite and courteous, as if he were still an instructor. They excluded him from their activities, not pointedly, but naturally. Brett climbed into his shell and stayed there, although it wasn't a form of isolation he enjoyed.

The Japs, having had their ears pinned back at Kula Gulf, had called time out to frame their alibi. The *Falcon* remained on the prowl, looking for whatever trouble might present itself. She finally had to manufacture some.

Obeying the summons to the ready room, Brett took down the dope on his plotting board. The objective, it appeared, would be Rabaul. Commander Gregory told the pilots:

"Spotters have reported a big concentration of cargo ships and transports in the harbor. A flight of fortresses will go over first and unload from twenty-five thousand feet. Your job is to mop up as much of the leavings as you can."

It wasn't the sort of job Brett wanted at this time, but he knew he'd have to make the best of it. The hunting, undoubtedly, should be good, but it wouldn't be the kind of hunting he preferred.

The dive bomber and torpedo squadrons left the carrier and set their course for New Britain. Once more they flew without the benefit of fighter escort.

The formation was as close-packed as a bunch of grapes, yet Brett had the uneasy feeling that he wasn't part of it. Even Carter, in the rear cockpit, seemed remote, though he undoubtedly was hoping that Brett would make a mess of things again. Carter was like that. He'd risk his own neck for the pleasure of seeing Monty Brett turn in another clumsy show.

New Britain came in sight. Then came the skipper's warning:

"Zeros! Keep in close!"

III

THE Zeros came down at them like a swarm of furious hornets. There were probably twenty of the slender, vicious little ships. They came in recklessly, trying to smash the squadron through sheer weight of numbers. In an incredibly short time, Brett heard the hammering of their guns, saw the red glow of their tracers. The Nips were "throwing apples."

It was the toughest spot of all for a bomber pilot—a period of almost frozen inactivity. Brett knew, as did the rest, that the best of all protection was the maintaining of a tight formation. It meant a complete dependence upon the rear-cockpit gunners, men who had been trained with mathematical precision in deadly, coordinated angle fire.

The Japs found this out. Their flimsy crates were vulnerable to .30-caliber guns. The formation held intact, giving the gunners steady platforms, and permitting them to concentrate their fire. Zeros began to drop in blazing spirals toward the water.

Brett sweated with impatience. It was torture to just sit there, waiting. Now and again his hand moved automatically toward the trigger of the fixed guns in the bomber's nose. It was just plain hell to know that these guns were useless, at the moment, that he couldn't join the fight with them.

The Zeros were thinning out, but the bombers were taking a savage mauling, too. Brett felt his ship jerk violently, several times, under the impact of machine-gun bursts. A heavier jar out toward the tail, told him a cannon ball had plowed

through the fuselage. After each impact, Brett asked quietly:

"Are you okay, Carter?"

And each time Carter answered, "Yes, sir." The steady, controlled firing of his guns confirmed it.

Three bombers failed to reach their targets, and some were limping when they got there. Brett's ship was still working nicely when the squadron roared across the northern tip of the island. He carried it through the smooth maneuver which brought the squadron into echelon attack formation. They ran into the anti-aircraft fire now, and it was savage. More land-based Zeros came to the attack, diving crazily into their own ack-ack.

The harbor was below them now. It was dotted with a heavy concentration of transport and cargo ships. Brett judged their number, roughly, as at least a hundred. Many of them were already burning from the accurate eggs which the flying fortresses had laid. Others were tilted for their final plunge. There were still enough left for the dive bombers and the torpedo planes.

Hal Farrel said, "Let's go! Watch the man ahead of you, and don't gang on the same target."

Farrel peeled off, and the attack was on. The sweat stopped trickling from beneath Brett's helmet. The heat was off. The waiting was over. Now it was the pilots' turn to do their stuff. It made a big difference in a fellow's nerves—smoothed 'em out like buttering a piece of bread.

Brett's turn came, and he kicked the heavy ship into its dive. A Zero, spitting fire, came howling at him from the side. Brett's hand remained steady on the stick. Jap slugs ripped through the greenhouse glass. Brett's head jerked as a bullet nicked the leather of his helmet. He merely grunted with annoyance, and went ahead with his adjustments. Ack-ack boiled about him. He dove straight through the middle of it, scarcely knowing it was there.

Diving flaps open, throttle eased, prop in high pitch, bomb charged—he began to gather speed. He didn't line his sights until he had studied the diving ship ahead. When he spotted the target the ship in front of him had picked, Brett eased to the left, and lined up on a cargo boat which appeared to have escaped damage.

He glued his eye to the sight, then, and toyed with his controls until the wabbling pipper had settled on the spot he knew was right. He held it there. It wasn't easy. Ack-ack joggled him. A Zero hurtled past—so close that it threw a rush of air which set the pipper dancing madly across the lines and circles of the sight.

THERE was a sick instant when Brett thought he'd been thrown completely off his target. But he brought it back, instinctively, with a delicacy of timing which a man can't learn—he has to feel.

The air was screaming past him now, but Brett knew every varying cadence of the sound. His brain checked off the altitude. The boat below was big and vulnerable in his sights. His finger closed upon the button. The bomb was on its way. Brett's lips were stretched into a grin. He knew exactly where that bomb would land.

He pulled back on the stick. The pressure hit him like a ton of pig iron, but it didn't black him out. It never did. The plane squashed soggily through the air, in its several hundred feet of complete helplessness. The controls were useless until they could regain their grip upon the air. Brett didn't like this period. Just now, he almost envied those men who went through it in a state of semi-consciousness.

It gave him the chance, however, to look down and watch his bomb smash through the deck below, then tear the steamer's guts out in a violent surge of fire. It was a pleasant sight. Brett liked it.

The controls, at last, responded to his touch. He held the plane down near the water, streaking low until he had a chance

to see how things were setting up about him. The dive bombers were still working, still battering their targets with destruction.

Brett felt, now, like a kid on a vacation. His job was done, done well. For a short time he would be on his own. He felt the Nips owed him something for the plastering he'd been forced to take while getting into position for his dive.

He swept the fighting area above him. An SBD was screaming downward at its target. Brett's eyes also took in a Zero, recovered from a dive, which was flashing in for an upward, slashing attack on the SBD. It looked as if the Jap could nail the bomber cold.

Brett, just off the water, had his motor open wide, his prop at full low pitch and his set-guns charged. Judging his distance to a gnat's whisker, he took a psychic chance at reading the Jap's mind.

He sent the heavy bomber roaring up into a steep chandelle. Relieved of the thousand pounds in its belly the ship handled sweetly, despite the fact that it wasn't meant for this sort of thing.

Brett, nevertheless, had it doped out neatly. At the top of the dizzy climbing turn, the Jap was exactly where Brett wanted him. The Zero was so close, in fact, that Brett could see the look of frozen terror on the Nippo's face, as he spotted Brett for the first time.

Brett calmly pressed the trigger button on his stick, and the slugs from his two big guns smashed at point-blank range into the Zero's cockpit. There was no more expression on the Nippo's face. He didn't have a face. He didn't need one any more. The Zero lunged like a bronco, then headed on its last dive toward the water. The other SBD could drop its bomb now, unimpeded.

Brett's situation, though, was not so simple. He was, as a matter of fact, in one hell of a spot. He was hanging on his ear a couple of hundred feet off the water, without enough flying speed to keep a box kite in the air. He heard Carter accept the situation with a resigned, but unpanicky, "Well, this is it!"

It looked that way. A P-40 might have had a chance. But a Dauntless? It was thin—thin as a film of oil.

Except that Monty Brett refused to look at it that way. He let the big ship drop off on a wing, then handled it with the delicacy of a jeweler installing a main spring in a watch.

THERE was neither room nor time for one false move—not even for one unbalanced breath. Brett did things to the Dauntless, things which had never been incorporated in its design. He made the big ship so completely a part of him, that he seemed actually to control it with his mind.

He held it in the air with sky hooks—nothing else. He wished it into a short dive, and somehow pulled it out. There was scarcely space for a ray of light between the blur of his propeller tips and the surface of the water. It was as close as that.

Again Carter spoke involuntarily. His voice, across the phone, was dazed. "Well, I'll be absolutely damned!" he said.

Brett didn't answer. His attention had been caught by something else. A torpedo plane was making its run toward a tanker which, so far, had escaped. A battery of machine-guns on the tanker was enveloping the torpedo plane in a heavy pattern of tracer fire. It seemed incredible that the VT could drive its way through that hail of steel.

Brett came around in a flipper turn, and leveled off on a course parallel to that of the torpedo plane. The gun crews on the tanker, seeing a second plane coming at them, figured it for a second torpedo carrier. They divided their fire between the two onrushing ships. It gave the torpedo plane an infinitely better chance to get its fish away.

Brett saw the fish drop in the water,

lined up for a certain hit amidships. Brett charged the tanker, then, and wiped out a machine-gun crew with his guns. He heard the hammering of Ray Carter's guns, and saw another machine-gun on the deck become engulfed in kicking Japs.

"Nice work, Carter," grunted Brett, before he had a chance to think.

"Thank you, sir," said Carter tonelessly.

Brett zoomed the tanker. A moment later he heard the thunder of the torpedo striking home. He didn't look behind. He looked aloft instead. The Zeros were still as thick as fleas on a monkey. The ack-ack was still exploding in a smashing curtain, but most of the Yank ships, by this time, were below its range, down in the flack area.

Hal Farrel's voice came through the mike, "Farrel to Squadron Forty-three. Mission completed. Disperse to option points."

BRETT received the order with a strange reluctance. He hated to leave the scene of action, despite the fact that his squadron had done virtually all the harm it could.

Nevertheless, he took his bearings swiftly, and set a rough preliminary course toward his own point option, the assigned point to which he must first fly in order to be sure he was not trailed by enemy spotters. Once there, if there were no Jap planes in sight, he would set a new course which would take him to the *Falcon*.

He clawed for altitude, and reached four thousand feet before a pair of Zeros marked him for their meat. Carter saw them first.

"Two Nips coming down at us!" he said.

Brett looked up, saw the wicked little wasps above, and leveled off. He kept an eye on them, trying to guess how they'd attack, as they maneuvered for position. The Japs were probably deciding that point between themselves. When they finally started their attack their strategy was obvious. One was to make a right-angled diving slash, while the other, apparently, would strike from the rear, to make a long zoom beneath the belly of the bomber. From the looks of it their attacks would not come simultaneously, and that's the thing Brett gambled on. He said:

"Pick off the rat to starboard. I'll give you all the time I can. Be sure your belt's tight, because you're going to need it."

"Wilco," acknowledged Carter.

His guns let loose. So did the Japs. They tore more holes in Brett's greenhouse. A tracer bullet passed before his eyes so close that it blinded him an instant. But he held the bomber steady, giving Carter every chance.

Carter came through in the pinch. "Got 'im!" he barked exultantly.

"Hang on!" Brett snapped, then yanked the big ship into as tight a loop as the controls would stand.

It was a seat-plastering maneuver which a single-seater couldn't have improved on—much. As he went around, Brett grimly hoped that he had figured things out right.

He had. The Oriental one-track mind was not prepared to have a bomber stand up to him like a fighter-ship. Brett, looking down, saw the Jap staring up at him with open-mouthed bewilderment. The Nippo made a panicky, belated effort to jerk his crate aside—but it was too late then.

Brett got his nose down, lined his sights, and tripped his trigger. The big slugs poured into the Zero cockpit. The Jap's body, as if it were made of rubber, bounced grotesquely from the impacts. The Zero slewed off into a dizzy sideslip, a dead hand upon the stick.

For a second time that day Ray Carter lost a grip on his composure. He said again, when Brett had leveled off, "Well, I'll be absolutely damned."

Brett headed once more for his point option, but he didn't get very far. The

motor coughed with a strangled, warning sound. Brett's fingers leaped swiftly to the throttle quadrant. His mixture control was in the right place, so was his supercharger handle, his throttle and the propeller pitch control. Glancing at the dials he checked his motor heat and amperes. Everything in order. The motor coughed again. His eyes snapped to the gas gauge —almost empty. He switched to his reserve tank, but the motor didn't like that, either.

The next step in the procedure was routine—a landing place. He nursed the SBD around in a gentle bank, and glued his eyes upon the southern shore line of New Britain, about two miles away.

THE first survey brought a cold hard lump into his stomach. The jungle seemed to crowd the shore line at all points. Not until the ship limped nearer did his eyes pick up a sight which brought a rudimentary grunt of hope. A slender strip of white was traced along a shallow indentation on the shore. It was a beach, of sorts, perilously small. Maybe he could find a better one. His motor took issue on the point. It gave a violent snort, and quit.

"Bail out, Carter, if you want to," Brett said shortly. "I'm going to try to set 'er down on that sliver of sand. Better jump. You can get ashore."

"Thank you, sir," said Carter. "But I'm allergic to silk. I'll stick around."

Brett didn't argue. He had too many other things on his mind just now. He was nursing the plane in as shallow a glide as it would stand, and the closer he got to shore, the worse the chances looked.

"What we need now," he grunted, "is a helicopter."

"Or the wings of an eagle," supplemented Carter.

One chance! Just one. Muff this landing, and he'd probably never make another. All of Brett's perceptions were tuned to concert pitch. They had to be. He had to fasten every detail in his mind, rivet it in place, for he would have no second guesses.

The beach looked hard, and fairly smooth, but desperately narrow. It sloped, too, toward the water, and, toward the far end, the trunk of a fallen gum tree had toppled across the path Brett had to take.

His concentration was intense and cold. He didn't hesitate. He measured the air-inches with the caliper of his mind, then dropped his ship into a whistling sideslip.

It was tricky to control, because his landing flaps, his diving flaps and wheels were down. Nothing but the most delicate of instinct could have held it where he wanted it.

When he leveled off, the upper branches of the trees grabbed hungrily at his undercarriage, but failed to hold. The beach came leaping at him. Brett stalled the bomber in—made a flat-top landing, hoping that his landing hook would bite into the sand, as a substitute for the *Falcon's* arresting gear. Simultaneously he must maintain a wing-tilt, to compensate for the sloping of the beach.

The landing hook took hold. The wheels hit in exact unison with a jarring impact. Brett kept the stick hauled back into his belly, but the forward speed of the big ship was still enough to chill his blood. The tree trunk loomed ahead of him—a solid barrier.

Brett waited until the final split-hair instant. Then, with ailerons and rudder, he sent the bomber slewing toward the jungle, The plane made a half turn, groaned in every joint, tipped drunkenly, but stopped—upright. The right wing rested gently on the log.

IV

BRETT slid back the hatch above his head, glad to find it wasn't jammed. He climbed to the ground, and found that his knees were not as steady as they might have been.

Carter joined him a moment later. He was slightly green. His eyes were steady, though, and they met Brett's without wavering. Carter's voice came out with an effort which left it almost toneless:

"You've shown me the greatest flying today I've ever seen—or ever hope to see."

Brett's jaw dropped in surprise. He searched for some further sign of amnesty in Carter's eyes, but it wasn't there. The chill impersonality had closed in again like a pair of shutters. Carter had given the devil his due, and that was that.

"Thanks," Brett said briefly. Then, "It's possible they might have seen us turn back and come down. We'll camouflage the ship."

They did a hasty, but effective job, with the aid of pocket knives, cutting brush and laying it on the wings and fuselage. They had scarcely finished when a Jap scout plane came nosing about the area. He didn't hover above the spot, so it was safe enough to assume he hadn't seen the SBD.

"Sure as hell they'll send patrol boats, though," said Brett. "Let's get the gun out of the back cockpit, and mount it along the shore." Carter shot him a curious glance, and Brett explained:

"If they *do* show up, they'll expect the gun to be in the plane, and they'll keep it covered. They'll also stay behind their armor. Our best chance will be to take them from the side."

Carter nodded, and they went to work, laboring in a strange, unnatural silence. It seemed incredible to Brett that two men whose lives were dangling by the same thin thread, should be so many miles apart in other ways. Yet, that's the way it was.

When the gun was mounted and well hidden, Brett gave the motor a quick check-up. He found what he'd suspected. A Jap slug had nicked the gas line, and there was no way to repair it with the tools at hand. He shrugged, and led the way to the improvised gun nest. When the heavy silence became almost unbearable, Brett said:

"Aren't we being a bit pig-headed, Carter?"

Carter made a careful, unnecessary adjustment on the gun. "It's possible," he replied slowly, but did not turn around.

Brett said, "Let's have it out." He settled his back against a tree, and fished out a pack of cigarettes. Carter turned, found a seat nearby, accepted a smoke and lighted it.

"There's nothing to have out," he said quietly. "Besides you have me at a disadvantage."

"Nuts!" snapped Brett. "Forget my braid, and get things off your chest. It may be your last chance."

"Yes, it may be," conceded Carter. He showed no inclination to continue.

"Let's start from the fact that you hate my guts," Brett prompted.

"Sure I do," said Carter with complete frankness. "But you already *knew* that."

"I guess I did," said Brett. "And the reason for it. You think I kept you out of a commission. Do you think I did it deliberately?"

"No," said Carter, handing Brett a big surprise. "Under the circumstances you were justified in washing me out. The point is, I believe I'd have made the grade under another instructor. I believe that another man, less hardboiled than you, could have taught me how to dive bomb. I couldn't take the sort of discipline you handed out, because I knew you'd never bombed a live target, and I couldn't accept you as the real McCoy."

"And you can't yet, huh?"

"Not yet," said Carter simply.

Brett analyzed this as if talking to himself aloud. In a way, he was, as a means toward clarifying his thoughts.

"I see," he mused. "I believe it goes like this: On my first chance, I miss the best possible target—a flat top. It was traveling at full speed. The inference was, aboard the *Falcon,* that I missed because of cold feet from ack-ack, flack and Zeros. Fair enough—*but,* today I scored a bull's-

eye under anti-aircraft conditions which were just as bad. Of course I hit a sitting target, but it washes out the yellow streak theory, just the same."

He took a long drag from his cigarette while Carter watched him curiously.

"And so," Brett continued carefully, "that leaves just one more theory, namely that I have a tendency to get buck fever when I line up on a vitally important *moving* target, and when the chips are down. Does that make sense?"

"It does," said Carter dryly.

"I thought it would," said Brett. "And summing up, it would please you and some others on the *Falcon* if I should pan out to be just a bust. Is that correct?"

Carter nodded. "Speaking for myself, yes," he admitted honestly. "I'm not proud of it, but that's the way it is. If you turned out to be really hot stuff, it would make a mug of me, and of my opinion of you. I hate to make wrong guesses."

Brett smoked awhile in thoughtful silence.

He was not the least resentful. He even admired Carter for his frankness, and wished there was some way to meet the man upon more pleasant terms. Brett also believed he knew the reason why this could never be—Jane Hall. The quick disturbing thought of her caused him to forget Carter temporarily. When he glanced in the other's direction a few minutes later, Carter, also, was lost in his own dreams, gazing into space, probably thinking of Jane Hall.

THE meditations of both men were interrupted by the faint sound of a motorboat exhaust. They both heard it at the same time, and stiffened to attention. It grew in volume, as the patrol boat cruised along the coast.

There was no way of knowing whether the boat was on a routine patrol, or whether it was looking for Bretts' ship. It didn't make much difference. The ultimate result would be the same at any rate, because the SBD could be spotted easily from the water.

This was confirmed almost at once. Hardly had the nose of the boat pushed into sight, than its motor was suddenly throttled down, and the excited jabbering of Jap voices came to the two men where they crouched behind a screen of leaves just inside the jungle wall. The Japs were pointing toward the SBD. There were six men in the boat.

Brett made an instinctive move toward the gun, then stopped. Carter, after all, was the best man for this job. He was accustomed to the weapon. His experience with it had been recent. Brett nodded toward the twin barrel .30 caliber. He whispered:

"It's your baby, Carter. They'll come in to snoop, and you ought to get a broadside shot."

Carter shot him a curious glance, as if he hadn't expected a break of this sort. He said, "Okay," and slid behind the gun.

The following moments proved the soundness of Brett's judgment in removing the gun from the rear cockpit. The Japs, apparently assumed that the plane's armament was still in place beneath the camouflage, and, that if the Yanks intended to make a fight of it, this was the gun they'd use. Accordingly the patrol boat eased in cautiously, its nose pointing toward the plane. The Japs were crouched behind the protection of the armor-plate shield at the boat's bow. They were a perfect target for the hidden gun on shore.

"Now?" breathed Carter.

"Pour it on," said Brett. "They're about to plaster our ship."

Carter checked his sights an instant longer, then his finger closed gently on the trigger. The first burst was low, in the water. He raised it calmly, and the second burst slammed solidly into the crowded knot of Japs.

A surviving Nippo, who thought faster than the rest, swung the boat's machine-gun toward the source of Carter's tracer

bullets. The Jap got in a lucky burst which chewed the leaves about the hidden nest.

Carter cursed impersonally, shifted his aim a fraction, and blew the Jap machine-gunner from the boat. He then poured a few more blazing slugs into the bloody shambles, and the job was finished.

Brett, up to now, had figured on the capture of the Jap boat for the purpose of escape, but the idea was short-lived. The Jap pilot, before dying, had managed to slap the throttle open, and yank the wheel around. The patrol boat was now heading for the open sea, manned with a crew of corpses.

"Fun while it lasted," observed Carter, stepping from the gun. "Now what?"

"Damned if I know," admitted Brett.

A strange voice from behind them said: "Just leave it to your Uncle Dudley."

Both men spun about—caught flat-footed. Brett rasped, "What the hell!" as his eyes, half blinded from the waters' glare, could see no source from which the voice could come.

THEN the foliage of the jungle seemed to separate. A small portion of it took on the outline of a man, clad from head to foot in spotted clothes which blended with the bush.

"Who are you?" demanded Brett.

A white grin broke through the camouflage on the man's face. "Name's Dudley," said the man. "First Lieutenant U. S. A. Intelligence. Saw you land. Just got here. Nice shootin'."

Brett let his breath out, and admitted, "You sure scared the hell out of me. I'm Brett. This is Carter. Do guys like you just sprout around here like mushrooms? Have a smoke."

Dudley reached for the cigarette with a grunt of pleasure. He lighted it, and hauled in a few deep, grateful lungfuls before answering Brett's question.

"I'm stationed here," said Dudley. "Got a lot of pals among the natives. Speak their language. Pick up a lot of good dope."

"Nice soft job," grinned Brett. "And now you've got us on your hands."

"Yep. Glad I happened to be around." He gestured toward the plane. "Will that crate fly?"

"It would if I had a new gas line for it, and could move that log out of the way to get a take-off run."

"Hum-m," mused Dudley. "Is *that* all that's botherin' you?"

"Are you nuts?"

Bradley grinned again. "I'm pretty well set up here," he explained. "Got a short-wave radio. Have to keep movin' it around, but it keeps me in touch with the outside. Got it set up now just a couple of miles from here. As for the log, the natives will take care of that."

THINGS moved swiftly, so swiftly that Monty Brett could scarcely believe it. He kept expecting to wake up, expecting to find that the amazing Dudley had vanished like a figure in a dream.

He didn't vanish, though. He remained very much in evidence, and the guy had a knack for getting things done. He had a hundred natives on the spot a half hour later. While Brett, with the help of one of the natives who spoke understandable pidgin, superintended the removal of the log and had his plane moved to the far end of the beach, Dudley went jogging off for a session with his radio. He was back before Brett's job was finished.

"All set," reported Dudley. "A PT boat'll be here at 22 o'clock. They'll have a mechanic to patch your gas line, and also some extra gas. The rest'll be up to you. You got a flashlight?"

Brett nodded.

"Here." Carter handed him a slip of paper. "I jotted down the recognition signal for you. Flash this code, and they'll know you're not a Jap. Their recognition signal is on there too. Well, I'll be seein' ya."

"Hold on," called Brett as Dudley started abruptly for the jungle. "You

haven't given us a chance to thank you."

"No time," Dudley said across his shoulder. "Got to see a guy about a cannibal. So long. Good luck." The jungle swallowed him.

"Well I'll be damned!" Brett muttered.

"And so will I," said Carter.

DUSK was already falling. It came down, tropic style, like the swift lowering of a shade. Brett and Carter shared the SBD's emergency rations. They sat in their respective cockpits. It was the most comfortable place to wait. The dogged silence settled down once more between them. Brett fought mosquitoes, and kept his ears strained for the first sound of the PT boat.

The luminous dial of his wrist watch said nine fifty-five when the first sound came to him. The PT boat was on the dot. Brett climbed to the ground fast, and stood at the edge of the water, his flashlight in his hand. It was a nasty moment. What if the boat out there was another Jap patrol?

Brett waited tensely, scarcely aware that Carter was beside him. Finally the signal came, the one Brett had an answer for. He grunted with relief, and pressed the button of his flashlight.

Things moved methodically after that. An ensign and a mechanic rowed ashore in a rubber boat, towing gasoline drums behind them on pontoons. The mechanic fixed the plane. The ensign told Brett where to make contact with the *Falcon.*

V

BRETT flew at dawn next day. The take-off was a dangerous, tricky job, but he got the Dauntless in the air. He found the *Falcon,* too, more easily than he'd hoped. He established his identity, and the flat top nosed into the wind to let him come aboard.

His arrival caused no more than a riffle in the ship's routine. The men, more seasoned than himself to the battle cauldron of the South Pacific, were not unaccustomed to the return of fliers who had been given up for lost.

This suited Brett. It was the way he'd rather have it. He was curious, though, as he headed for the ward room after making his report. There was just a chance, a slim one, that the show he'd staged the day before had raised his stock a notch or so. He wanted to find out. He did. Hal Farrel, stocky and direct, said:

"Well, Brett, glad to have you back."

"Glad to be back," Brett admitted guardedly.

As squadron leader Farrel seemed to think that more was still required of him. He was not an expert in the use of words, could not control their intonations. He said:

"Good show yesterday. I saw you drop yours in the bucket."

"I can almost always hit a sitting target," Brett probed carefully.

"Well, that's *something,*" blurted Farrel, then realized what the words implied. He turned a little red, and said, "I—I mean—"

"Forget it," Brett cut in. "You may be right for all *I* know."

"I—I'm sorry," Farrel blundered on. "But damn it, Brett we've got to feel that—"

The clamor of a gong chopped off his words. The ward room stiffened to alertness, then broke into swift motion. Battle stations! Farrel started for the door, then whirled.

"We'll probably need you, Brett," he snapped. "You'll have another plane. Come on!" Brett joined the orderly stampede for the ready room. It was a quicker break than he had hoped for.

Farrel had guessed right. They had another plane for Brett. The *Falcon* was short handed from the battle of the day before, so Monty Brett would fly again.

And so would Carter. He was waiting in his seat when Brett came out to climb

aboard. Brett made a point of looking at him squarely. Carter met the look with impersonal flat eyes. Brett shrugged imperceptibly as he straddled his long legs into the cockpit. The take-off, swift routine, got under way.

The target was a small task force about two hundred miles away, a force of three destroyers. It suited Brett, in his present frame of mind. Destroyers were moving targets, tough ones—hard to hit.

The squadron was winging above the Coral Sea. The target was still some distance off, so the planes were cruising low, five thousand feet. The wake of a steamer in the distance caught the skipper's eye. He swung over to investigate. Coming closer, Brett got a good look at the ship below, and his heart began to hammer at his ribs.

It was a hospital ship—the *Flanders,* with a convoy of two destroyers. Jane Hall would be aboard the *Flanders.* Brett wondered if she were watching the planes above, if she hoped that Monty Brett was up there. A disquieting thought hit hard. Maybe she was hoping that Ray Carter was up there, too.

The bombers were swinging away upon their course, when Carter's voice came crackling with excitement through the phone.

"I saw a sub! Just caught a glimpse of it, but I know damn well that's what it was!"

Brett's throat closed like a vise, but his brain kept clicking. He managed, too, to keep his voice distinct.

"Brett to Farrel. Brett to Farrel. We think we saw a sub. Request permission to investigate."

"Permission granted!" Farrel snapped. "Go down! We'll follow!"

Brett peeled off like a diving hawk. "Where was it?" he asked Carter.

"To the left! That's right! Now steeper! Good! That ought to be the spot!"

It was. Brett saw the shadowy, sinister outline below the surface. Its nose was pointed toward the *Flanders.* Brett lined his sights, then saw an evil streak of white. Torpedo! It was headed toward the *Flanders*—too close to miss! It was bound to hit! Unless—

Panic, chill and brutal, made a pass at Brett—but didn't reach him. At last he had his moving target, the hardest he would ever have—and the most vitally important. Jane Hall was on that ship.

The diving angle of the bomber changed, aiming at a point to intercept the foaming path of death below. Ray Carter saw what Brett intended, and Carter's voice was harsh and wild:

"Make it good, Brett! Make it good! So help me God, I'll kill you if you don't! Nancy Blake's on board that ship!"

The words registered but vaguely as they bounced against the concentration of Brett's mind.

He snapped, "Shut up!"

And Carter grunted, "Sorry."

Brett was cool. The machinery of his mind and body were as delicately balanced as the mechanism in that deadly fish below him. His motions were controlled, well-spaced, deliberate. The eyes behind his goggles were intent, but free from strain. There was no obstruction in his thoughts, no quivering in his nerves.

His telescopic sight was useless. There was no defined target upon which he could align it. His target was an unmarked spot upon the water. There were no instruments in his cockpit to help him find that spot.

The instruments were in his senses, mounted and calibrated there by his years of vast experience. It was more than instinct, it was a definite, exact knowledge of the angles, forces, and the sciences which comprise dive bombing.

He utilized them all, moulded them into a compact unit, then released his bomb. He couldn't watch it strike. He had his pull-out to attend to. It would be dangerously close, but he knew he still had time.

He heard the explosion then—a thundering detonation—too great a roar for a single bomb, so he knew he'd hit his target.

Carter confirmed this, when the pull-out was complete. He said, "You did it, sir!"

AGAIN Brett scarcely heard him, because reaction hit him with the impact of one of his own bombs. For a minute it was touch and go. Brett thought he was going to be sick, actively and disgustingly. He never quite knew how he fought it off, but he managed somehow.

With the safety of the *Flanders* now assured, he even brought himself to take an interest in the other things about him, the submarine, for instance, which the other planes had ripped wide open. It was a pleasing, satisfying sight which helped to bring Brett back to normalcy. He was feeling pretty good when the planes re-formed and left the scene.

His mind began to back-track then. Some thought was trying to burrow to the surface. It finally got there. He said to Carter:

"Did I hear you mention someone by the name of Nancy?"

"Yes, sir," said Carter. "I'm going to marry her."

"You—what?"

"She's a nurse I met in the hospital at Auckland. She was transferred aboard the *Flanders.*"

"But—I thought—" Brett stammered.

"About Jane?" Carter helped him out. "Well, sir, Jane and I are just good pals."

"Oh," Brett answered weakly.

"And—Lieutenant Brett."

"Yes."

"I've been a damn sore-headed fool. That was the greatest bit of bombing I ever hope to see."

"Thanks," said Brett. Then, "How'd you like another crack at pilots' school. I think I could fix it up, because I believe you're ready, now."

"I'd like it," Carter answered hoarsely. "Even if I don't deserve it."

"I'll do my best," Brett promised, feeling swell.

The social hour, however, had just started. Hal Farrel's voice came back:

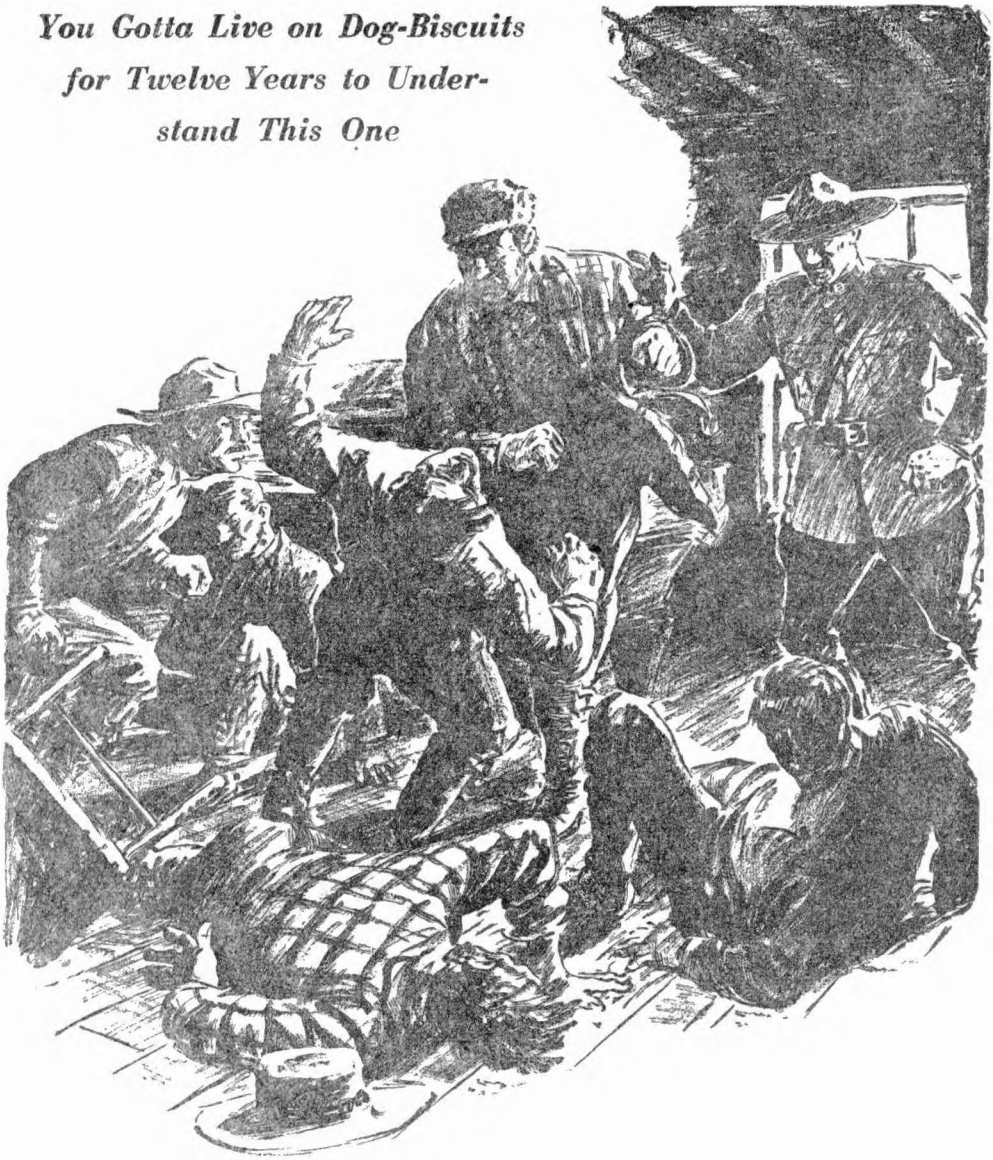
"Farrel to Brett. How's your head, Monty? All swelled up?"

Brett caught his breath, grinned and replied, "Brett to Farrel. Yeah. It's crowdin' the cockpit."

"How about some acey-ducey when we land?"

"Wilco," answered Brett, then added as an afterthought, "And how!"

You Gotta Live on Dog-Biscuits for Twelve Years to Understand This One



MAN OF PEACE

By H. S. M. KEMP

Author of Many Stories of the North

HE APPEARED on the Voters' List as Samuel Wellington Blythe; but up in the Island Lake country or the Churchill they tagged him "Peaceful Sam." There was a reason for this, and it was summed up succinctly by old Dad Jarvis. Said Dad, "The feller should drop the 'Wellin'ton' part of it. Fer he sure favors the Child Samuel more'n he does the Iron Duke."

Twelve long years had Sam Blythe lived

at Island Lake, and in all that time no one had seen him lose his temper, smite a fellow-human or utter a single "damn." Nor was it from lack of provocation. Sam Blythe, like anyone else, had to clean stovepipes and put them together again, he depended on the vagaries of the fur-market for a living, and he drove a train of dogs. And if, during those twelve years of dog-driving, nothing had happened to make him either tear his hair or bay to heaven, the sages of Island Lake figured nothing ever would.

"Me, I'm a man of peace," said Sam. "I read oncet where every time a guy flies off the handle he burns up enough energy to cut a cord of jackpine. Cuttin' jackpine's pretty tough—so why go cut a cord of the stuff when you don't need it?"

That was Sam's peculiar philosophy, and when he first descended on Island Lake the citizens decided to give his beliefs a workout. They played pranks on him, and some of them weren't too nice. But Sam merely smiled, allowed the boys wanted their fun, and joined in it with the rest of them.

Nor was Sam a meek little rabbit of a man. He stood six feet in his sox, had the heavy, drooping shoulders of a stevedore and the strength of Charlie Atlas himself. Ripping a deck of cards with his thick, blunt fingers was nothing to Sam Blythe; and where it took four good men to pack a butchered moose out of a muskeg, Sam would pack a side of it alone. Shock-headed, with a long, ragged mustache and genial blue eyes, Sam was pretty much of a puzzle to the denizens of Island Lake.

"Sure, Sam," agreed Dad Jarvis when the big fellow first propounded his views: "but a guy's got to cut loose oncet in a while. What'd happen if another guy come at you really lookin' fer trouble? A feller with blood in his eyes? What'd you do then?"

"Talk him out of it," said Sam promptly. "Yes siree; talk him out of it every time!"

"And you wouldn't clip him one? Not a little bust in the jaw to kinda put him back in his place?"

"Why should I?" argued Sam. "Guy might be half shot, wouldn't know what he was doin'. Mebbe him and the missus had had a row about somep'n. Anyways, a feller can't go around bustin' other fellers in the jaw all the time."

Dad sniffed. "S'pose you couldn't talk him out of it—what then?"

"I dunno," Sam admitted. "Dunno what I'd do." He seemed puzzled at the contingency.

Dad sniffed again. "I do. You'd run."

Sam guessed he wouldn't run.

"Sure you would!" jeered Dad. "Anyways, it's a poor pair of feet that'd stick around and see a face beat up!"

Sam guffawed at the joke, but failed to detect the scorn in old Dad Jarvis's voice.

After a while Dad said, "S'pose another war come on. Mebbe you wouldn't enlist?"

"Why not?" countered Sam. "Did last time."

Dad's tufted brows went up. "*You* did? The man of peace?"

"Yeah; but my hearin' wasn't good. They shoved me in a Labor Battalion. Still," Sam pointed out cheerfully, "that was all right. I was pretty handy with a pick and shovel; so mebbe that way I did somep'n to win the war."

Dad Jarvis, impressed, left him alone after that. The others left him alone, too. At least, they played no more pranks on him. For what was the good of trying to get a rise out of a guy who'd only grin and come back for more?

But as time went on they found that Sam Blythe wasn't the sort you could ignore for long. He was too good-natured, too easy-going. If anyone had a house to build, Sam Blythe would get out and cut logs for it. If a man were needed to drive the fifty miles down to the Landing and bring up the Christmas mail, Sam would take it on and claim that the hundred-mile

trip from his camp on the Little Smokey had only limbered him up. Sam would nurse the sick, play the fiddle at the Indian weddings, dig down in his jeans whenever the call came and do it all with a grin.

"If only the guy 'ud act human," growled Bill Carstairs of the Hudson's Bay post. "Go on one little spree, cuss, rant or tear down the walls. But that everlasting grin and everyone slipping it over him makes me tired."

CERTAINLY they slipped it over him. Sam seldom got back half the money he loaned; there were wages he never collected; and if they worked him like a coolie, imposed on him, gypped him and gave him the run-around generally, they weren't altogether to blame. The Lord had presented them with a witless sucker—and a sucker only asked for what he got.

But Sam had troubles that really did worry him; and the troubles were in the nature of food. Early in his days in the North he discovered that bannock and he didn't agree. In his own words, bannock kinda cramped his guts.

Now there is bannock, and there is bannock. There is the kind that with the addition of much shortening and baking-powder threatens to bulge the sides of the oven wherein it is cooked. And there is the other kind, the Indian kind—thin and flat, with all the texture and palatability of a rubber heel. Sam tried both of them, and got nowhere with either.

"What I crave is loaf-bread," he told them. "Yunno, th' kind that Mother used t' bake. And, by gosh, if Mother could bake it, I guess I kin bake it too!"

He tried, with a stack of cookbooks and a ton of flour; but the results was a cross between the flat-type bannock and a burned sock. His six huskies were the only ones that benefitted from his experiments; but with flour at ten dollars a hundred, Sam saw financial ruin staring him in the face. He gave in at last; and for the rest of the twelve years he lived on what he was pleased to call dog-biscuits, or what is known to the trade as hardtack or pilot-bread.

But through all these years of eating hardtack dunked in milkless tea, Sam Blythe continued to be his easy-going self. He was the same old butt for rough jests whenever he came into the village, the same old easy mark. Then Fate took a hand in things and saw to it that his path crossed that of Miss Nancy Black.

Now Nancy Black was a full-blooded Cree. The family-name was Kusketay-weas, which is being interpreted "Black Meat," or more euphemistically "Negro." From way-back-when, the family had been extremely dark, even amongst a race who were never renowned for their fairness. But when Miss Nancy arrived at the years of discretion, she took a tumble to this Kusktayweas-Negro stuff and thought it time for a change. From then on, the family would be known as "Black." And Black they became.

Nancy herself was not particularly dusky. She was tall, willowy, and, with her Indian features, extremely good-looking. She returned from eight years of mission schooling bent on snaring a white man and marrying him. But the few eligible whites around Island Lake had their own ideas. They had heard things concerning Miss Nancy and knew their way around. The trouble was that Nancy was a bit of a stepper; and it was the stepping proclivities that had cut short her schooling a year short of the proper time. The good people of the mission decided that it might be better for the young pupils if Nancy completed her schooling somewhere else; so they returned her to her people with a note to that effect. In other words, they canned her.

Nancy herself was unabashed about it all. The eight years at the mission had helped a lot. She could talk good English, she could wear good clothes and wear them well, and she could cook, white-man style. But where those few eligible whites

were content enough to flirt with her, they weren't getting hitched to a package of dynamite for the duration. That is, till Sam Blythe came along.

Nancy regarded him with sooty, appraising eyes and decided to lower her sights. Sam was twenty years older than she was, he wasn't the best trapper in the country, and she had always regarded him as pretty much of a boob. But he was a white man, and he was a better trapper—or a better worker—than most of the Indians or halfbreeds, so she might do a whole lot worse than marrying Peaceful Sam.

Sam—the sucker, the easy-mark, fell hard for her wiles; and when she came around to his tent one evening with a loaf of pure-white bread of her own cooking, Sam was sold down the river. He married the gal in three days.

NOW men are a funny lot. They'll criticize a neighbor to his face, criticize his living and manner of dress and pass disparaging remarks concerning his canoe, his gun or his dogs. They'll advise him regarding his trapping-grounds, his equipment; but when it comes to the most important thing of all, the selection of a mate, they'll keep surprisingly mum.

So it was in Sam's case. Behind his back and amongst themselves, they shook their heads and predicted a sweet time ahead for Samuel Wellington Blythe. The dame 'ud run him dizzy; he'd never keep up with her; and if he let out one little squawk, she'd pin his ears back and make him like it. But as the days lengthened and the weeks drew into months, they began to sit up and take notice. The eligible ones, the canny ones who had shied clear of the beauteous Nancy and her wiles, wondered if they hadn't been a bit too cautious after all. For never a hint of scandal, never a nudge of suspicion arose against her. She fished Sam's net as any other good squaw would have done, she worked him elaborate moosehide moccasins, and what was more to the point, she fed him in white man's fashion. As a result, Sam began to put on weight. The hollows of his cheeks filled out, he clipped his ragged mustache, and he wore better clothes. Moreover, nobody slipped it over Sam any more. The lady saw to that. In shrill Cree and English combined she took Bill Carstairs to pieces in the post one day for charging Sam eight dollars for a seven-dollar sweater; and if anyone hired Sam to do a job of work, they paid him in folding money.

But spiritually, Sam didn't change. He took life as he found it—as a matter of course. And he made the mistake of taking the dynamic Nancy the same way. Which was bad for him. For after they had been married three months, "Chiseling Charlie" Morgan came along.

Chiseling Charlie had his name bestowed on him by Dad Jarvis. And it was apt. For by nature, Charles Morgan was a chiseler of the first run. He chiseled into the fur-game by clerking for Bill Carstairs long enough to get the hang of things; then he chiseled six thousand dollars out of a distant relative and went trading for himself. Here again his peculiar streak showed up. Instead of going after business in general, he chiseled a dozen of Bill's best customers away from him by the simple method of sowing the seeds of dissension amongst them whilst working for Bill some months before.

In private life he was the same. He chiseled-in on every case of beer that came to the place, into every poker-party, into every dance. And when he discovered that Sam had struck a good thing in the bewitching Nancy, he decided to chisel-in on Sam.

He tried it at the right time. Nancy was getting a bit fed-up with this man of hers. Through her teepee-friends the news leaked out that Nancy was sort of disappointed in him. She had always known he was something of a boob, but his complacency got her down. Sam failed to interest himself in Nancy's affairs; the meals

she cooked for him were taken for granted; and if she ever wore something new in a dress, Sam wouldn't know if it was made of gunny-sacking or crepe-de-chene.

Chiseling Charlie heard all this, and decided to capitalize on it.

HE WAS something of a student of feminine nature; and if Nancy ever went down to his store to buy an article that Bill Carstairs was out of, Chiseling Charlie did his stuff. Flattery was the line, subtle, not too easy to detect. And sympathy—sympathy for anyone who would soon be doomed to six months in a trapping-camp instead of enjoying the larger pleasure of the village of Island Lake.

Soon, Charlie Morgan was taking the girl to dances. Sam still played the fiddle at them, but the thought that his wife might like to go along never entered his head. And the two—Nancy Blythe and Charlie Morgan—made a rather-striking pair.

Charlie was tall, slimly-built, with dark, sardonic features and a hair-do that gleamed like patent-leather. As they floated by in a waltz or whirled around in a square-dance, the wiseacres came out of their holes once more and nodded to each other grimly. Things were turning out as they always knew they would. And up on his packing-case platform, Peaceful Sam sawed tunes from his fiddle and gave Nancy and Chiseling Charlie a benevolent smile.

By "pitching-off" time, when white man and Indian began to leave for his winter camp, things grew worse. Chiseling Charlie paraded his flirtations more openly. And who wouldn't, when a mug like Peaceful Sam didn't know enough to get sore? But it was about that time too that Molly Carstairs, wife of the Hudson's Bay man, decided that something should be done. Molly was red-headed and Irish, and when husband Bill said he wasn't shoving his nose into another man's business, Molly went in alone.

Sam came up to the post one evening to borrow a sewing-machine needle for the wife. Molly was ready for him.

"And what does she want it for—to make another new dress for Charlie Morgan to admire?"

Sam grinned. "Mebbe. She says Charlie does admire 'em. He knows more about them things than I do."

Molly's lips compressed. "Tell me, Sam; why did you get married?"

Sam frowned. He didn't rightly know. He guessed he took a tumble to the gal; and it was workin' out all right.

Molly was amazed. "By the signs, it won't work out much longer."

"Eh?" Sam seemed completely baffled. "I guess I don't savvy."

"Then you should," she told him bluntly. "Charlie Morgan is aiming to run off with your wife."

Deep in his armchair Bill Carstairs stirred in uneasiness. He frowned, looked across at Sam for the hint of an explosion. But time went by, and Sam Blythe's face took on a deprecatory smile.

"Aw, now, Mis' Carstairs; you don't want to say nothin' like that. Nancy's a swell gal and she likes a good time. And where I'm gettin' past tearin' around, Charlie does it for me."

"Does it for you!" Molly Carstairs was aghast. "But don't you realize there's a purpose behind all this 'tearing around' of his? He's crazy over her; he must be, or he wouldn't carry on as he does."

Sam shook his head. "Naw. He don't mean nothin' by it. Anyways, we're pullin' out fer the Little Smokey day after tomorrow. And if he *does* mean anything by it, well, he'll have all winter to cool off in."

That, by Molly Carstairs' reckoning, was Sam's only salvation—to get away, to take his addle-headed wife with him. Perhaps in six months Chiseling Charlie might forget the girl; she might even forget Chiseling Charlie.

Perhaps.

A WEEK before Christmas found Peaceful Sam Blythe slugging up the Little Smokey River towards home. He had had six days on the trap-line and the catch had been good. Give him a couple of days to get rested up a bit, then he'd hit for Island Lake and the festive season. There he'd sell his catch to date, pay up his account and have quite a bit left over.

He wondered what he'd do with it. Not blow it in, that was sure, or Nancy'd crawl all over him. But he'd buy a new rifle, and a better set of harness for the dogs. Might buy himself a box of cigars and Nancy a new dress. That was quite an idea, and he toyed with it. A new dress for Nancy. Wimmen was funny; they liked stuff like that. Yeah; he'd bought her plenty, but he guessed he buy her one more.

Buoyed with such pleasing thoughts, he pulled up the hill to his big log cabin beneath the pines, banged the snow from his moccasins and walked in. He was back two-three days sooner than he expected, but it wouldn't take Nancy long to throw the skillet on the stove. Good gal, Nancy. She did th' cookin' and her sister did the chores. The sister was Nancy's own idea. She could stay with Nancy for the winter and be company for her while Sam was on the line. Not a bad sort, either, the sister. A widder-woman with a seven-year-old kid.

But when he stepped into the cabin, Nancy wasn't around. The sister was there, squatting on the floor, hugging her youngster and moaning to herself. Sam stopped dead and stared at her.

The moaning didn't cease. With it was a rocking to-and-fro that finally got on Sam's nerves. "What's up?" he demanded at last.

The woman didn't talk English, and Sam's knowledge of Cree wasn't of the best; but between the moaning and a flock of *A-eee's,* Sam was given to understand that Nancy had fled the coop.

"Ke tuppisew!" moaned the sister. She had run away.

Nor, was Sam to learn, had she run alone. Oomoochawew, the free trader, had run with her. Now the only free-trader in the country was Chiseling Charlie; and Sam demanded to know the how-come of it all.

It was finally blubbered out. Chiseling Charlie had lived up to style. With a train of dogs he had made the rounds of Bill Carstairs' Indian trappers and had garnered in much of their fur for cash. He was now going south, bound for the white man's civilization far beyond Island Lake; and with him had gone Nancy Blythe.

Sam stood there and glanced round the cabin. Where Nancy's dresses and cariboo parka had hung was now but the bare wall; and the bunk, his and Nancy's, was stripped of its blankets. He nodded slowly, as though to himself; but his only sign of emotion was a more rapid in-drawing and expelling of breath. Finally, in a tight, queer sort of voice he spoke to his sister-in-law. "When did they pull out?"

She told him. At ten that morning.

Sam flicked a glance to a cheap alarm-clock on the table. It was now two-fifteen in the afternoon.

"Rustle some grub," he ordered. "Then feed the dogs a half-fish each and unload the toboggan."

Ten minutes later he hit the trail again —but this time going south.

IT GREW dark in less than an hour, but he kept on till seven in the evening. Then he came to an Indian shack, stopped, and made his way inside. Here he gathered more information. Chiseling Charlie and Nancy had passed that way about three hours earlier. They were given the offer of camping but were going right through to Island Lake. Sam nodded. In four hours he had gained better than one on the fugitives. If his dogs held out, he'd probably overhaul them before dawn.

Off once more he went, but by midnight it was evident that the huskies were beginning to tire. Sam himself was as fresh

as when he started; but he had an urge that the dogs had not. Grudgingly he paused beside the trail, made tea from snow-water, fed and rested them.

From there on he rode the toboggan but little; yet when dawn broke there was no sign of the outfit he was trying to overhaul. He wondered if Chiseling Charlie had detoured during the night, was intending to by-pass Island Lake in an endeavor to shake off possible pursuit. But in a little while he came to a fresh boiling-place.

He examined it closely. There was an empty can of pork-and-beans of a brand that could only have come from Charlie Morgan's store; cigarette-butts too, the kind that Charlie smoked. Then the balsam-boughs before the fire showed where two people had sat to eat; and if these things were not enough, there was the plain imprint of two sets of moccasins in the snow surrounding the camp. Two sets—one large, one almost daintily-small.

Though he had traveled hard, he knew he was still thirty miles from Island Lake village; and perceptibly the huskies were slowing down. But instead of taking his impatience out on the dogs, he become grimly philosophic. Chiseling Charlie's dogs were no better than his, and where Charlie was carrying a load of fur, he, Sam, was traveling light. Moreover, Nancy was a good 'un on the trail, but a woman'd play out quicker'n a man.

Still he failed to overhaul them; but when the thirty miles finally went by and he pulled into the village, his philosophy was rewarded. In front of Charlie Morgan's store a train of dogs were sprawled on their sides; and the man unloading the toboggan was none other than Chiseling Charlie himself.

Then Sam made a mistake. Instead of ducking for cover and sneaking up on his man, he gave a bull-roaring bellow that could have been heard all over the village and five miles beyond.

Chiseling Charlie heard it; he couldn't have failed to do otherwise. He straightened with a sack of fur in his arms, recognized his personal Nemesis bearing down on him, dropped the fur and scurried into the store.

The door slammed with a crash that rattled the windows. Down the lake-front other doors opened. The roar and the crash seemed to have aroused everybody but those in the graveyard. A dog went yelping for cover; a squaw dropped an armful of wood and followed the dog. And Peaceful Sam Blythe followed Chiseling Charlie Morgan.

The door was locked. Sam battered on it, kicked at it, then charged it broadside. As Sam hurtled through the front entrance, Chiseling Charlie catapulted out the rear. And the man-hunt began.

SAM combed the village, a different Sam to any seen before. His eyes were chips of blue steel, twin spots of red burned in his cheeks, and his stubbled jaw was clamped like that of a bulldog. As his shack-to-shack canvass progressed, his manner became more deadly. Chiseling Charlie Morgan had few friends in the place, but there seemed to be a sort of League of Nations set up to protect him. No; nobody had seen th' guy; didn't know where he was at all. Till a halfbreed youngster of nine or ten lisped the news that he had just seen him running into the poolroom.

Now "poolroom" was a mere compliment paid to Hank Thompson's stopping-place.

For years the itinerant public had put up at Hank's, had flopped in his six bunks and eaten at his oilcloth-covered table. A year earlier Hank had procured a couple of moth-eaten pool-tables and installed them between the eating-table and the wall. A shingle outside now read "Hank's Poolroom;" and this bit of perjury was agumented by the words, "Kummon Inn."

The words were intended to be an invitation, so Sam accepted them as such.

He barged in, looked around, settled at last on six men eating breakfast.

"Where's Charlie Morgan?" he bellowed.

Hank Thompson, in his accepted place at the head of the table, wiped bacon grease from his jaw and asked how he should know.

"He come in here, didn't he?" roared Sam again.

"How do I know what he did?" retorted Hank. "I'm feedin' my face, not watchin' the door!"

Sam's jaws were grinding. Suddenly he grabbed Hank Thompson by the shirt-collar and swung him to his feet.

"Talk!" he snarled. "Where is he?"

Hank was crusty at any time; worse until he'd eaten breakfast. Instead of talking, he swung a haymaker at Sam's jaw. The blow was a near miss, but it did things to Sam. For the blow that Sam swung didn't miss. Hank Thompson landed backwards amongst his hot-cakes and bacon; and after that the breakfast seemed to dissolve.

But not the eaters of it. They picked themselves up, shook clear of the debris, and sailed into the man responsible.

Sam seemed to welcome them. Amongst the crunch of crockery and fractured chairs, they milled and swung and battled. The hundred-mile trip from the Little Smokey seemed to have no ill effects on Sam himself. The man of peace howled his battle-cry and waded in.

There were casualties. One man seemed to fly gracefully and backwards through the air to land limp and senseless ten feet away. Another, on hands and knees, was shaking blood from his eyes. Yet another was staring bewilderedly at three teeth he had spat into his hand. But reinforcements arrived; and these were led by Corporal McGinnis of the R. C. M. P.

Sam spotted the policeman. "Come and get it!" he howled. "I'd just soon clean y'up too while I'm at it!"

Later, the corporal testified that he thought Sam had gone mad; and the only way to deal with a madman was to lay him out. So he commenced his worthwhile project by picking up a three-legged chair and making a pass at Sam's skull.

But Sam ducked, grabbed the chair with one fist and shivered the cop with the other. And thus armed, he became more deadly than before.

But there were more chairs; and more men. It was not every day that Island Lake saw a maniac run amok; and those whose temerity did not permit them to join the melee, stood wide-eyed in the doorway.

The place became a shambles. There were split skulls and crooked noses and torn lips. Sam himself boasted a shiner that was fast making him one-eyed. In the meantime the partition separating the main room from the kitchen had collapsed. And the collapse of it brought to light three interesting objects. One was Hank Thompson's Indian wife, preparing to sell out dearly with a rolling-pin in her hand; another was the beauteous Nancy, cringing behind the six-hole stove. The third was Chiseling Charlie Morgan.

Charlie, white-faced and frantic, was seeking escape; and the only such that offered him was the window at the rear. With a chunk of firewood he was hacking out window, frame and all.

Sam seemed not to notice the others, but he certainly saw Chiseling Charlie. With a howl like a wolf he surged forward. Men clung to his shoulders, clung to his neck. Corporal McGinnis had a sort of half-Nelson on him, but Sam suddenly broke it by stooping forward and hurling the policeman over his head. Then his hands went out and grabbed Charlie.

There was no more patent-leather hair-do then. Charlie squealed like a pig in terror as Sam's big fingers closed around his gullet. Then the squeal was cut off; Charlie's eyes bugged and his tongue protruded. Free, Corporal McGinnis recognized the signs.

"He's strangling him! That rolling-pin —*quick!*"

The squaw handed it to him. McGinnis brought it up, brought it down on Sam's thick skull. And like a hard-hit grizzly, Sam sank gently to the floor.

NOW there is an unwritten law which says that a man, seeking an erring wife, may not with impunity wreck pool-rooms, smash crockery and commit mayhem with impunity on the King's loyal subjects. Hence, at three that afternoon, Samuel Wellington Blythe found himself in court.

The courtroom happened to be the biggest building in the place, a log-built school that functioned for Indian education during the summer months. The stove had been installed, a table, chairs and benches brought in, with a smaller table and two chairs reserved for the prisoner and his counsel.

The prisoner, of course, was Sam; the counsel, one Hamilton Strutt. Strutt was a busted lawyer, a shyster whose love of liquor had proved his downfall. Fifty years of age, he acted as purser on one of the river-boats in the summer and did odd jobs around Island Lake village during the winter. He approached Sam whilst the man of peace was languishing in Pat McGinnis's whitewashed jail.

"You need a friend, Sam; someone to defend you."

Sam, his head beginning to clear though his right eye was not, grunted. He didn't know about that. Seems like he'd done a pretty fair job of defending himself—fer a while. Only there was too many of 'em.

"I mean in court, you jackass," explained the alcoholic Mr. Strutt. "How'd you like to do ten years in the pen? Or perhaps fifteen?"

Sam didn't think he would like it; whereupon Mr. Strutt outlined his proposition. He, Hamilton Strutt, would plead Sam's case. If Sam went to jail, he'd owe Strutt nothing. If he didn't go to jail, he'd pay Strutt ten dollars. If he got off with a fine, Strutt would receive seven-fifty.

More to give his head a rest than anything else, Sam agreed; and now, a few hours later, he was observing Strutt earn his money.

Dressed for the occasion in a mouldy-looking black suit with soup-stains down the front, Strutt faced Magistrate Bill Carstairs.

"Your honor," he began in a sonorous voice, "we have heard the charge—or I may say the charges: disorderly conduct, damage to property, resisting arrest—and we have heard the testimony of the witnesses arrayed against the accused." Mr. Strutt swept the gathered spectators scornfully. Amongst them were some of the witnesses alluded to, the halt, the maimed, the blind. "We have heard how the accused practically wrecked the business of Hank Thompson and mauled half the citizens of this fair town; but"—and Mr. Strutt fixed Bill Carstairs with a whiskey eye—"have we heard the other side of the story?" He shook his head. "No, we have not. But with your permission I would like to set it forth."

He paused. On the table in front of him was a jug of water and a tumbler. Dramatically he filled the glass, drank, set the tumbler down again. Some of the effect was destroyed by the cough that followed. The drink of water was probably the first Mr. Hamilton Strutt had taken in many years. But with restored aplomb, he went on.

"Now for the accused. You know him; I know him. We all know him. Long, long ago he came to make his home with us; and from the day of his arrival we called him friend. He had characteristics that appealed to us. Most striking of these was his simple, child-like manner. Here was no roughneck, no tavern brawler; in his own words, he was a man of peace. I ask you, Your Honor, have you ever seen him give way to anger? Have you ever heard him utter a curse? Have you ever seen him strike anyone, man or dog? No, you have not. Instead, you have seen him

playing the part of our best of citizens—offering the helping hand."

MR. STRUTT coughed deprecatingly. "But I must hurry on. All these long years, I say, Samuel Blythe lived amongst us; but through all those years he was a lonely man. He lived alone in the village here; he lived alone in his isolated camp. As the poet says, 'Never knew kiss of sweetheart; never caress of wife.' And then—then suddenly, what happens? Out of the very blue, love comes into his soul!" Mr. Strutt beamed pontifically at the bewildered Sam Blythe. "Yes; 'love came tripping along,' in the form of an Indian maiden who had found favor in his sight! Now I will not bore you by recounting what you already know. Suffice to say that my poor client found a new vista opening before him. His joys were shared, his sorrows were halved. In his new-found happiness, there was no room for doubt; no cloud of suspicion dimmed his fair horizon. Under the influence of this new happiness, he became another man. Nor did he keep his happiness to himself; he shared it with the giver of it all. Whatsoever this Madonna of his wanted, he gave her—frocks money, a position in the world. And then—then what happens?" Mr. Strutt glared across the room.

Across the room, prominent in a chair facing the magistrate's table, sat Chiseling Charlie Morgan. He looked something of the old Charlie; his hair was slicked again and he wore a clean shirt. But he appeared apprehensive and miserable. And just beyond him, sitting beside Molly Carstairs, was Nancy herself. Her eyes were lowered. Not once had she looked up. Mr. Strutt tugged at his vest-front, pinned Charlie Morgan with a bloodshot, accusing eye.

"What happened then?" he thundered. "A snake came through the grass!"

"Whoa, there! Order!" called the policeman. "You mustn't make slanderous statements.

Mr. Strutt bowed. "I am merely speaking allegorically, you understand."

Magistrate Bill Carstairs, who seemed to be enjoying it, grinned at McGinnis. "That's okay. Let him go ahead."

Strutt bowed again. "I say, a snake came through the grass. Like the serpent of old, he saw the woman and coveted her." Mr. Strutt's allegories were going a bit haywire, but nobody seemed to mind. "And coveting her, he decided to have her for his own. Now, Your Honor, we have a parallel here between this serpent and King David of old. Both had the pick of all the women in the land, but each had to partake of the forbidden fruit.

"You know the rest: how this snake intrigued her; how he made brazen love to her; how, ultimately, her head turned by his wiles, she listened. And you know the next step: how in the accused's absence, this snake ravaged the abode of love—ran away with my client's wife. You know that, I say, but can you picture what followed when the accused returned to his home? I can. He would stand there, knowing his dream was broken and his house of cards destroyed. The wife he had cherished to his bosom was his no longer. He would realize that he was a man alone again, the happiness he had nurtured snatched from his grasp. He would see the years, stretching out lonely and empty into the vistas of time—"

Mr. Strutt paused, sniffed, dabbed at his eyes with a soiled rag of a handkerchief. He turned to Sam.

"Tell them," he pleaded, "tell them what your thoughts were when you came home to find your love had gone."

Sam blinked. Eh?"

Mr. Strutt blinked a bit. "Tell them what you thought when your wife had gone."

Sam nodded. "Oh yeah. Sure. I thought, 'No more loaf-bread. Gotta go back to them damn dog-biscuits ag'in.'"

The Court exploded. Magistrate Bill Carstairs, Corporal McGinnis and every

man in the room howled with glee. Hamilton Strutt frowned blackly. Sam Blythe seemed bewildered. But catching the spirit of the thing, Sam gave a self-conscious smile. "Sure. You live on them dog-biscuits fer twelve years, and you'd know all about it too!"

But one there was who didn't laugh. From her chair beside Molly Carstairs, Sam's wife was looking at him curiously. In her dusky eyes was a new respect, a glowing admiration. Those eyes caught Sam's. Then the two of them, Sam and the girl, smiled foolishly and hesitatingly at each other.

Bill Carstairs noted this. He banged on the table. When order returned, he said, "Case dismissed." He began to laugh again, added, "And so help me, I'll pay the costs of the court!"

But a howl went up. It came from Hank Thompson; and Hank was on his feet. "That's all right, but where do I come in?"

Bill Carstairs' face straightened. "You come in? Yours'll be a civil case. What's the damage, anyway?"

"Fifty bucks."

"Fifty horse-laughs!" scorned Bill. "Couple dozen battered dishes, half a dozen haywired chairs! Five bucks'd cover the whole thing!"

Once more Hank started to howl, but Bill caught a second bit of by-play. Chiseling Charlie Morgan happened to look at the girl. She felt his eyes on her, and she turned. Then her chin went up, she spun her back on Charlie and smiled again to Sam.

Sam, still grinning, faced Hank Thompson.

"Five bucks. I'll pay you ten. Seems like I owe my lawyer another ten. Yup," he said after a moment's reckoning. "That'll be twenty altogether. But what's twenty bucks? Me, I'm a man of peace and don't like trouble—but look at all th' fun I've had!"

As the Rangers Landed in Venice—Big Feet Was There in Force

BIG FEET TURNS GONDOLIER

By ANDREW H. HEPBURN

Author of "Big Feet's Gold Rush," etc.

THE traditionally blue Adriatic was inky black and oil smooth. The sky, which should rival the sea for azure beauty, was scarcely any better. It was moonless and set with a few feeble stars, which but emphasized the blackness of the night.

If Big Feet, huddled against the steel side of the barge, had bothered to sum up the situation he would have done it with: "Blacker than the inside of a cow." But Big Feet didn't bother. He was sleepy and his drowsy thoughts were far from the northern Adriatic. They roamed the world; to his home in the hills of Kentucky from which the war had uprooted him; to the steaming jungles of New Guiana, where he had fought Japs and been wounded; to a desert town of Texas where he had recovered from the scars of battle, to the highway of Alaska where he had done service, and last to the bloody beaches of Salerno and the fierce sieges and struggles which followed.

That Big Feet was comfortable approached the miraculous. For once in his

military career, his feet, though fully and properly shod didn't hurt.

Big Feet's enormous feet generally did hurt, and more particularly when he wore army shoes. Though Big Feet's reputation as a gallant soldier was adequate—to which bright ribbons on his blouse and a corporal's chevrons bore evidence; his reputation by virtue of his gigantic feet was fabulous. It was legendary. It extended to fighting men all over the world who had never seen him, and it was directly responsible for Big Feet's participation in the unusual mission on which he was currently engaged.

It had happened this way. One day, after Naples, while the division was resting from combat in the hills back of Rome, someone had told Big Feet that the boys in the Ranger battalions had the best and most comfortable shoes in the army, made to order if necessary. So Big Feet had joined the Rangers, and they had made him shoes, huge incredible boots, soft and pliant as deer hide.

And thus it was not surprising, a week or two before, when a request for volunteers had gone out among the Rangers, that Big Feet, grateful and comfortable for once in his brand new boots, should be among those who stepped forward. And Sergeant Tim McCoy, his diminutive and inseparable companion had stepped out too.

Now, together, they crouched against the side of the barge. In it were about fifty men.

The men had been enjoined to silence. But now it was broken by a voice. From the stern someone said in a sort of hoarse whisper: "Attention, men."

"Hey," said Tim, prodding Big Feet violently in the ribs.

"Wasamatter?" muttered Big Feet.

"The lieutenant's goin' to give us the lay" whispered Tim.

"Men," said the lieutenant, still in a whisper. "This is going to be a tough show. You must listen carefully. You must do exactly what I tell you. If you don't it may be curtains, or a prison camp."

The lieutenant paused to let the gravity of his words sink in. No one said anything.

"Men," continued the lieutenant. "We are now within the Venetian lagoon. In something less than ten minutes we will come to the city of Venice itself. So far we have been extremely fortunate. We have a perfect night for our task—black. We have had a smooth sea, and our friends among the Italians have seen to it that we got through the nets outside the Lido gate. I know you men are fighters. You'd rather fight than eat, but tonight we're not supposed to do any fighting if we can help it. This is a reconnaissance patrol. We want information. That means prisoners. But we've got to get our prisoners as quickly and as quietly as possible and get back.

"Here's what we're supposed to do. In a few minutes we'll come ashore at a little park. I is just back of a famous church, Santa Maria del Salute, just at the end of the Grand Canal. We'll come ashore quietly. We'll sneak through that park. We cross the little canal on a bridge and keep the Big Canal on our right. About three quarters of a mile we come to a bridge over the Grand Canal. Just at the end of the bridge, is a big building. That's our objective. That building is supposed to be the headquarters for the German Army staff for northeastern Italy. We want every soldier we can find in that building, and every map and every paper we can carry away with us."

The lieutenant paused and the odd immensity of the task before the men in the silent boat made the night seem suddenly chill.

"Now," went on the lieutenant, "here's something else. The air force is going to help us out. At exactly one hour and ten minutes from now they will start pasting the rail yard and the main viaduct which connects the island of Venice with the mainland, to create a diversion. When the

bombing starts that should be our signal to crash the building, but until then, if we meet patrols, use knives, no guns, no grenades. After the bombing starts, make all the noise you like, but remember don't kill unless you have to. We want prisoners, live prisoners that can talk, and we want papers and maps. Any questions?"

There was a deep and pregnant silence and then came Tim McCoy's voice. "Yes, sir. Sergeant McCoy, sir. I know we're supposed to stick together and not get separated, but maybe we will anyway. How long do you hold the barge, sir, just in case?"

"Right, Sergeant. We'll hold the barge, if we can, until four a.m. That is exactly three hours and twenty-five minutes from now. Any man not back at the barge by that time is either a dead pigeon or a Nazi prisoner. Is that clear?"

It was too clear. It made Big Feet almost sorry his feet didn't hurt, that he had left the hazards of the infantry, where at least you didn't get left behind.

Suddenly the barge motor was shut off. The barge drifted in complete silence, rocking slightly in the oily swells. The men crouched tense, expectant. Some of them made a hasty check of their equipment with nervous fingers.

The nose of the barge grated harshly against stone. Dark figures slipped over the high bow and in a matter of seconds the barge was moored solidly against a low stone embankment. Out swarmed the men. A few quick whispered commands and half a dozen took their places as ghostly sentinels along the embankment.

BIG FEET and Tim joined the others in a knot around the lieutenant. Again the officer whispered instructions about their route, concluding with, "Sergeant McCoy, you will bring up the rear. Watch out for stragg'ers. Now we're off, single file, forty minutes to reach the bridge over the Grand Canal."

But they weren't off. There was a slight commotion off to the left. Two of the sentinels who had been posted there came up dragging a German soldier, neatly gagged and trussed, and only semi-conscious from a blow on the head. To dispose of the first prisoner in the barge took a few minutes.

At last they started. Big Feet and Tim came last. Big Feet felt gravel under his feet, perhaps a walk; then grass, no doubt a lawn. He sensed rather than saw trees ahead and then faintly made out their dark shape against the pale stars. Now they were among them moving slowly. They were through the trees. Another gravel walk.

Big Feet nearly fell over a low parapet, and swore softly.

"It's the little canal," whispered Tim. "Keep it on our left, chum."

They proceeded a few hundred feet. Then Big Feet pointed to the right.

"Look," he said, "the church. I'll bet it's pretty."

Faintly against the stars was the vast black hulk of a domed building.

"Sure it's pretty. I seen pictures of it," said Tim. "Kinda gold in the daylight I think."

Feeling with his feet along the parapet, Big Feet discovered a break. Cautiously he explored.

"The bridge," he whispered. It was a narrow bridge just as the lieutenant had said. They took it across the small canal.

"Big Canal should be on our right," whispered Tim. But it wasn't. Instead there was a sort of street, very narrow, between high stone walls. Discovering it, they discovered at the same time that they were apparently alone. The rest of the men ahead had been swallowed up in the night. They felt their way down the street. It twisted narrowly between buildings. The sky was a pale slot above them.

"Cripes, pal, we're lost," croaked Tim. "Better go back."

They turned and retraced their steps, or

thought they did. The little canal did not reappear. Genuinely alarmed now, they groped along, tearing their fingers on the rough stones of the confining walls. Tim stopped once and peered at his wrist-watch.

"Ten minutes," he whispered. "Then the bombing starts." A minute or two later they took heart when the narrow little street appeared to debouch into a wider one, but they did not know whether to turn right or left in it. They had decided to turn left when Tim heard the bombers coming, a faint pulsating drone.

Others must have heard, too, for suddenly a slender sword of light flashed into the sky. Then another and another. The sky threw back some of the light, enough for them to see that they were on a street that curved slightly to the left.

The drone was a roar now and to it was added the barking clatter of anti-aircraft, first only one battery, then two, then half a dozen. Tracers made incandescent threads in the sky. Madly searchlight beams swung and probed.

STILL undecided as to their direction the two bewildered soldiers were jarred out of their inaction by the crash of an artillery piece from behind a wall not thirty yards down the street to the left.

"Hot damn," said Tim, and headed for the wall. Big Feet followed. Standing back from the wall a few feet Tim fumbled at his belt a moment, stooped and yanked with his teeth at the pins of grenades, held one in each hand and then swung both arms simultaneously. The explosion which followed all but blew the wall out, did in fact send a shower of bricks from the coping into the street. The gun in the courtyard was still, but not one of the gunners. He screamed as only a mortally wounded animal will scream.

"Betcha they figure we got some kind of mystery bomb," whispered Tim. "Let's get to hell out of here."

The pyrotechnics in the sky gave quite enough light now to see the street. As they started down it they heard the bombs begin to explode somewhere far behind them—there was more light, the dull red glow of fire. It helped them make out a broad sheet of water which cut squarely across the end of the street.

"Here she is, the big Canal," said Tim. "The lieutenant says to keep it on the right. Let's get goin', pal, maybe we won't be too late to grab us a couple of Heinies."

It was easy to see where they were going now. The whole sky was alight and the mirror surface of the canal caught it and threw it back. On his left Big Feet made out the irregular outlines of what appeared to be handsome buildings, silhouetted against the wavering crimson glow. A few hundred yards along the canal they noticed a huddle of small boats tied against the low stone embankment.

"Look, skiffs," said Big Feet.

"Skiffs, nothing, them's gondolas," explained Tim.

"What?"

"Gondolas, kinda water taxicabs. I seen lots of pictures of 'em. Guy stands up behind and pushes 'em along with a long pole, and you and your gal sort of lies around on cushions. Seen it in the movies."

Big Feet was a little dubious, but since Tim was occasionally right he accepted it on faith. The boats looked suspiciously like the flat-bottomed skiffs he'd used many a time on the Big Sandy.

No doubt Big Feet's absorption in the huddle of gondolas tied below prevented his noticing the flight of steps which led up from the water. In any case he stumbled over the steps and tumbled down them. Instinctively he threw his arms over his face just as he crashed headlong among the boats. They separated and Big Feet disappeared into the Grand Canal, somewhat astonished at the chill of the water, and the fact that the quart of it which he swallowed was salty.

Big Feet struggled to get his feet under him, but he had fallen hard and the force of the fall had been only partially broken

by the boats. It carried him down until he felt his shoulders nesting in a slimy ooze. With a desperate heave he got his feet down and pushed up. His head came up between two gondolas. From above he heard a voice.

"Hey, pal, where are you; what the hell happened to you?" called down Tim from the top of the steps.

BIG FEET tried to shout back, but only managed a weak "S-u-l-p" as he spouted out a small fountain of dirty Grand Canal water. Spotting the head among the boats Tim came clattering down the steps and leaped into the larger of the two gondolas between which Big Feet's head appeared.

"All right, chum, hoist up them big dogs of yours and I'll help yank you out," counseled Tim, pulling hard at Big Feet's shoulders.

Big Feet, choking and spluttering, found his voice. "Sorry, Tim, I can't get 'em up. My shoes is too heavy when they're wet."

Tim whipped out a long knife.

"Look, pal," he said. "You reach down and cut the laces, then kick off them boots. You may be goin' back in your stocking feet but you're goin' back, so help me."

By a maneuver which would have done credit to a contortionist Tim struggled with the knife under water, finally ducked under for a minute and came up with one enormous shoe, which spouted water and dripped mud. He threw it in the bottom of the boat and went to work on the second shoe. That was easier. Up surged the other boot and plopped into the gondola to join its mate. His feet thus lightened, Big Feet swung them up while Tim assisted by grasping the seat of his pants. Thus aided Big Feet finally swarmed over the edge of the boat and fell panting and spluttering in the bottom.

For a minute or two he lay there gasping, miserable. He felt as though he were going to be very ill. Presently he got up, only to sit down again suddenly on the little platform across the end of the boat, take his head in his hands and groan.

"Look, pal," pleaded Tim. "We gotta be moving. The bombers have gone. These Nazi bums will be swarming around any time now. The boys have probably made their raid and started back. We still got time to get back to the barge if we hurry, and we're lucky as hell."

"I'm sick. I'm awful sick," pleaded Big Feet. "You go on and leave me, Tim, I can't walk I tell you."

Tim suddenly remembered something. He remembered that the lieutenant had said the barge would wait behind the church just at the end of the Grand Canal. If they followed the canal, with the bank at which the boats were moored on their right they'd come to the church.

It was just a matter of a few hundred yards then, to where the barge lay hard by the little park in the rear. They wouldn't have to walk, they'd go in the gondola. He scrambled out, found the rope by which the boat was moored to an iron ring in the stone wall, cut the rope and climbed back and began to grope around for oars or a pole.

Big Feet was too sick to notice anything. He sat with his head held in his hands, groaning softly while his angry stomach churned and heaved, and Tim was too busy loosening the boat to notice that a door in one of the big houses facing the canal opened suddenly making a rectangle of yellow light for an instant. Had they noticed they would have seen in the doorway the dark silhouette of a big man. The door shut and heavy steps rang on the stones of the street which flanked the canal.

The first thing that either Tim or Big Feet noticed was a voice. It came from directly above them. It said: *"Gondolier, zum Rialto, schnell!"*

Big Feet, still seated on the platform, lifted his head. Tim crouching behind searching for a pole, peered over Big Feet's shoulder. They both saw, shadowed

against the glowing sky, the burly figure of a very tall slender man in uniform.

Big Feet, knowing nothing else to do, started to stand up. Tim remained crouching behind him. "Heinie officer," whispered Tim. "Don't say nothing, just do what I say."

The officer calmly climbed into the boat and took a seat in the bow, repeating as he did so, *"Zum Rialto, schnell!"*

Tim's hand closed over a heavy round pole, which was lying inside the boat. Lifting it he thrust the pole from behind into Big Feet's right hand. "Ok, pal, push off," whispered Tim very softly.

The feel of the pole in his hand restored Big Feet to full consciousness. The tumult in his stomach seemed to subside. He had poled many a boat in the Big Sandy, even on the Ohio. He didn't know what Tim had in mind, but Tim generally had something in mind.

LIFTING the pole he thrust it into the water between the boats, found the soft bottom, took a high grip with both hands and with a mighty heave sent the slender boat crashing backward among its mates so violently that the officer fell off his seat in the bow.

Before he had scrambled up to fill the air with Teutonic curses of rage, the gondola was floating clear, fifty feet from the shore.

"What do I do now?" whispered Big Feet.

"Pole her back the way we came, and fast; I'll take care of him," answered Tim.

Big Feet found a new purchase on the bottom, this time with the pole slanting forward. The boat leaped forward with a violent lurch. The officer, who had been trying to stand, holding with a hand on either side, pitched forward suddenly and came up sprawled full length in the bottom of the gondola with his face nuzzling coyly inside one of Big Feet's water-logged boots. The boot, as if in protest, made a squnching sound and annointed the Nazi nose, with a generous portion of Grand Canal mud.

"Keep poling," shouted Tim, no longer concerned to whisper. "I'll fix him."

Big Feet poled again, and again the gondola leaped forward. So did Tim. He landed astraddle the officer, knife in hand. Pressing the knife hard against the officer's neck he gave quick advice: "Just lie still, Heinie, nice and quiet now. We ain't Eyties, we're American Rangers, see, and we're collecting Heinies tonight, particularly Heinie officers. Nice and quiet now while I tie you up, or I'll just have to slit your ugly throat."

THUS overwhelmed, both physically and by astonishment, the officer lay still, while Tim stripped him of his belt and with it tied his hands, then half dragging the bewildered German along the boat he hitched him securely to the cross seat with what was left of the mooring rope. In the meantime, Big Feet had been poling steadily, his huge feet spread wide on the little platform, the long pole moving up and down with long rhythmic strokes. It is probable that that particular gondola had never slid so fast through Venetian waters before.

The exertion, the excitement had restored Big Feet to full vigor. He was doing something he understood, poling a boat, and he did it with gusto. For a few minutes they moved steadily along in silence. The left bank of the canal was a murk of darkness, but the western sky on their right was pulsing with crimson light. Against it the palaces which flanked the canal stood black and bold. It was evident that the diversionary exploit of the bombers had produced some genuine damage.

The sounds of the night had changed as well as the color. The bombers had gone and there was no longer the chunk of bursting bombs the angry blasts of anti-aircraft, but instead from behind them came the chatter of machine-guns with the occasional ragged blast of a grenade. Ap-

parently the boys had stirred up something.

Big Feet poled silently. Tim, crouched in the bottom of the boat and carefully scanned the skyline on the right watching for the dome of the church that would be their landmark. Their prisoner tugged at his bonds, swaying back and forth, cursing in shrill German.

Now there was a new sound. From the embarkment on their right came the clatter of running feet. The German turned his head quickly and then set up a shrill cry for help. *"Hilfe! Hilfe!"*

"Blast his eyes," muttered Tim, "I'll have to gag the Kraut." But before he could crawl forward to do it sharp spears of light flashed out from the darkness; there was the crackle of rifle fire, the whang of bullets over their heads and the chunk of them into the water beside them.

"For the love of Pete," shouted Tim. "Get out further, pal, they'll sink us."

Obediently Big Feet poled away from shore. When Tim judged that a safe distance had been put between them and the bank they continued their course almost down the center of the canal. Tim fixed a gag made from the officer's own handkerchief and again took up his vigil.

Presently he spotted the dome of the great church Santa Maria Del Salute.

"There she is, chum," he shouted to Big Feet. "Now pole in easy toward the bank."

BUT Big Feet was having difficulty with his poling. The water had been deeper in the center of the canal, and as they proceeded toward the lagoon it had grown deeper still. He was using the full length of the pole to find bottom, and got little purchase then. To make matters worse the tide was coming in, and they were driving against a stout current. Big Feet working to the limit of his great strength was panting hard. Suddenly, driving hard down on the pole, he found a spot where there was no bottom. Lurching he lost his balance and would have fallen overboard except that he dropped the pole and seized the side of the boat.

For a minute the boat swayed and pitched. Big Feet, weak and frightened, sat down. Tim began to swear softly.

It was now Big Feet's turn for inspiration. Spying his enormous boots in the bottom he picked up one, drained out a half-gallon of muddy water, thrust his arm in up to the elbow and leaning over the side began to ply it vigorously, using the big sole as a paddle. The boat began to move forward slowly.

"Hot damn," shouted Tim, and seized the other shoe and went to work opposite Big Feet. The boat slowly approached the embankment. The great dome of the church loomed closer and closer, dominating the sky.

Tim, who had anxiously been watching his wrist-watch, announced that they still had forty minutes before the barge was scheduled to leave.

SHORTLY the high prow of the gondola grated against the stone embankment. Big Feet, who was manning the port boot, plied it industriously in an effort to bring the stern around while Tim stood up to catch the embankment in preparation for a quick debarkation. The maneuver was almost accomplished when, from above and behind them, apparently from behind the church, came the sound of sharp firing. Apparently half a dozen machine-guns were involved. Tim's ear, tuned by combat to distinguish the tonal qualities of different weapons, knew at once that both German and American guns were engaged and concluded that Nazi patrols had pursued the raiders to the barge and were attempting to prevent debarkation.

Tim also knew from the location of the sound of conflict that to attempt to cut across the church yard and the park behind to reach their destination would be suicidal. They would have to run the gauntlet of a cross-fire from both forces.

"Quick, pal," he shouted, "limber up

that big boot of yours, we're going round by water." So saying he grabbed the other boot and began to ply it fiercely.

The gondola moved slowly along, keeping just under the lee of the stone embankment, where they were both concealed in shadow and safe from stray bullets. Two hundred yards and they came to the end of the canal. Before them was the open lagoon and behind them at an angle was the embankment which ran behind the church and along the side of the park. They swung the gondola and headed back on the angle, the wall still to their right. Now the incoming tide helped them and they made better progress. In a few minutes they could see something of the struggle in the park, the dark hulk of the barge moored beside the embankment, bow headed out for a quick get-away. The park beyond was alive with flashing rifle and machine-gun fire. Apparently the guns of the Rangers stood on the edge of the embankment firing into the park, while the Nazi guns were scattered through the park firing out at the dodging shadows of the Rangers who even then were piling into the barge.

A hundred feet separated the gondola from the barge when they heard the motors of the barge cough, splutter and then roar into full power. The American machine-guns stopped firing, a few dark shadows leaped into the barge. The barge nosed out slowly. It gathered speed, pushing a white bone of foam before its stubby bow, and headed directly for the gondola.

Tim standing, shouted at the top of his lungs. Big Feet threw down his boot and crouched in the bottom of the gondola, ready to spring. It was evident that whoever manned the tiller of the barge hoped to use the protecting wall of the embankment as a shield against the murderous pursuing of Nazi fire as long as possible.

For a split second a head-on collision appeared inevitable, but then the barge swung out a point and as it did so missed the gondola by a matter of inches. As the high side slipped by Big Feet reared up, threw his elbows over the edge of the barge and at the same time hooked his huge feet under the edge of the little poling platform. There was a sickening lurch. Big Feet felt as though he were being yanked in two. The next instant the barge shot out toward the open lagoon, linked to the frail gondola by the anguished human rope of Big Feet's body. The pressure on his feet hooked under the platform was such that Big Feet felt certain they were being sawed off. Now they were beyond the range of flying bullets. A head appeared over the barge rail, just at the point where Big Feet clung. An astonished face looked down into Big Feet's anguished countenance.

"Godamighty," said a voice, "if it ain't Big Feet wearing one of them gondola's for a shoe."

It was fully an hour later before the gains and losses of the raid could be appraised. Within the hour the gondola had been cast adrift, Big Feet, Tim and the German officer taken aboard the barge. The barge had slipped south through the lagoon until abreast of the southern entrance, and then under full throttle dashed through the narrow opening, trusting to speed and surprise to avoid possible gunfire and to luck to avoid the mines which should have closed the channel. Their luck held. Soon, in the open Adriatic, danger passed, they picked up the destroyer which had brought them north on their strange mission.

Aboard the destroyer injured and wounded were hustled below decks for treatment while the prisoners taken were assembled in the ward room together with officers commanding the Rangers for appraisal and identification. Once the score was done it was agreed that the raid had been a qualified success. Twelve Rangers had been left behind, killed or captured. But to offset them twenty-seven prisoners had been taken, as well as a great quantity of valuable papers and maps.

In the course of the interviewing, Tim had been called in to report his misadventure with Big Feet. This resulted in clearing up one puzzling incident, the volley of rifle fire which had greeted the cry for help from Big Feet's prisoner. It had come from the Rangers, scuttling back to the barge with their prisoners after the raid on the headquarters. Hearing the cry in German from the dark waters of the canal they had concluded that they were being attacked from the water.

However, identification of Tim and Big Feet's prisoner proved the surprise of the night. It came at the end of the interview and news of it was brought to Big Feet by the captain of the destroyer himself, together with congratulations.

It happened in the sick bay where Big Feet was having his torn and lacerated feet bandaged till they looked like bundles of laundry, and where liniment was being rubbed into badly strained muscles.

Seeing the captain enter, followed by two grinning officers, Big Feet tried to sit up and contrive a salute.

"At ease, soldier," directed the captain.

"Yes, sir," said Big Feet and lay back on the bunk.

"How do your feet feel, Corporal?" asked the captain.

"They hurt, sir."

"Worse than when you wear shoes?"

Big Feet managed a wry grin. "Yes, sir," he answered.

"They did heroic service, tonight, though," began the captain. "Do you have any idea who the German officer is you and the sergeant nabbed?"

Big Feet appeared apologetic. "No, sir," he said. "He just came down the steps and sat in the bottom and hollered at us in Heinie talk. I didn't rightly see him, but maybe Sergeant McCoy can tell you, sir, he kinda worked him over a bit."

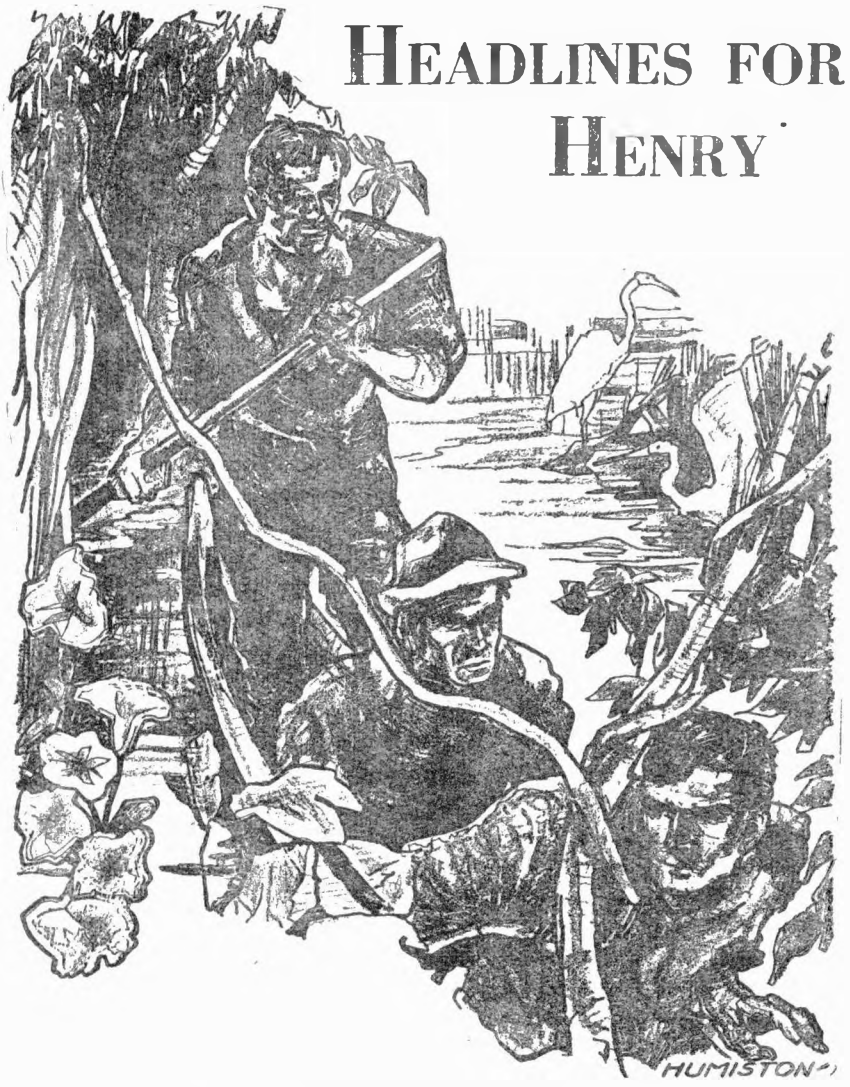
"He's told us himself," answered the captain. "It seems," he went on, "that when you succeeded in falling in the canal you selected a spot directly in front of the quarters occupied by the staff of the commanding officer, and the gondola you climbed into was one reserved for their use. You are supposed to have been the Italian gondolier who should have been on duty there, but wasn't because he ran away when the shooting started, and the officer who climbed in and ordered you to the Rialto was none other than General Kurt von Sneed, commanding general of the Venetian garrison."

"I'm sorry, sir," Big Feet began, "if we'd know'd who he was—"

"Nonsense, Corporal," interrupted the captain. "You did a fine job. The general is in excellent shape, a little muddy and battered but otherwise in perfect condition, and fortunately for us quite talkative. You and the sergeant did a job tonight, Corporal. Congratulations."

News of the exploit spread rapidly over the ship. Perhaps the best comment on it was contributed by one of Big Feet's Fellow Rangers, who said: "That lucky stiff, Big Feet. He gets lost, trips over them super dogs of his and falls in the soup and comes up spoutin' mud with the biggest brass hat in the Heinie army hangin' on behind. If you passed that guy a wooden nickel he'd win the jackpot with it."

HEADLINES FOR HENRY



By NEIL MARTIN

Author of "Body in the Bayou," etc.

THE hands of the dashboard clock were pointing to a quarter past ten as Dan Corrigan eased his car in against the curbing in front of the Evrod Building and peered through the streaming windshield at the white-lettered sign beneath the upper story windows.

"Evrod Transfer and Storage Company —Local and Long-distance Hauling," he read. He glanced at the lighted windows and added, "Reckon there's somebody still in the office. Hope it's Evrod himself."

Opening the car door he dashed across the sidewalk, bowing his head against the late October downpour. As he reached the

Experience Teaches That One Should Beware of Evidence That Comes Without a Lot of Hard Work

unlighted vestibule at the foot of the narrow stairs leading to the upper floor, he collided with a man who was coming out.

"Hup!" Corrigan exclaimed apologetically. "Excuse me, Mister!"

With a grunt, the other brushed impatiently past him, turned left and s rode hurriedly east along Grand Avenue.

"Nice polite sorta guy!" Corrigan muttered. He stood in the doorway and stared after the retreating figure, shrugging as the man's face was revealed in the light from a store window. Dismissing the incident from his mind, he started up the stairs.

The hallway above was unlighted, except for a square of radiance filtering through the frosted glass panel of a door to his left. Pausing outside the door, he tapped with his fingertips on the glass panel.

Receiving no answer, he turned the knob and pushed the door inward. Then he halted, with one foot across the threshold, his hard blue eyes widening in momentary horror.

Seated in a swivel chair behind a battered desk set between the two front windows was a fat-middle-aged man who, at first glance, appeared to be drowsing. His puffy hands rested on the arms of the chair, and his chin was sunk on his breastbone, as if he had fallen asleep while contemplating the bone haft of the knife that projected from his bulging shirt front, directly above the heart.

"Hell!" The exclamation burst from Corrigan's lips in the shock of discovery. Having come from New Orleans to this little South Louisiana town of St. Odile, to investigate a case of simple larceny, he hadn't counted on murder.

"Cripes!" he muttered, stepping across the threshold and halting beside the desk. "It looks like I'm bein' promoted—advanced from groceries to homicide."

He stared down at the face of the man in the chair. It was a peculiar face, the slanting, bushy eyebrows, the sagging pouches beneath the eyes and the thin beaked nose suggesting the face of a horned owl.

Laying the back of his right hand against the dead man's neck, Corrigan found the skin still warm. Not many minutes had passed since the knife had been driven home, he realized. He surveyed the room, the sudden tensing of his mouth imparting to his ruddy, good-humored face a peculiar grimness.

Beside the desk was another chair, its leather seat still warm from the contact of a human body. A smaller desk, holding a typewriter, stood against the wall to his right and, beside it, a metal filing cabinet. Against the opposite wall was an old-fashioned safe and, between it and the door, a sofa with cracked leather upholstery."

"Five gets six that the guy I ran into just now did this job," he mused. Frowning dubiously, he added, "Still, I don't know; it looks too pat."

Experience had taught him to beware of evidence that came without a lot of hard work. Too often, he had seen such evidence fail. He went over the room in a hurried inspection, trying the window screens, which proved to be hooked. Beside the two front windows and the door leading to the hall, the only other opening was a grimy flue inlet in the inner wall, its tin cover hanging awry.

He stepped to the doorway and looked over the unlighted hall, his glance traveling to the rear door and back again to the stairs. On the same side as the office was another door. On the opposite side of the passage were four windows looking out over the flat roof of St. Odile's only picture theater. Corrigan tried the window screens, found them hooked, and went on to the back door, which proved to be bolted on the inside. Sliding the bolt, he drew the door inward and found that it gave on to the top landing of an outside stair leading downward to an open space behind the building, where several trucks were parked.

"Yeah!" He closed and bolted the back

door. Reckon he's it. It's just gotta be him."

He started back to the office, paused to try the second door, expecting to find it locked. Glancing downward, he saw a line of glistening red footprints reaching from the door to the head of the stairs.

Mystified, he stepped back, his eyes following the double line of footprints, the toes of which pointed toward the stairs. He realized now that he hadn't noticed them before because the light slanting through the doorway of the office had been at his back, throwing his shadow before him along the passage.

Stooping, he touched a fingertip to one of the footprints, raised his hand to his face and sniffed.

"Well, I'll be jiggered!" he muttered. "Paint! Plain, old red oxide paint. But what in Sam Hill's the idea behind it?"

HE TWISTED the knob and thrust the door inward, at the same time jerking the six-shooter from his shoulder holster. Standing to one side of the doorway, he peered into the room. The light from a distant street lamp struggled through the dusty panes of the room's single window and cast an oblong of radiance on the dingy ceiling. Nothing moved.

Striking a match, he held it above his head. Now he saw that the place was a storeroom, for it was littered with odds and ends of broken furniture and discarded motor parts, while a shelf fast to one of the walls held a number of cans of truck paint. A chair stood against the wall next to the office, directly below the flue-opening. Nearer the door, a gallon can lay on its side, its contents spread in a glistening red puddle over the rough boards.

The match burned out. Striking another, Corrigan advanced into the room and looked behind the piles of junk. He was stepping back to the door when he glanced at the chair and saw on its seat the red imprints of a pair of feet.

"Somebody stumbled over the can and spilled the paint," he summed up. "Then he walked through the paint and stood on the chair, to look through that stove-pipe hole."

He conquered an impulse to climb on the chair and look through the flue opening, and left the room. He walked back to the office, carefully avoiding stepping on any of the footprints. As he entered the lighted office he glanced at the body in the chair, then halted, his eyes fixed incredulously upon the red stain that marred the front of the dead man's shirt.

The knife was no longer in the wound.

He glared about the room, swore when he saw for the first time the coat closet, a six-foot opening in the wall to one side of the old safe, its door of plywood covered with a paper that matched the wallpaper of the room. Now it was swinging open, and the cavity behind was empty.

Too late, he realized that the murderer had been hidden in the coat closet. Hearing him coming up the stairs, the killer had gone into hiding, and then, while he was investigating the storeroom, had crept forth, jerked the knife from his victim's body and fled.

A board creaked faintly in the corridor. Corrigan stepped quickly into the hall, just in time to catch a glimpse of a crouching figure slipping through the back doorway.

"Hey, you!" he bellowed.

The man in the doorway paused, whirled about and flung up his right hand. The next instant the corridor was lighted by the orange flash of a pistol shot, and a bullet knocked a shower of plaster from the ceiling overhead. Then the slam of the back door and a hurried clatter of feet on the treads of the back stairway blended with the lingering echoes of the report.

"Hell's bells—this is gettin' interestin'!" Corrigan swore as he dashed in pursuit along the corridor.

Jerking open the back door, he peered into the streaming darkness and saw a man scurrying across the open space below toward the alley. Throwing up his pistol,

he snapped a hasty shot at the retreating figure. The other paused, turned about and returned the detective's fire, his bullet knocking a shower of brickdust from the wall above the door. Corrigan fired again, heard his bullet ricochet from the concrete pavement below, and realized that he had missed and dashed down the stairs.

Too late, he saw the broom lying across the third step. Before he could stay his impetuous rush, the handle of the broom caught him across the insteps, and he continued downward in a swan dive, to land with a breath-taking jar on the concrete below.

FOR several minutes Corrigan lay still, feeling that every bone in his body was broken. After a while, he ventured to move his legs. They seemed to be all right. He flexed his arms, noting with vague surprise that he still gripped his pistol in his right hand. At last he struggled to a sitting posture, satisfied that he hadn't suffered anything worse than a severe shaking.

He heard running feet pounding through the hallway above, saw the white beam of a flashlight slanting downward from the top landing and move like a probing finger through the rainy darkness. As the light came to rest upon Corrigan huddled at the foot of the stairs, a deep, bass voice boomed from above:

"All right, yo'! This here's the law talkin'. Come on up here—an' don' try no monkey tricks."

Corrigan slipped his pistol into his left sleeve and dragged himself painfully to his feet. "Okay, brother!" he responded submissively. "I'm comin' up."

Groaning, he climbed the stairs. As he reached the top landing, he blinked at the shadowy figure behind the flashlight and said:

"H'ya, pal?"

"Never yo' min' how I am—an' I ain't yo' pal!" the man with the flashlight boomed. "Tu'n aroun', an' get them han's up!"

Meekly, Corrigan obeyed. The other ran an exploring hand over him in search of a weapon, omitting to search Corrigan's coat sleeves. When he felt the detective's shoulder holster, he grunted:

"Where's yo' gun?"

"Reckon I lost it when I took a header down the stairs," Corrigan evaded.

Limping painfully, Corrigan preceded him to the office, where he staggered to the sofa and sat down with a grunt of relief. He glanced at his captor and smiled. Having learned in advance all he needed to know about the little town of St. Odile, he recognized the man as the night marshal, Henry Pou—pronounced "Pew."

Henry Pou was about five feet two in height, and almost as broad, and his mouth was hidden beneath the sweep of an impressive handlebar mustache which, somehow, brought to Corrigan's mind the picture of a man peeping over a brush fence. Stroking his boulder-like chin, Pou stared for several minutes at the body in the chair, then laid his gun handy on the desk and sat down in the other chair.

"That feller, now," he said, indicating the body, "he never done nobody any good what I ever hear about. Still, that don' make no needcessity fo' murder. No!"

He rose, divested himself of his glistening rubber raincoat and sat down again. "Why you kill him?" he inquired casually.

"I didn't," Corrigan denied. "I was tryin' to catch the guy who knifed him when I fell down the stairs."

"Huh!" Henry Pou sniffed incredulously. "Where yo' come from?"

"New Orleans"

"N'Yawlins! Big-town crook, hey?"

"Listen, brother," Corrigan said wearily. "I'm just a dick, see? If you want to know more about me, just call Sheriff Vicou, at Sellierville."

The night marshal frowned doubtfully. Keeping his pistol handy, he reached for the telephone. "Yo' won' try to ron away, no?"

"Hell, no!" Corrigan groaned. "I couldn't run from here to the door unless someone carried me."

He stretched out wearily on the couch, closed his eyes and listened to Pou put through his call to the parish seat, thirty-five miles away. Presently, the night marshal boomed into the receiver:

"Hello! This Sheriff Vicou? This is Henry Pou, at St. Odile. Say, I gotta fella here who say he is dick from N'Yawlins. Say his name is—" He placed his left hand over the receiver and looked at Corrigan. "What yo' say yo' name is?"

"I didn't say—but it's Corrigan," the detective yawned. "Just tell Vicou Dan Corrigan's here."

Pou concluded his conversation with the criminal sheriff and cradled the telephone. "By damn," he exclaimed, grinning, "that is wan fonny thing! Me, Henry Pou, arrests wan city dick. Ho! Ho!"

He pushed the telephone aside, holstered his gun and frowned at Corrigan. "Jus' the same, she is wan helluva mess. Vicou, he say yo' are all right, an' fo' me to co-operate wit' yo'. Suppose yo' tell me what fo' yo' come here?"

"I'm workin' with the sheriff on that grocery steal," Corrigan explained. "Evrod's trucks were used on that job, although he denied knowin' anything about it. We were willin' to give him the benefit of the doubt, but thought some of his drivers might be implicated. That's why I'm here."

HE DIDN'T think it necessary to add that he was now a member of the F.B.I., for the duration, and that the food theft had aroused the interest of the Federal authorities. Instead, he went on to tell the night marshal of all that had happened since he stepped out of his car in front of the building. As he concluded, Pou rubbed his chin and frowned.

"What like was that firs' fella?" he asked.

"Around thirty, I'd say," Corrigan went on to describe the man with whom he had collided at the entrance of the building. "Five feet ten, rather slim. Wears glasses."

"By damn!" Pou exploded. "That soun' like Leon Pailet." He pronounced the name "Pail-ay." "He is bookkeeper for this truckin' outfit. Reckon I better call the day man."

He reached for the telephone and called a number. "Listen, Tessier," he boomed, "somebody stab' ol' man Evrod. Yeah! Kill' him dead. Me, I wish yo' hurry aroun' to Madame Legere's boa'din' house an' pick up Leon Pailet. Uh-huh! I'm in the office."

Replacing the phone, he leaned back in his chair and said, "It look bad fo' Leon jus' now. Bot from what yo' tell me, I don' think he is the wan who knife Evrod. No!"

He rose and switched on the hall light, and stood in the doorway studying the line of footprints. After a while, he moved back to the storeroom.

As he listened to the night marshal pottering about the adjoining room, Corrigan began to wish that his partner, Alcide Latouche, was present. Singly, each was just another routine dick; but paired, they were invincible. But Latouche, now also with the F.B.I., was detailed on anti-sabotage duty in one of the New Orleans shipyards.

So far, Corrigan realized, he had made little progress in his investigation of the looting of one of the Considine Wholesale Grocery Company's warehouses in Sellierville. Two big freight trucks belonging to the Evrod outfit had been used to carry away the loot, mostly cases of canned foods and bags of coffee and sugar. The lettering on the trucks had been covered with a coating of calcimine. But the trucks had been driven through a downpour, and the calcimine had been partly washed off, exposing the signs on the side panels of the trucks—a fact which had been noted by the alert watchman on a construction job close to the grocery warehouse.

Alex Vicou, criminal sheriff of Papillon

Parish, had made a routine investigation. Evrod had denied all knowledge of the use of his trucks in the robbery. But a food theft of such magnitude was now Federal business, and the F.B.I. quickly took over the investigation Corrigan had been assigned to the case. But so far he had succeeded only in having a sweet case of homicide dumped in his lap.

For now that Evrod was dead, he supposed it was up to him to discover who killed him, and why.

Corrigan was jarred from his reverie by the voice of Pou coming through the flue-opening in the wall.

"I say, ma frien," the marshal inquired, "can you hear me?"

"Sure can," Corrigan declared. He realized now that if he had yielded to the urge to climb on the chair and look through the flue hole into the office, he might have had a clear view of the murderer.

TWO men came up from the street and halted in the doorway, staring silently at the body in the chair. Henry Pou emerged from the lumber room and ushered them into the office.

"Chief Tessier," the night marshal spoke to the younger man, who wore a star pinned to one of his red suspenders, "shake han's wit' Mist' Corrigan. Mist' Corrigan is a deetective from N'Yawlins, an' he's wo'kin' wit' Sheriff Vicou on that Considine beez-ness."

"A detective, eh?" Tessier beamed, shaking hands with Corrigan. He glanced nervously at the body and added, "You'll help us, I hope?"

"I've got a lot to learn about this mess," Corrigan said. "Still, if I turn up anything, I'll pass it along to you."

"Swell!" Tessier applauded. He was youngish and sandy-haired, and spoke with hardly a trace of the Cajan accent. Corrigan classified him as a high-school product, a political glad-hander whose enforcement activities would more than likely be limited to the raiding of an occasional Saturday night crap game in the Negro section of the town.

Beckoning his companion forward, Tessier went on, "Meet Mr. Bond, Mr. Evrod's partner."

This was Corrigan's first intimation that Evrod had a partner. He looked at Bond, who was about forty, with a partly bald, globular head set upon a short neck that bulged over his shirt collar. He had the shoulders of a blacksmith and the waist of a lightweight boxer, the tapering mold of his body, from his beefy shoulders to his unusually small feet, suggesting a wedge standing on its point.

BOND turned from his contemplation of the body and fixed a pair of stony blue eyes on Corrigan. "I just can't figure why anybody should want to kill old Jake," he said, ignoring the introduction.

"Somebody kill' him, all right," Henry Pou boomed. He looked questioningly at Tessier. "What about Leon Pailet?"

The day marshal grinned sheepishly. "When you called me, I was just getting ready for bed," he declared. "But I dressed and hustled over to Leon's boarding house. On the way I stopped off at Mr. Bond's house and told him about what had happened. He got up and dressed and insisted on coming with me to Madame Legere's. But when we got there, Leon was gone."

"Gone?" Henry Pou echoed. Where did he go?"

"It's nothing to be alarmed about," Bond put in. "Leon left for New Orleans in his car about ten-thirty. He'll be back some time tomorrow afternoon."

"Bot," Henry Pou probed, "w'at he go for?"

Bond smiled. "Well, Henry, that's rather an embarrassing question. But under the circumstances, I suppose I'll have to answer it. A certain party in New Orleans telephoned the old man about a bargain in used truck tires—strictly black market, you know. As neither Evrod nor I were in a position to leave right now, we arranged

for Leon to go to the city and examine the goods. That's all."

Henry Pou frowned. Corrigan could see that he wasn't satisfied with Bond's explanation of Pailet's absence, and realized that the chunky night marshal was nobody's fool. Glancing at his watch, Henry said:

"She's ten minutes of eleven now. Leon would be still this side o' Sellierville. We could phone Vicou to have him headed off."

"But there's no necessity for that, Henry," Bond argued.

"How come there s no needcessity?" Pou boomed. "When a man leave' the scene of a murder, d'rectly after the murder is committed, an' then high-tail it out o' town, I t'ink there is plenty needcessity fo' headin' him off an' holdin' him on suspicion, by damn!"

"But, why not wait until he returns tomorrow afternoon?" Bond persisted. "You can talk to him then." He looked appealingly at Tessier. "Don't you think so, Chief?"

Tessier hesitated. Watching him, Corrigan realized that he was beset by the fear that haunts all peace officers in the Deep South—the fear of being sued on his bond for false arrest.

"Well," Tessier said, "I think it would be better if we followed Mr. Bond's suggestion and wait until Leon gets back. There's no sense in stirring up a lot of bad feeling."

Henry Pou looked helplessly at Corrigan. "W'at yo' t'ink o' that, ma frien'?"

"I think the logical thing would be to head him off before he gets to the city," Corrigan said. "But as Mr. Bond seems to believe Pailet will be back tomorrow afternoon, maybe it would be best to wait until then."

"You don't think Leon killed him, Mr. Corrigan?" Tessier ventured.

Corrigan shrugged. "Your guess is as good as mine."

"If you ask me," Bond said, "I'd say it was a burglar. You know, we always carry a large sum of money in the safe. Most of our drivers know about it, so—" He broke off, leaving the implication hanging in the air.

"Mebbe yo' bes' open the safe an' see if anyt'ing is missin'," Pou suggested.

Bond shrugged helplessly. "The old man kept the combination—in fact, he used to change it about every week, so that neither Pailet nor I ever knew it. I suppose we'll have to bring an expert down from New Orleans to open it."

"You might be able to tell me something about those trucks," Corrigan said. "Sheriff Vicou thought it would be better for me to talk to Evrod here, instead of having him brought to Sellierville. Since Evrod ain't talking any more, you might be able to spread a little light on the subject."

BOND sat down in the empty chair, opened the top drawer of the desk and brought forth a cigar. Lighting up, he looked at Corrigan and drawled:

"Vicou is a damned old fool. If there's anything to his contention that our trucks were used in that robbery, I know nothing about it." He indicated the body of Evrod with a careless inclination of his head and added, "Of course, he never told me everything. He might have hired out the trucks without my knowledge. You see, I've been with him only two months, and am still in process of breaking into the business."

Corrigan sensed that the man was lying, also that he was trying to pass the buck to the dead man. He realized now that Bond would never talk, that the fellow was tough as sole leather. Rising, he glanced meaningly at Henry Pou.

"Reckon I'll go to the hotel and turn in," he said. "If you fellows want me, you'll know where to find me."

"We'll have the body removed to the undertaker's right away," Tessier declared. "I guess we'll hold the inquest around noon."

"I'll be there," Corrigan promised. He

left the room, followed by Henry Pou. As they reached the foot of the stairs, the night marshal said:

"It sho' looks bad fo' Leon Pailet. Me, I t'ink that Bond he is tryin' to cover him up. W'at yo' t'ink?"

Corrigan ignored the question. "Listen, Henry," he said, "if you can find out what long-distance calls came in or went out of Evrod's office today, you might be able to help a lot."

Pou frowned at the sidewalk and stroked his mustache. "Yo' don' believe that Bond about them tires. Hey?"

"That," Corrigan declared, "was strictly the malarkey. You see, he didn't need to pass out that guff about black market. If somebody up in N. O. had second-hand tires to sell, the deal could be strictly on the up and up. Look up those calls, like a good fella."

"Me, I sho' will, ma frien'," Henry Pou promised.

Corrigan climbed into his car and drove along the palm-lined avenue to the hotel. Having registered, he ordered his car taken to the garage, and carried his portable typewriter and overnight bag to his room.

Taking off his coat, he sat down before his typewriter and started his report. He was still pecking away an hour later when the colored porter knocked on the door and informed him that he was wanted at the telephone. Corrigan put on his coat and descended to the lobby.

Henry Pou was calling. "Listen, ma frien'," he reported. "No calls from N'Yawlins came through fo' Evrod today. In fact, no long-distance call came in or went out o' the office ontil about half an hour ago. Then somebody put in a long-distance call for' N'Yawlins—Tchoupitoulas 06843."

Corrigan wrote the number on the telephone pad. "You're sure the call came from Evrod's office?"

"Uh-huh! I stays wit' Tessier ontil the ondertaker he leaves wit' the body. Bond an' Tessier they goes home then, an' I starts on ma rounds. Well, I makes the wes' side o' Grand Avenue, an' stops in at the phone office, an' the night operator tells me about the call jus' gone out from Evrod's office. Me, I didn't figure anybody had any license to be there at this time 'cept Bond, so I hurried over there. But the office is locked up. Somet'ing damn fonny about that. Hey?"

"Sure is, Henry," Corrigan agreed. "Well, we'll talk it over tomorrow. Much obliged!"

Returning to his room, he sat down before his typewriter and stared at his half finished report. "Yeah!" he mused. There's something damn funny about it, all right. So funny it smells. But it doesn't smell like groceries any more."

AT TWO o'clock the following afternoon, Alcide Latouche laid his own routine report on the chief's desk. Making a report always bored him, for he was definitely a man of action. Only a few of the lessons learned by him and Corrigan at the F.B.I. school had stuck. The rest had been discarded as "white-collar stuff," something to be ignored by journeymen coppers like Corrigan and himself.

The chief glanced casually at Latouche's report and nodded toward the chair beside his desk.

"Sit down a minute," he invited. As the lanky Cajan seated himself, the chief lifted several sheets of paper from the wire desk basket.

"This man Corrigan seems to have taken the bit between his teeth," he remarked, glancing over top edge of the paper at Latouche. "By the way, do you know a man named Corsi?"

"If you mean Vic Corsi," Latouche drawled, "I know him to be a complete heel. During prohibition, he had him a fas' speedboat he call' *The Laughing Girl*, because she was so fas' she help' him make a laughing stock o' the Coas' Guard. Since repeal, he has bin mix' up in wan shady racket after another."

"So he's that sort of person, eh?" the chief smiled. "Anyway, he seems to be connected with the grocery theft Corrigan is investigating. In his report, Corrigan refers to a mysterious long-distance call, Tchoupitoulas 06843, and suggests we investigate it. We have, and find the number listed in the name of Vic. Corsi, 1754 Tupelo Avenue."

He paused and again referred to Corrigan's report. "The man whom Corrigan was to question was murdered last night. About thirty minutes later, his bookkeeper, one Leon Pailet, fled from St. Odile in a Chevrolet coupé, supposedly headed for New Orleans."

He laid aside the report and leaned back in his chair. "Now, about six o'clock this morning, a motorcycle patrolman named Reynolds, while patrolling a stretch of highway across the river, between Gretna and Concession, saw a Chevrolet coupé being crowded off the road by a Lincoln. Two men jumped out of the Lincoln, dragged a man from the coupé and forced him to enter the bigger car, which started away at a fast clip. The patrolman gave chase, drew alongside the Lincoln and ordered the driver to pull over to the side of the road. Instead of complying, the fellow drew a pistol and fired twice at the officer, one bullet wounding him in the right thigh. Reynolds fell off his motorcycle, drew his gun and fired after the car. His first bullet evidently wounded the driver, for the Lincoln went out of control for nearly a minute. The policeman's second bullet struck the back of the car. Then the Lincoln was brought under control again and sped away. So much for Reynold's report."

"Didn't he get the license number?" Latouche asked.

"He reported that both license plates were so thickly coated with dust as to be undecipherable."

Latouche nodded. "They smear the plates wit' can syrup an' ron the car over a dusty road. An' ol' trick. Yes!"

"Well," the chief continued, "when the Highway Patrol investigated the coupé, they found in the left door pocket a driver's license issued to one Leon Pailet, residence, St. Odile, Papillon Parish. Also, the license plates were issued to the same person."

"Looks like Corrigan got somet'ing, yes," Latouche drawled.

"Undoubtedly," the chief conceded. "He wants you assigned to look up Corsi. Presuming to give orders." He smiled.

"Mebbe he ain't so crazy, after all," Latouche said. He could see nothing wrong with Corrigan's dictating to the head man. "He an' I work together fo' a long time now."

"Once," the chief said, "it seems that you two did your work, not wisely, but too well."

Latouche frowned; reference to his past always touched a sore spot in his memory. Years before he and Corrigan, both of them first-grade detectives on the city force, had been assigned to an investigation of the various gambling rackets, and had hewn too close to the line. The resultant howl had awakened a responsive echo in the City Hall, at which the police department had promptly covered up, saving a score of official heads by slapping a charge of insubordination against the two detectives, as a result of which they found themselves out on the pavement, minus their jobs.

Following their suspension from the city force, they had opened a private agency. The intervening years had been kind to them, for they had prospered, and had built up a reputation for efficiency and square dealing. But the injustice still rankled.

The chief picked up Latouche's shipyard report and adjusted his glasses. "Now run along and see what you can get on Corsi," he concluded the interview.

AN HOUR later Latouche parked his car near the boathouse at West End, on Lake Ponchartrain. Leaving his car,

he walked west for several blocks, crossing the boundary between the parishes of Orleans and Jefferson, invading a region of new real estate developments, where houses were few and far between, and the intervening lots were overgrown with weeds and brush.

Tupelo Avenue, he discovered, ran north and ended at the lake front. Number 1754 stood alone in the middle of the block. It was, in fact, the only house for several blocks in any direction.

Standing in the shade of a lone camphor tree on the edge of the banquette—as sidewalks are called in New Orleans—he studied the two story house across the street. The house had a deserted look. The shutters were drawn across the windows of the lower floor, while the upstairs windows seemed to be without shades or curtains. There was no feed wire leading in from the electric light line, no mail box at the edge of the curbing; nothing at all to suggest that the building was occupied.

Crossing the street, Latouche walked boldly up the concrete walk to the front gallery and pushed the bell button. He heard the answering chime of the door bell inside the house. But no one came in answer. He tried again and again, and after the fourth attempt stepped off the gallery and walked around to the rear, passing the double doors of a built-in garage. Stepping on the back gallery, he peered through the kitchen window. The sink held a pyramid of unwashed dishes, while a table just inside the window was cluttered with still more soiled crockery, prominent among which were several empty whiskey bottles.

Deciding that he'd better go back downtown and obtain a search warrant, he stepped off the back gallery and started toward the street, fighting back an urge to pick the lock of the kitchen door. So far, he wanted only to question Corsi, although he felt that the latter would have a plausible explanation for the telephone call from St. Odile. But he had hoped to find some flaw in Corsi's story that would serve as a starting point, for he had a strong suspicion that the call was connected with both the murder of Evrod and the abduction of Pailet. Consequently, he was curious to see the inside of the house. But curiosity, or even suspicion, did not excuse breaking and entering—at least, not in the F.B.I.

He was passing the garage on his way back to the street when he noticed that the double doors weren't completely closed. Pausing, he applied his right eye to the inch-wide crack between the door leaves and peered inside. He saw a car, a big, blue Lincoln, the lower panel of the left rear door disfigured by a raw gouge that gleamed like a dull silver streak against the glistening finish—a disfigurement that could have been caused only by a glancing bullet.

He glanced quickly about him, fearful of being observed. Opening the door wider, he slipped inside the garage and drew the panel shut behind him. He felt cooler, now that he was definitely committed. He sniffed, suddenly aware of a stale, fetid odor that in no way resembled the reek of oil and gasoline.

Switching on his pencil flashlight, he directed the slender beam over the interior of the car until it came to rest upon the stained upholstery of the driver's seat. Someone, he told himself, had bled like a stuck pig over the seat cushion, possibly within the past twelve hours, for the stained plush was still damp and sticky to his touch.

He felt relieved; now that he had something to go on, he could safely ignore legal technicalities. He climbed a short flight of steps out of the garage and found himself in an untidy living room, the polished hardwood floor of which was littered with the stubs of countless cigarettes. On a low coffee table in the center of the room were four empty glasses and a bottle half filled with whiskey.

He stood at the foot of the carpeted stairs leading to the upper floor and listened for

some sound that would indicate the presence of another person in the house. Satisfied that he was alone in the building, he ascended to the upper hallway, where he was confronted by the closed doors of four bedrooms. Turning the knob of the nearest door, he looked into the room, saw it was empty and went on to the next. As the door of the second room swung inward, he was suddenly reminded of the odor that had assailed his nostrils in the garage. The shades were drawn over both windows, throwing the room into semi-darkness. Nevertheless there was light enough for him to see the figure of a man lying on the bed with his arms crossed upon his chest.

Latouche's first impulse was to withdraw, until he realized that the odor which filled the room couldn't possibly be associated with life. Standing on the threshold, he peered toward the occupant of the bed, who was fully dressed, even to his shoes and hat. He stepped into the room and halted beside the bed, focusing his flashlight upon the man's face. Then he started in sudden recognition.

"Vic Corsi, himself, by damn!"

Judging from the atmosphere of the room, Vic Corsi had been dead for many hours. He lay there on the bed, arms crossed stiffly over his chest, black eyes peering glassily from beneath drooping lids, his lips drawn back from his teeth in a frozen sneer. The left shoulder of his coat was caked with the blood that had flowed from the ghastly bullet wound in the side of his neck, directly beneath the left ear. Latouche surmized that death must have been almost instantaneous; a man didn't long survive a bullet-severed carotid artery.

Latouche didn't bother to raise the window shades. Snapping off his flashlight, he sat down on the edge of the bed and tried to visualize what had happened. Remembering what the chief had told him of Pailet's abduction, he realized that Corsi, overtaken by the motorcycle officer and ordered to pull over to the side of the highway, had lost his head. Suspecting that the policeman had witnessed the kidnaping, he had drawn his gun and shot the officer, only to fall a victim to the latter's hastily fired bullet.

Outside in the street a truck rumbled slowly past, filling the house with noise. Simultaneously, a door squeaked. Catching the sound above the rumble of the passing truck, Latouche jerked his head around. He saw a closet beyond the foot of the bed standing open. And from the closet a shadowy figure was springing toward him, a blackjack clutched in his upraised right hand. Latouche clawed at his gun, even as he saw the blackjack swooping downward toward his head. Then his brain seemed to explode in a brilliant, white flash.

SOME time later, Latouche sneezed, tried to rise, only to fall back helplessly, his movements hampered by the bedsheets in which he was tightly enfolded, and which was reinforced by several turns of silken curtain rope.

For several minutes he lay still, staring dazedly at the smoke wreaths swirling against the ceiling. He sneezed again, expelling the pungent reek of burning cloth from his nostrils. Turning his head, he found himself looking into the set face of Vic Corsi. Then he started into instant realization that the foot of the bed was blazing like a burning pine knot.

He rolled off the bed and landed on the rug, which reeked of gasoline fumes. Aware that it might at any instant burst into flame, he threshed frantically over the floor in an effort to rid himself of the encumbering sheet. His right elbow burst through the thin fabric, and he clawed the rest of the sheet from his body.

Downstairs, a door slammed. Running along the hallway to one of the front bedrooms, Latouche peered through the window into the now darkened street and saw a man walking briskly away from the

house, already too far away for the detective to identify him.

Cursing, Latouche felt for his gun, which was still in his shoulder holster. He was about to give chase when he remembered the body on the bed. He ran back to the side bedroom and snatched the corpse from the blazing bed. Carrying the body in his arms, he stumbled down the stairs to the living room and laid it on the floor.

He winced as he realized how closely he had come to death. His late assailant, he surmized, had been in the house for the purpose of setting it on fire, and had been lurking on the upper floor while he himself had been snooping about below stairs. He wondered why the arsonist hadn't killed him outright, and could only conclude that the fellow, for some reason, had drawn the line at outright murder, telling himself, doubtless, that the fire would do the job just as efficiently as a bullet.

Latouche ran upstairs and retrieved his hat. The blaze had spread to the rug, and the room was now an inferno. Realizing that there was nothing he could do, he ran downstairs again, lifted the body from the floor and staggered to the garage. As he placed the body in the rear seat of the car, he sniffed the fumes of gasoline and surmized that the car, too, had been doomed to burn.

Opening the garage doors, he looked into the empty street. Then he turned back to the car, released the brake and rolled it from the garage. When it was well beyond reach of the flames, he set the brake and ran toward the nearest house to turn in a fire alarm.

When he made his report, an hour later, the chief looked at him with a twinkle of humor in his eyes. "Do you know any of Corsi's associates?" he asked.

Latouche thought for a minute. "Well, there's Tony Arigho, better known as Tony the Tank, an' Little Johnny Margusso, an' Boxcar Strobel an'—" He paused. "That's all I can think of right now."

"Well, the police will take care of them," the chief said. "Corrigan it seems, needs help at his end. You two do much better when you're teamed. Besides, he probably needs you to look after him. You'll take the first bus south to St. Odile in the morning."

CORRIGAN was stretched on the bed in his underwear when Latouche walked in on him shortly before noon the following day. Henry Pou was occupying the only chair.

"Hya, pal?" Corrigan greeted his lanky partner.

"Hear you bin' catchin, yourself a mess o' trouble," Latouche remarked unsmilingly. "Looks like I gotta be aroun all the time to keep you outa trouble, by damn!"

Corrigan's blue eyes twinkled. "That's right! Just now, Henry is doin' the nursin act. Shake hands with Mr. Pou, night chief of police in this burg."

Henry Pou shook hands with Latouche and surrendered his chair to the lanky detective. Seating himself, Latouche asked:

"Well, what you know?"

"Damned little, Al," Corrigan admitted. He went on to tell of all that had happened since he had discovered the body two nights before. "Since then," he concluded, "Henry's bin doin' all the footwork." He looked at the night marshal. "You tell him, Henry."

Henry Pou leaned against the wall and folded his arms across his barrel chest. "I have fin' that them trucks they were onload' onto an ol' schooner." He declared impressively.

"How you know that?" Latouche quizzed.

"Accident," Pou admitted. "Yesterday comes an ol' colored man name o' Uncle Dominick, bringing Maman a mess o' redfish fo' makin' a *cour'bouillon*. He stays to drink coffee, an' bimeby he starts tellin me about how he was runnin' a trot line fo catfish in the bayou, w en he sees them trucks onload a lotta bags an' boxes aboard

the ol' *Sidney* which was then towed down the bayou by a big gas boat."

"Why did this ol' *Sidney* need to be towed?" Latouche probed.

HENRY POU flung his arms wide in an expansive gesture. "Bot, ma frien', how could she go? Yo' see, she ain't got no masts nor engine. She is jost w'at yo' call a—" He paused, at a loss for the right word.

"A hulk," Corrigan supplied.

"Thass right—a holk," Henry Pou acknowledged, bowing. "Thank yo', ma frien'. Anyway, she lie on the mod for years, ontil Bond hauls her off an' uses her fo' his fishin' camp—"

"Hol' on!" Latouche interrupted. "Is this the same Bond who was partner wit' Evrod?"

"Uh-huh!" Henry Pou nodded. "He has him a fishin' camp down the bayou a ways."

Latouche frowned at the rug. "What's it like down the bayou?"

"Not'ing moch," Henry Pou told him. "This side Uncle Dominick's place there is a few dryin pla'forms fo' shrimps. Below that, she's broke up wit' side canals cuttin' off into the marsh. Yo' lose yo' way down there pretty damn quick."

Latouche nodded absently, his eyes still on the rug. Presently he looked up at Corrigan and said:

"Vic Corsi, he's dead."

"So what?" Corrigan propped himself on one elbow. "What's he gotta do with this particular headache?"

"Don't know yet," Latouche confessed. He went on to tell of Pailet's abduction, and of his own experiences in Corsi's house. As he concluded, Corrigan sat up on the bed and swung his feet to the floor.

"By jeepers!" Corrigan exclaimed. "This mess gets crazier all the time. All I can figure from what you've just told me is that Corsi was in on the grocery steal. Pailet, too. Evidently Pailet knifed Erod, or else knew who killed him, and took it on the lam to save his own hide. Whoever made that phone call to Corsi didn't want him to get too far away."

Henry Pou nodded vigorously. "That's the way she goes in this law busi-ness," he declared. "Yo' fin' out about somet'ing, an' that helps yo' fin' out about somet'ing, else. Yes!" He stroked his mustache and beamed at Corrigan.

"That's the way she goes, Henry," Corrigan admitted. "Think you could help us locate that old schooner hulk?"

"I try damn hard, me," the night marshal promised.

Corrigan reached for his trousers. "How's the road?"

"They hain't no road pas' Uncle Dominick's place," Pou declared. "We can leave the car there an' go the rest o' the way in a peeru."

Corrigan frowned dubiously; he didn't relish the prospect of traveling in a pirogue. "Can't we hire a gas boat?"

Latouche grinned at his partner's reluctance. "Don't you mind about a gas boat," he cajoled. "Them damn things make such a racket everybody for miles know we're comin'. Me, I don't believe in that kind of advertisin'."

TWO hours later they shoved off from the bank fronting old Uncle Dominick's fishing camp and headed down Bayou Papillon toward the Gulf. Latouche and Pou took turns at paddling the pirogue, standing upright in the low-sided, needle-like craft. Corrigan knelt in the bow, gripped the low gunwales and held his breath.

For the first few miles the banks on either hand rose for about six feet above the water. Great live oaks stretched their moss-hung branches across the stream, forming a canopy beneath which floating islands of water hyacinths stretched from bank to bank in living barriers of lavender and green through which the paddlers often had to drive their light craft by main strength. Gray-blue herons rose from the shallows and flapped lazily downstream.

Alligators, alarmed by the splashing of the paddles, slid furtively into the water.

Because of the water hyacinths, their progress was slow. At the end of the first hour, they had covered less than six miles. The scenery was undergoing a slow change. The banks dwindled to a succession of low hummocks, between which the trunks of dead, moss-draped cypresses gleamed like polished bones in the afternoon sunlight.

Presently the cypress swamps and the islands of floating hyacinths were succeeded by an eye-wearying monotony of rippling green above which rose at long intervals low *chenieres* crowned with stunted, wind-tortured live oaks. An air of desolation hovered about the scene. And yet, Corrigan knew that the surrounding marshes teemed with life. On those low, brush-covered shell mounds, which here and there rose like islands above the sea of waving grass, there were deer and rabbits and muskrats, and even an occasional bear. Gulls and pelicans circled overhead, and far to the west geese and ducks were winging toward their winter feeding grounds. Frightened mullet boiled through the water ahead of the pirogue, and several times Corrigan caught the coppery flash of a broaching redfish.

"Boy!" Latouche murmured ecstatically, "ain't this somethin'? Some day, we're comin' back here for a bit o' fishin'."

"If we do," Corrigan declared nervously, "we ain't comin' in a peeru; I promise you that! Right now, I'm scared to wink for fear this damned thing will tip over."

They paddled on for several more miles, unable to see for more than a hundred yards ahead at any time because of the high grass that marked the course of the bayou. Numerous narrow canals opened up on either side and wound away like pale blue ribbons into the green wilderness beyond. Ahead and to their right, a small *cheniere* showed above the waving grass tops.

Henry Pou pointed with his paddle and said:

"We have arrive'. Yes!"

He swung the pirogue into a narrow canal that cut off at a sharp angle from the main channel. Corrigan transferred his six-shooter from his shoulder holster to his left sleeve and stared ahead as the pirogue headed up through the winding passage and drew in against a wharf of cypress timbers jutting out from the foot of the mound.

Kneeling in the pirogue, Corrigan swung a slow glance over the surroundings, his eyes following the steep, winding path that lead upward from the inshore end of the wharf to the low clapboard building on the crest of the mound, its weathered sides blending with the surrounding trees.

"Don't seem as if there's anybody home," he remarked. He looked at Henry Pou. "And where's that old schooner?"

"Ha!" Henry Pou chuckled. "You have to look two t'ree time befo' yo' see that wan, by damn!"

Corrigan looked up at Latouche and saw the grin of amusement on his partner's lantern-jawed face. Puzzled, he looked about him again. For a while, his city-trained eyes saw only green grass and pale blue water, and the deeper blue of the sky overhead flecked with puff-ball clouds.

Then, as his glance came down to water level again, he saw what appeared to be an extension of the *cheniere*. Not until he had studied it for several minutes did he recognize it for what it really was—the dismasted hulk of a small vessel backed into a narrow cove, her deck piled high with cut marsh grass, with which was interwoven the tops of the grass growing along the edges of the waterway, completely hiding her outlines, while, as if to complete the illusion, several clumps of roseaux cane rose above her grass-covered deck.

"Some camouflage!" Corrigan exclaimed in grudging admiration. "The guy who worked that out oughta be in the army."

He scrambled out of the pirogue and climbed the narrow path to the shack. Reaching the summit, he paused for an instant to look about him. North, east and west, the marshes reached toward the sky-

line in a level expanse of waving green, threaded with innumerable canals that reflected the quiet blue of the afternoon sky. South lay open water that stretched toward the horizon—the Gulf of Mexico.

Latouche and Pou came up the path, and together they walked toward the shack. Pistol in hand, Corrigan stepped ahead of them on to the narrow front porch and rapped on the closed door.

"Hello!" he called. "Anybody home?"

Receiving no answer, he tried the door and found it unfastened. Followed by the others, he pushed his way across the threshold, then halted. On the rough floor, stark naked, his wrists and ankles secured with turns of fishing line, lay the man with whom he had collided at the entrance of the Evrod Building two nights before.

"Leon Pailet, my damn!" the voice of Henry Pou boomed in his ear.

Stepping into the room, Corrigan took out his pocketknife and severed Pailet's bonds. The man's eyes were closed, and he was breathing heavily. Corrigan didn't bother trying to arouse him, for he saw that Pailet had been drugged.

Kneeling beside the unconscious man, he looked past him through the doorway of the adjoining room, which was empty, except for a canvas cot covered with a mosquito curtain. He stared down at Pailet, frowning when he saw the raw, burned flesh between his toes. He looked up as Latouche halted beside him.

"Somebody's bin givin' him the hot foot," Corrigan growled. "They doped him, too. Probably had to go off somewhere and were scared he'd work loose and get away."

"Wish we knew what he was supposed to tell," Latouche drawled.

Corrigan frowned. "You want to earn your beans too easy, Long Fella." He lifted one of Pailet's eyelids and studied the pupil. "They gave him a Mickey Finn, all right. We'll have to let him sleep it off."

They lifted Pailet, carried him to the inner room and laid him on the cot, tucking the mosquito bar about him. As they came outside, Corrigan glanced at his watch.

"Holy fly! Four-thirty! It'll be dark in another hour. Let's take a gander at that old boat."

Descending the path to the wharf, they boarded the pirogue and paddled across to the hulk. Climbing to the deck, they kicked aside the grass, revealing a hatch covered with a new tarpaulin. Henry Pou discovered a rusty batten maul, and with this he knocked loose the wedges. Corrigan and Latouche rolled aside the tarpaulin and lifted off one of the hatch covers. Pou switched on his flashlight and directed a beam into the shallow hold, revealing tiers of bags and boxes in both wings.

"Looks like we've hit the jackpot, all right," Corrigan said, smiling approvingly at Henry Pou. "Reckon the honors will have to go to you for this, brother."

"Uncle Dominick, he is the wan what tip me off," Pou declared modestly.

"Mebbe," Corrigan grunted, "but Uncle Dominick ain't a cop."

He swung over the low coaming and dropped into the hold. Pou tossed down the flashlight to him. Playing the light over the stacks of bagged coffee and sugar, cases of tinned meats, of milk, of preserves, he chuckled:

"Looks like somebody aimed to throw away his ration book."

Latouche dropped into the hold and surveyed the loot. "Picayune stuff!" he said. "Hell! Nex' thing you know, they'll have us raidin' slot machines."

"Yeah," Corrigan agreed, "it does look like a helluva come-down for a pair of old bloodhounds like us. But don't forget, Long Fella, that two killings and a snatch have grown out of it."

From the deck above there came the thud of a blow, followed by the slump of a falling body on the deck. Then the rectangle of light overhead was blotted out as the hatch cover was slammed suddenly into place.

"Hey—what the hell!" Corrigan shouted protestingly.

He dashed for the rickety stanchion ladder and swarmed upward. From without the swish of the tarpaulin being drawn into place came plainly to his ears. He thrust at the hatch, but the cover remained immovable. Then he heard the tap of the batten wedges being driven into place.

Drawing his six-shooter, he fired through the two-inch hatch cover. Latouche, too, drew his weapon and added to the bombardment. For several minutes the hold echoed to the crash of gunfire. Then the tapping of the maul ceased, and a crackle of pistol shots sounded from above, while bullets ripped through the hatch cover and thudded into the rotten flooring of the hold.

"Hell's bells!" Corrigan raged. His pistol now empty, he slid down the ladder and sought shelter in the port wing. Latouche had ducked out of the line of fire and was crouched behind a tier of coffee bags. Ejecting the empty cartridges from his six-shooter, Corrigan grunted:

"Well, it sure looks like we've played ourselves for a couple of suckers."

FOOTFALLS sounded dully on the planking overhead. Corrigan paused in the act of reloading his pistol and stared upward as a heavy splash in the water alongside was followed by the stacatto rattle of an automatic. The shooting ceased. Corrigan peered through the darkness toward Latouche, seated on a pile of bagged coffee, and grunted:

"Jeepers, Long Fella, my feet are beginnin' to feel cold already."

"Sooner or later," Latouche drawled, "somebody got to open the hatch. An' when they do, we mus' be ready for them."

"I getcha!" Corrigan said, holstering his pistol. "Let's get started."

He lifted a case of milk and carried it to a spot directly below the middle of the hatch. He brought another case and set it on top of the first. Latouche joined him, and together they toiled for the next half hour, building a ramp of cases that sloped upward from the floor of the hold like a staircase.

"And there y'are," Corrigan said, as the last box was set in place. "We ain't the only folks that are goin' to be surprised when the hatch comes off again." He looked at his watch in the glare of the flashlight. "Holy fly—it's six-thirty!"

Latouche walked up the ramp, put his shoulders against the hatch cover and shoved, vainly trying to force it upward. After a few minutes of straining, he gave up, climbed down again and slumped to a seat on a sack of sugar.

"Hell!" he grunted.

"Hell is right," Corrigan assented cheerfully. "And you'll know it for sure when they start to take the hatches off." He switched off the flashlight and leaned forward in an attitude of listening.

A sound of scratching against the side planking was succeeded by a rustle of something being dragged over the deck, then an almost imperceptible patter of footfalls.

"Did you hear that?" Corrigan whispered.

"Muskrat," Latouche grunted.

"It would have to be a sizeable one, to make such a racket," Corrigan argued. "Jeepers! Wonder what happened to Brother Pou?"

Latouche made no answer; apparently, he was busy with his own thoughts. Corrigan sat down on the bottommost case of the ramp and reviewed the happenings of the past forty-eight hours. He had the feeling that, as yet, he hadn't got to first base for, as he saw it, the discovery of the stolen groceries was merely incidental now, overshadowed as it was by the murder of Jake Evrod. Theoretically, his assignment would end with the return of the loot to its rightful owners But he had a hunch that the chief wouldn't be satisfied to leave the solution of Evrod's murder to the parish authorities; which meant that he and La-

touche would have to carry on until the case was closed.

Having nothing better to do, he leaned back against the sloping pile of cases and dozed. Hours later, he started fully awake, aroused by the distant putter of a motor exhaust.

"This is it, Long Fella," he announced grimly. Switching on the flashlight, he looked at his watch. "Eleven-thirty!"

Listening, he could visualize the approach of the vessel through the canal winding about the foot of the *chenıere.* Suddenly the chug of the exhaust was stilled. Pistol in hand, Corrigan waited for it to pick up again. Half an hour passed, most of which time he spent in glancing at his watch at three-minute intervals. He heard the shuffle of Latouche's movements in the stillness of the hold as the Cajan resumed his seat.

"Me," Latouche said, "I think that was nothin' but a shrimper on her way up the bayou to one of the dryin' platforms."

Corrigan wasn't so easily convinced. "Sounded too close for that."

Suddenly the motor was started up again, coming gradually closer until the fabric of the ancient hulk seemed to vibrate in time with the rhythmic beat of the exhaust. It accelerated to a roar that filled the hold with sound. Then the hulk quivered from the impact as the other vessel ground alongside.

Booted feet hammered on the deck. A confused murmur of voices filtered through to the hold. It seemed to Corrigan that at least a dozen men must be moving about overhead. Gripping his pistol, he crouched behind a tier of boxes in the starboard wing, aware that Latouche had taken cover over on the port side behind a pile of coffee bags.

Listening, Corrigan heard an irregular hammering at the hatch coamings, and guessed that the newcomers, unable to find the batten maul, were forcing out the wedges with their boot heels. He counted the wedges as they fell, one by one, to the deck, stiffened as he heard the swish of the tarpaulin being drawn aside. Then he caught a glimpse of starlit sky and knew that the hatch was being lifted off.

As the hatch cover slammed on the deck, the white beam of a flashlight slanted like a probing finger into the hold. Standing beside the holder of the flashlight, another man aimed a submachine-gun through the opening. As the beam of light came to rest upon him for an instant and then swept across the hold to reveal Latouche, Corrigan realized with a sinking heart that there was no part of the hold that couldn't be raked by the tommy-gun.

Then a voice that sounded oddly familiar commanded:

"Come out—and come with your hands up!"

A YELL of alarm sounded from the deck and was followed by the thud of a falling body. The beam of the flashlight lifted out of the hold and was focused on some point overhead. Booted feet trampled confusedly to and fro. An automatic added its stacatto chatter to the medley. Someone shouted warningly:

"Hey! Cut that out!"

And then came the booming voice of Henry Pou:

"Put op the han's! Yo' all onder arrest."

Corrigan heard the thud of a blow, saw the fellow with the machine-gun stumble, then pitch head-foremost into the hold.

The report of Latouche's six-shooter came like an echo to the crash of the man's body on the bottom boards of the hold. The fellow with the flashlight dived over the hatch coaming and landed on his head beside the machine-gunner.

"That's tellin' 'em, Long Fella!" Corrigan whooped.

Tossing his pistol to the Cajan, he snatched up the machine-gun and sent a burst of bullets screaming up through the open hatchway. Then he charged up the ramp of boxes, followed by Latouche.

Pistol shots flared almost in his face as he landed on the deck. He pressed the trigger of the tommy-gun and saw two men fall. Two more were rushing toward him from the vessel moored alongside the hulk, firing as they came. Latouche dropped them with a couple of shots. A huddle of men against the bulwark fell apart, revealing the stocky figure of Henry Pou, who followed, flailing at them with the old batten maul like a crazed blacksmith.

Raising the muzzle of the tommy-gun, Corrigan fired over the heads of the crowd.

"Hold it!" he shouted. "You're all under arrest."

One of Pou's opponents shot his hands above his shoulders and yelled in heavily accented English:

"Don'd shoot! Ve surrender."

Corrigan covered them with the machine-gun, while Latouche lined them up against the rail and searched them for weapons. Under the glare of Corrigan's flashlight, they seemed just like the crew of any shrimper or oyster lugger in their grimy, ill-fitting dungarees. But they had a "foreign" look; their close-cropped bullet heads, their blunt-featured, stupid-looking faces and their pale blue eyes made them seem alike as peas in the same pod.

"All clean," Latouche announced, his search concluded.

Corrigan looked significantly at his partner. "Looks like we've got into the war, huh?" He leveled his flashlight at the nearest man and snapped, "What's your name, fella?"

Without a change of expression, the man answered: "John Brown."

Corrigan glared. "Don't try to feed me that! If your name's John Brown, mine's Hitler. You're Germans, aren't you?"

"I refuse to answer," the man replied sullenly.

Corrigan shrugged. "Suit yourself, pal." He turned to Latouche. "Let's stick 'em in the hold."

"We better make sure them fellers down there haven't got guns," the Cajan warned. Taking the flashlight, he descended into the hold.

Leaning over the coaming, Corrigan watched him play the light over the two figures huddled at the foot of the ramp of boxes. He saw that the fellow who had handled the machine-gun was recovering consciousness. The other man was dead, for a red stain was spreading over the front of his shirt. As the light fell on the man's face, Corrigan started in instant recognition.

"Jeepers!" he exclaimed. "It's Bond—old man Evrod's partner."

"Sho' is!" Henry Pou declared at his elbow.

Corrigan swung about and stared at the night marshal, who held the rusty topping maul balanced on his right shoulder. His hair and mustache were matted with duckweed, and his wet clothing clung to his stocky frame.

"Gee!" Corrigan chuckled. "You look like Father Neptune. What happened to you?"

"Well, I tell yo'," the night marshal began diffidently, "I think we do wrong when we don' search this wan. Yo' see, all the time there is a feller hidin' in the grass—that wan." He pointed with his free hand to one of the bodies on the deck.

"Me, I don' see him, fo' I am watchin' yo'-all down below. Nex' thing I know, I am in the water. I try to swim, bot the feller, he shoots at me wit' a gon. I dive. I swim onder water. I crawl in the grass an' hide. An' I am still hidin' when it comes dark. All the time I try to think what to do, fo' I have los' ma gon.

"Bimeby I see that feller settin' aft. So I climb back aboa'd, quiet like the mushrat. I lay down on the deck an' burrow into the grass. An' beside me I fin' the beeg hammer.

"I am lying there, thinkin' what I can do to help, when this other boat she comes op the bayou an' turns into the canal. She stops fo' a little while off the wharf, an'

two fellers go ashore. Bimeby they comes back, an' the swimper she comes alongside this wan. Me, I begin to think all is los'. Yes!

"Them fellers come aboa'd. They walk all over the deck. They take off the hatch. Wan feller he trip over me an' fall. He shouts. I jomp op an' smack him down wit' the beeg hammer. Somebody begins to shoot. Then I see wan other feller aimin' a machine-gon down the hatch, an' I smack him down, too." He combed a tendril of duckweed out of his mustache and added apologetically, "Mebbe I do mo' better if I had me a gon. Yes!"

Corrigan chuckled. "You did fine, Brother Pou."

LATOUCHE climbed out of the hold, carrying a pair of automatic pistols. The prisoners were ordered to lower Pou's unconscious victims through the hatch, after which the whole crowd was battened below. Flaying the light over the four bodies on the deck, the Cajan grunted:

"Here we have Vic Corsi's mob, all present an' accounted for. Here's Boxcar Strobel, Little Johnny Margusso an' Tony the Tank." He paused with the light shining on the upturned face of the fourth man and shook his head. "Don't know this guy."

"He goes by the name of Simonetti—a Chicago punk," Corrigan identified the fourth man.

"That wan," Henry Pou accused, "he is the feller what was hidin' aboa'd here."

Corrigan rubbed his chin and frowned. "I don't get it yet," he grumbled. "It still looks like petty larceny to me, even if there is two killin's mixed in with it."

"By damn!" Latouche exploded. "Me, I just thought of somethin'."

Vaulting the low rail to the other vessel's deck, he dived through the companionway. A few minutes later he reappeared, followed by half a dozen men in their underwear.

"Here's the real crew of the shrimper," he announced, herding the newcomers over the rail to the deck of the hulk.

"How come?" Corrigan probed.

One of the men spoke up. "I'm the skipper—name's Boisson. This afternoon, about three o'clock, we're trawlin' just south o' Timbalier Island. A gang o' fellers in a big motorboat comes alongside an' boards us. They pull guns, drive us below an' make us take off our clothes. After that, they tie us up. Then they cuts loose from the trawl an' heads inshore. That's all I know."

Latouche chuckled. "Corsi's mob are supplyin' German U-boats. They took over the shrimper to carry the groceries out to the sub, figurin' to use a vessel that's well known to the Coas' Guard."

Corrigan shook his head. "There's more to it than that, Long Fella. Before we got into the war, the Coast Guard boarded several dago shrimpers off Barataria and found their holds crammed with supplies for the Nazi U-boats operating in the Gulf. That racket died a natural death when the government put the arm on certain Nazi agents in New Orleans. It was picayune stuff, at best. But this is different."

"That feller, Pailet," Latouche said thoughtfully, "he might know what it's all about."

"Jeepers!" Corrigan grunted. "I forgot all about him."

"I'll go an' see if he's awake," Henry Pou volunteered.

Laying aside his maul, he accepted one of the automatics from Latouche. Then he climbed into the pirogue, which was still swinging alongside, and paddled over to the wharf.

FIFTEEN minutes later, Henry Pou returned with Pailet, who was now fully dressed. The night marshal was carrying a leather satchel. As they climbed to the deck of the hulk, Corrigan flashed the light over the faces of the four dead men and asked:

"Know these guys?"

Pailet studied the faces of the dead men and nodded slowly. "Yes, three of them kidnaped me in New Orleans yesterday morning."

"D'you know why?" Corrigan probed.

Pailet shrugged. "Bohn ordered it."

"Who's Bohn?"

"You probably know him as Bond," Pailet explained. "He's a Nazi agent."

"You should put that in the past tense," Corrigan said. "But how do you know he was a Nazi agent?"

"I learned about that night before last, when he stabbed Evrod." Pailet declared. He hobbled to the hatch and sat down. "The pair of them were working a jewelry smuggling racket. Evrod doublecrossed Bohn, and Bohn killed him."

Corrigan looked quickly at Latouche and grinned. "I knew there was more to it than groceries." He turned back to Pailet. "Keep on talking, brother."

"It boils down to this," Pailet continued. "Certain Nazi big-shots in Germany are getting ready for the blow-off by shipping jewelry—probably looted--to this country via submarine. Bond—or Bohn—is acting as their agent on this side, receiving the diamonds and other precious stones and passing them along to Evrod, who has a brother in the wholesale jewelry business in New York." He looked at Pou "Show 'em, Henry."

The night marshal opened the satchel. Inside was a number of bulging chamois leather bags. Untying the neck of one of these, he spilled its contents into his cupped palm.

"Pretty—hey?" he murmured.

"Diamonds!" Corrigan stared at the scintillating heap in Pou's hand. "Jeepers! If they're all like that, there must be about a million dollars' worth of ice in that grip."

"Yeah!" Latouche grunted. "But what's this gotta do wit' stealin' groceries?"

"Listening to Bohn and the old man snarling at each other, night before last," Pailet continued, "I learned that there's a two-way radio outfit in the shack up yonder. At certain times, Bohn used to come down here and broadcast a signal. If a sub was on the way over, he'd get her identification number. Last week he got a code message. It seems that the U-boat he'd been expecting ran into trouble on the way over, and most of her provisions were spoiled. Her captain ordered Bohn to have a supply on hand.

"Well, as Bohn couldn't buy that much food supplies without exciting curiosity, he decided to steal them. He arranged with Corsi to do the job, using two of the company's trucks—"

"Skip that and tell us what you were doing in the Evrod Building at ten o'clock, night before last," Corrigan interrupted.

"I went up there to swipe paint," Pailet confessed. "These shell roads down here are hard on automobiles, and the under sides of the fenders of my Chevvy were rusting. About nine-thirty I was down-town at the picture show, and decided to get some of the red paint the company uses for the under sides of the truck fenders. I was in the storeroom when I heard the old man come up.

"I kept still, knowing he'd be sore as hell if he caught me taking company stuff. Pretty soon, I heard him shove something in the flue hole in the dividing wall. I was about to sneak out when Bond—or Bohn—came up from the street. The minute he entered the office, he started cussing the old man.

"I couldn't help overhearing everything they said, and it made me wonder if I wasn't dreaming. Bit by bit, I learned of their smuggling racket. Naturally, that was a shock to me; and at first I couldn't believe it until I remembered the occasional trips Evrod used to make to New York.

"Even then, I wanted to make sure that my ears weren't playing me tricks, and I climbed on a chair and tried to see into the office through the flue hole. Right away, I saw the hole was blocked with something, and when I pulled out the obstruction, it

proved to be an envelope. Then I remembered about the old man putting something in the flue hole a while before.

"In the office, the old man was sitting at his desk, grinning at Bohn, who was sitting in the chair nearby and looking as mad as a hatter. The old man was saying, just as calmly as you please:

" 'You'll never get a cent of that money. It's in a safe deposit box in a certain New York bank. You can't get it without having the key and knowing the box number. And I'm the only person in the world who knows about them. Threaten all you want to. There isn't a damned thing you can do about it.'

"Then Bohn drew a knife and stabbed him.

"He must have killed him instantly, for the old man never moved. Bohn went through his pockets, then searched the drawers of the desk. He was trying to open the safe when I decided I'd seen enough. So I sneaked out of the building—"

"And almost knocked me down in your hurry," Corrigan reminded him.

"I don't remember—I was scared stiff," Pailet declared. "I can hardly remember getting to my room. Once there, I opened the envelope. Inside was a flat brass key, a card bearing a number, and a letterhead of the Traders' Trust Company, New York.

"I tumbled right away to what it was—the key and number of Evrod's safety deposit box, and decided, in the light of what I'd overheard, that it was a matter for the Federal government to handle. Not daring to carry the envelope with me, I put it in another envelope and mailed it to myself, general delivery, New Orleans, planning to turn it over to the F.B.I. Then I got in my car and pulled out for the city.

"Just outside Gretna, the following morning, four men in a Lincoln, crowded my Chevvy off the road. Two of them got out, covered me with guns and ordered me to get in their car. I climbed into the back seat of the Lincoln, and we were starting off when a motorcycle cop came alongside. Corsi—he was driving—pulled his gun and shot the cop. Everything happened so fast, that I was confused. Anyway, I know that the cop fired back and shot Corsi in the neck. One of the others shoved Corsi down on the floor and took his place behind the wheel. I think Corsi bled to death lying on the floor. It was ghastly.

"They kept their guns shoved in my ribs while we crossed the river on the Jackson Avenue ferry. Once on the New Orleans side, they drove to a house near the lake front. They put Corsi's body in the house, changed to another car and pulled out again, heading south, with the fellows on either side of me jamming their guns against my ribs.

"We passed through St. Odile shortly after noon yesterday, and kept on south to

the end of the bayou road. There we found Bohn and another man waiting with a motorboat. We got in the boat and came on here, after they'd hidden the car in the swamp.

"When we reached camp, they stripped me, tied me up and proceeded to give me a working over, trying to make me admit that Evrod had given me the number and key of his safety deposit box. I didn't dare tell them the truth, figuring they'd kill me once they'd learned all they wanted to know. However, after an hour or so they gave up and left me alone for the rest of the day.

"This morning they tried again, worked on me for about an hour. When they couldn't get anything out of me, they gave me something to drink, and then left on the motorboat. That's the last I remember until I was awakened by Bohn and some other man arguing in the next room. They were speaking in German, which I happen to understand fairly well. That was about twenty minutes or so before all that shooting started. Pretty soon they left, leaving that satchel on the table. A little while after that I heard the shooting. Soon afterward, Henry came. That's all."

Corrigan nodded his head slowly, checking over the younger man's story, and finding that it agreed with what he already knew. He felt a glow of satisfaction. Being assigned to a case of common larceny had pricked his professional pride. But now the hurt was salved, inasmuch as the case had developed into something really big—something worthy of the combined talents of Latouche and himself.

TURNING to Henry Pou, he said, "Remember how we thought Bond was trying to cover Pailet? Actually, he was stalling us along until he could be sure that Pailet had passed through Sellierville. He didn't want him headed off and brought back, because he was scared Evrod might have told him something about their smuggling racket.

"I had my money on Bond, right from the start. But I couldn't place him on the scene—at least in a way that would stand up before a jury. I know now that he was hiding in the coat closet the other night, and scrammed out the back way, while I was poking around in the storeroom, trying to figure out those red footprints.

"He strengthened his alibi by letting Tessier find him at home in bed. Later, after the body was removed to the undertaker's, and you and Tessier were gone, he got Corsi over long-distance and tipped him to be on the lookout for Pailet."

"By the way," the latter said, "I forgot to mention that I overheard Bohn and that other fellow talking about a U-boat. From their conversation I gathered that she has retired to deep water, to lie submerged all day tomorrow, and then come in again tomorrow night and lie a mile south of Racoon Point. Something ought to be done about that, I think."

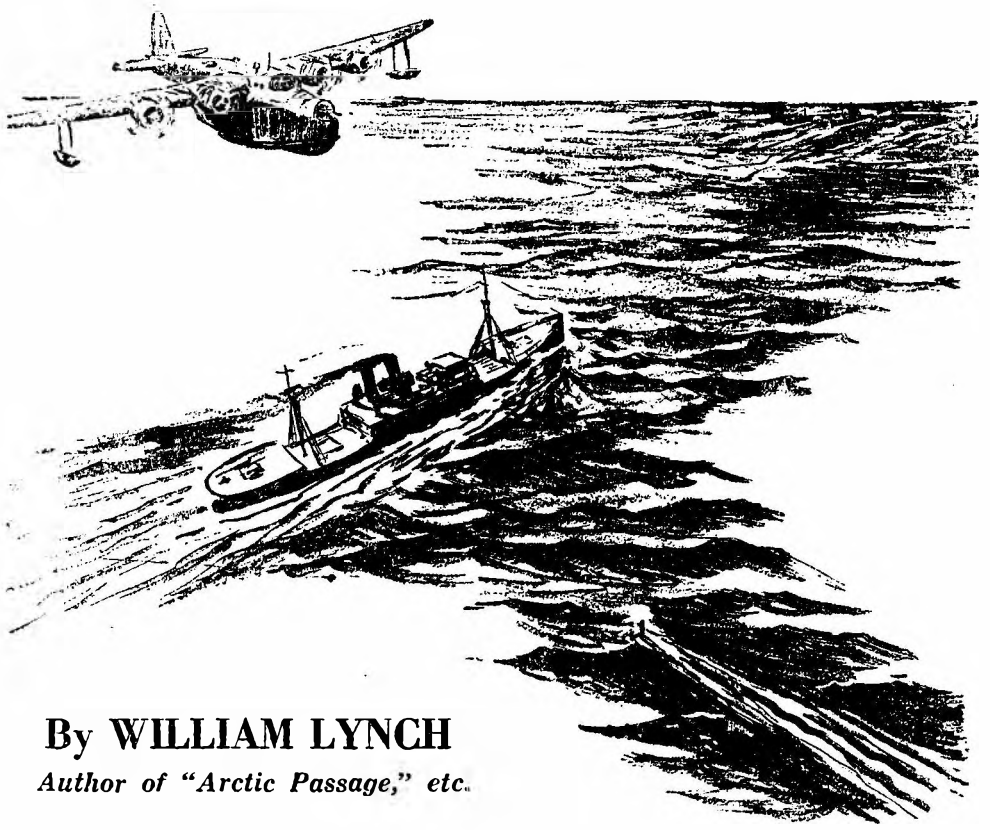
"Don't worry, brother," Corrigan assured him. "When she comes in tomorrow night, the Coast Guard boys will be on hand to say it with depth bombs. We'll see to that."

Latouche grinned sourly. "The Coas' Guard will get all the bouquets for that, an' nobody will ever hear a damn thing about us. That's one o' the drawbacks about bein' a G-man. Yes!"

"If anybody rates headlines for this job," Corrigan said, "I'd recommend Brother Pou. He really used his head."

Henry Pou bowed, stroked his mustache and frowned. "Ma head? Bot no!" He lifted the old batten maul from the deck. "No, it is not ma head I use, bot this, ma leetle hammer. Yes!"

Funny—Her Skipper Always Wanted a Big Ship, but, Well, He Always Seemed to Get Little Ones



By WILLIAM LYNCH

Author of "Arctic Passage," etc.

LITTLE SHIP, COME HOME

I CAN see her now, from 1000 feet up, ploughing gallantly along, a mere toy beside the low, long tankers and the aristocratic merchantmen, her decks forever awash as the giant waves sweep across her freeboard.

I am awake long before the dawn that morning. Myself, and the rest of the aircrew, gather before the stove in the Operations Room. Over coffee we discuss flight orders.

Our job that day is to contact the convoy and escort it while our petrol holds out. It is routine; nothing much ever happens east of the Hebrides.

It is pitch dark, and raining heavily, when we reach the jetty. Ten minutes later, 20 tons of Sunderland flying-boat looms up at us from the sea, a great gaunt symbol of warmth and comfort. We run alongside under the port wing and scramble aboard.

Then there are 12 men, at our appointed positions, glad to be out of the rain, our feet solid on one-sixteenth of an inch of plating that separates our hull bottom from the Atlantic.

The fitters prime our engines with petrol, and the riggers cast off from the buoy. Presently the port outer engine gives a convulsive shudder, and roars hell and damnation. The other three engines take

up the macabre chorus; the control boat gives us the all-clear, a flash of green; and then we are easing along at 50 knots past the first flare, increasing to 100 knots as we reach the end of the flare-path.

Flap one-third out for additional lift, screws finely pitched to give the engines maximum revolutions; "over-ride in" to give extra super-charger pressure; four throttles moving slowly forward; and it all adds up to a chalk entry back at Operations —Sunderland "E" took off 04.00 hours.

The sky, when we can see it, hangs wet and pale-blue, like a bordello's dirty washing.

At 700 feet we put Sunderland "E" into cruising trim, and then we make for the open sea.

Everybody aboard this flying-craft has got something to do—all hands and the cook engaged with their particular brand of mopping-up, like men in a dormitory fixing their pillows and the angle of their reading-lamps before settling down. Personally, I am very interested in what Jimmy Rodgers, the cook, is doing, because I am mightily in need of coffee.

Visibility is down to three miles, we so drop to 400 feet. Ice begins to form on the wings, even at this low level, and wisps of black cloud frequently obscure our view.

A few of the crew who will not be needed before the dawn have crept into their bunks. I can see Callaghan, the armorer, lying flat on his back, his mouth open, and I think that probably he snores very objectionably.

Nevertheless, I envy him his ability to sleep with all this noise going on. I am sorry, however, for the midship gunners. They look very uncomfortable and cold, with just a wind-breaker shield and a large gun-hole in the side of the hull, that lets the wind in. I am glad I was good at arithmetic, otherwise I might be sitting there, too, doing the same kind of freeze.

It is 06.00 hours, time for breakfast, and from below comes the magnificent smell of Jimmy's coffee and fried eggs and bacon. Breakfast over, I go back to the control deck, and send the second and third pilots for their meal.

We do not strike the convoy according to schedule; but, then, we seldom do. Everyone is busy right now. The rear-gunner is in his turret, and in the bomb-room the air-gunner officer, the armorer, and two others are winding the bombs out on to the wings. Disappointed, Erickson, the navigator, is working out a routine for a creeping search. Using the assumed route of the convoy as a datum, we advance 25 miles, and work back, zig-zagging in sweeps of 12 miles.

We spot the first ships of the convoy at 07.15. If there is enemy territory between the Hebrides and Scotland, this is it, and the air-gunner officer, largely from habit—and, maybe a touch of frustration —is preparing to conduct a gun-firing test from his Perspex dome in the roof.

It is easy to spot the Victory ships, identifiable by their shining hulls and low sheers. These are making their first trip. Others, rust-covered, but tough and serviceable-looking, show out plainly—sturdy old warriors of the sea. Destroyers, corvettes, and armed trawlers are weaving in and out, like a flock of patronizing hens keeping the chickens out of a mud-hole.

THE S.N.O. of the convoy is signalling up to know how long we can keep him company. Grimes, our radio operator, comes forward with the Aldis lamp, and as we circle the ship he takes down their messages. Navigator tells us that we have five hours or more, and this information is passed on to the destroyer.

Jimmy Rodgers, the cook, comes through on inter-com, wanting to know if we have spotted a very small ship, with vertical bows and tall funnels, vintage about 1906. Grimes hands him binoculars, and he finally makes out the ship for himself.

"That is good!" Jimmy says. "I am extremely pleased to see that ship." Then he

skips back to his kitchen without another word. Jimmy Rodgers is straight from high school. He comes from a long line of mediocre Navy men.

The small ship is making very heavy going of it. But she is as game as they are made, which is shown in the way she plods, plods along, well to the rear of the convoy, getting rocked back on her heels with every sea that comes up at her. I cannot help but admire the courage of the little ship that can't keep up. For the long tankers and the speedy Victory ships there is the protection of the Navy escort; but for the little craft it is keep up or find your own way home; and the sea is full of danger for the straggler.

Then, as we cruise leisurely, about two knots ahead of the convoy, we see what we have not seen in a great number of flights —the long, phosphorescent trailer of a periscope. We flash a warning to the convoy, giving the sub's exact position, and then we come down in a curved dive. At 500 feet we drop a couple of eggs, and then we ease upward to observe results. The line of phosphorus has suddenly snapped off, leaving a thin, ragged ribbon of dulling white.

We peer down through the murk for the tell-tale smudge of oil, but there is nothing good to be seen. Two, sleek, gray-blue destroyers are already circling the spot like greyhounds scenting prey, their decks awash with the white spume of their frantic haste. Depth-charges, a score of them, are catapulted sternwards, disappearing while you could count 15, and then throwing the sea up in great chunks. Presently a couple of swift corvettes join the destroyers, and the hunt is on in earnest. But it is a Navy job now, and where there is one ocean prowler there may be a dozen of them. We head back to the convoy.

THE diminutive freighter is still wallowing along, her nose deep in the water, and her freeboard constantly awash. I just can't get the little ship out of my mind; but strung along the narrow sea-lane there are three score of ships, and we are the eyes of the convoy. But we take time off to signal the little ship, telling her to catch up if she can, and in a hurry. But in ships of her size the wheels just don't go round fast enough, and that's all there is to it. We cruise round for about an hour.

"Periscope off to starboard!"

It is the rear-gunner, who has been swinging the gun turret about, searching the skys behind us. We bank and turn, and there, almost below us, is once again the ominous ribbon of dull-white. Before we have time to ease down into our dive the surface of the water is broken, and the sub's conning-tower busts into our sights. The air-gunner officer is watching, head down, awaiting our signal. But he will drop no bombs on this baby if she is prepared to come quietly.

The sub is hanging half out of the water, sick to death, and listing a little to port. The Navy stuff must have been good.

I tell the second pilot through inter-com. that I am in two minds about the vicious thing that lies mortally hurt beneath us, and he comes back, as swift as a gun-bust: "Let them have it!"

I glance at Jerry Masters, the third pilot. "You, too, Jerry?" and he nods emphatically.

"It is unsportsmanlike and should be discouraged," I murmur, mimicking our boxing instructor back at Base "A."

But Fritz has made up my mind; for, even as I vacillate between kill and capture the sub has released a couple of torpedoes, and one of them is making a beeline for the tiny freighter at the rear of the convoy, a deadly, bubbling trail of hate and venom.

It is the sub's Partian shot, for she cannot hope to escape what we are about to drop on her. Our bomb-aimer is hovering over his instrument, fingers itching. We are heavily laden with bombs, and this U-boat is about to collect most of it.

She collects. We straddle her with three

of the best, and then, just in case a couple of her plates still manage to hang together, we come round in a quick turn, and drop a few more on to the debris. Great pieces of her feather up into the sky and plop into the sea a quarter of a mile away—and this time there is oil on the water. All of it was good.

"A decent bit of ardua—" It Is Masters, who is pleased beyond description.

Then our eyes are directed to the little ship.

She is down in the middle, the bowels blown out of her, and the big seas are gambolling across her bridge, relentlessly weighing her down. I feel I want to yell at her that there is a great smudge of oil beneath us on the water, and that she was a good, game little ship—but my mouth is dry with fear for her.

So I go down for coffee. Jimmy Rodgers stares hard at me, a coffee-pot trembling in his hand.

"The little freighter—she got it, sir?"

I nod and reach for a cup. Jimmy goes on, huskily:

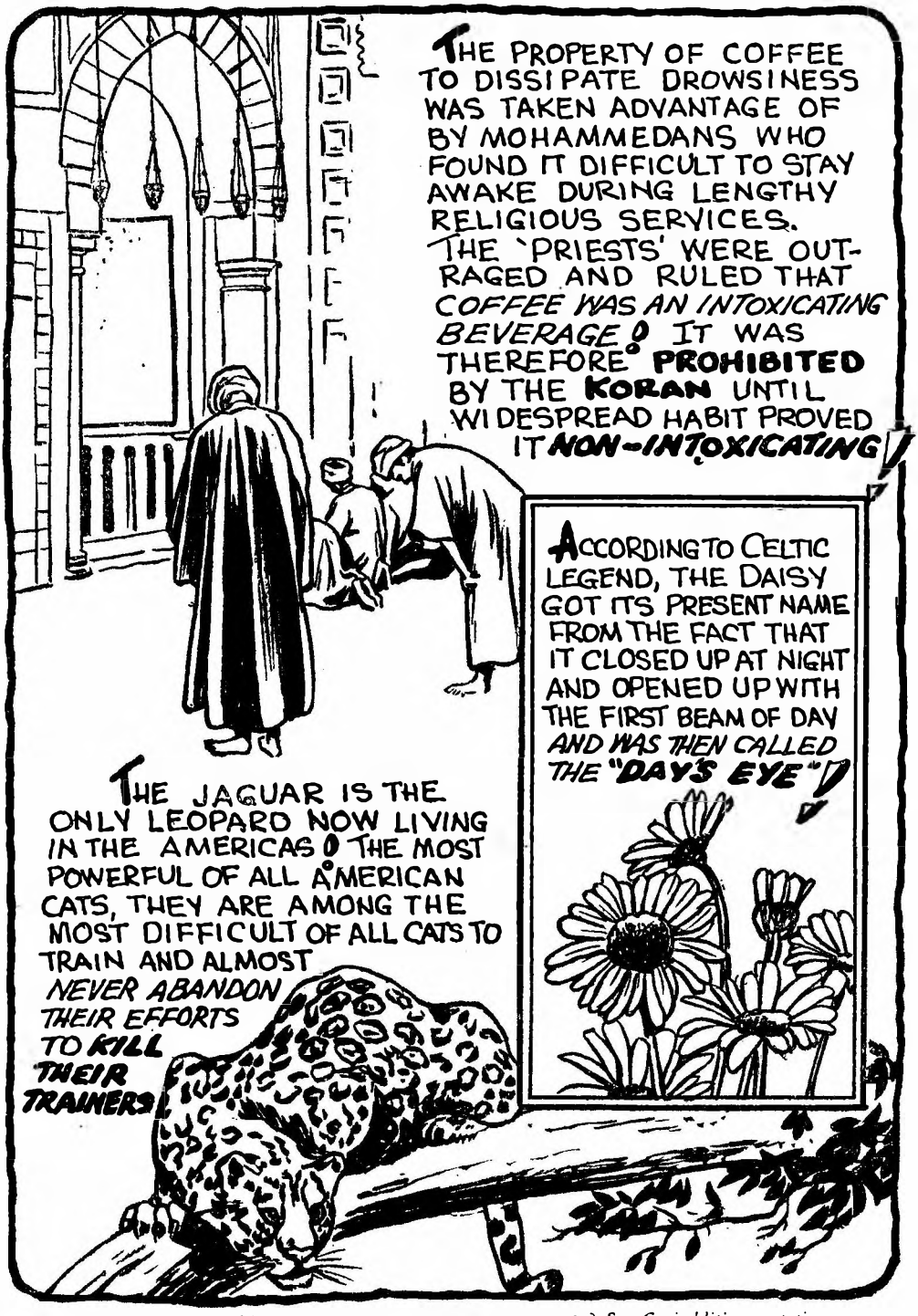
"Funny—her skipper always wanted a big ship—but, well, he always seemed to get little ones."

"You know her skipper, Jimmy?"

"Knew him well. Name of Captain John Rodgers, sir."

And as I climb back to the control deck I can hear my heart go clang, clang, clang, for the brave souls who man the little ships of the convoy.

Curioddities By Weill



WHO, BUT NOT NECESSARILY WHY, INVENTED THE BAGPIPES? *See Curioddities next time.*

An Inch of Time

By JAMES NORMAN

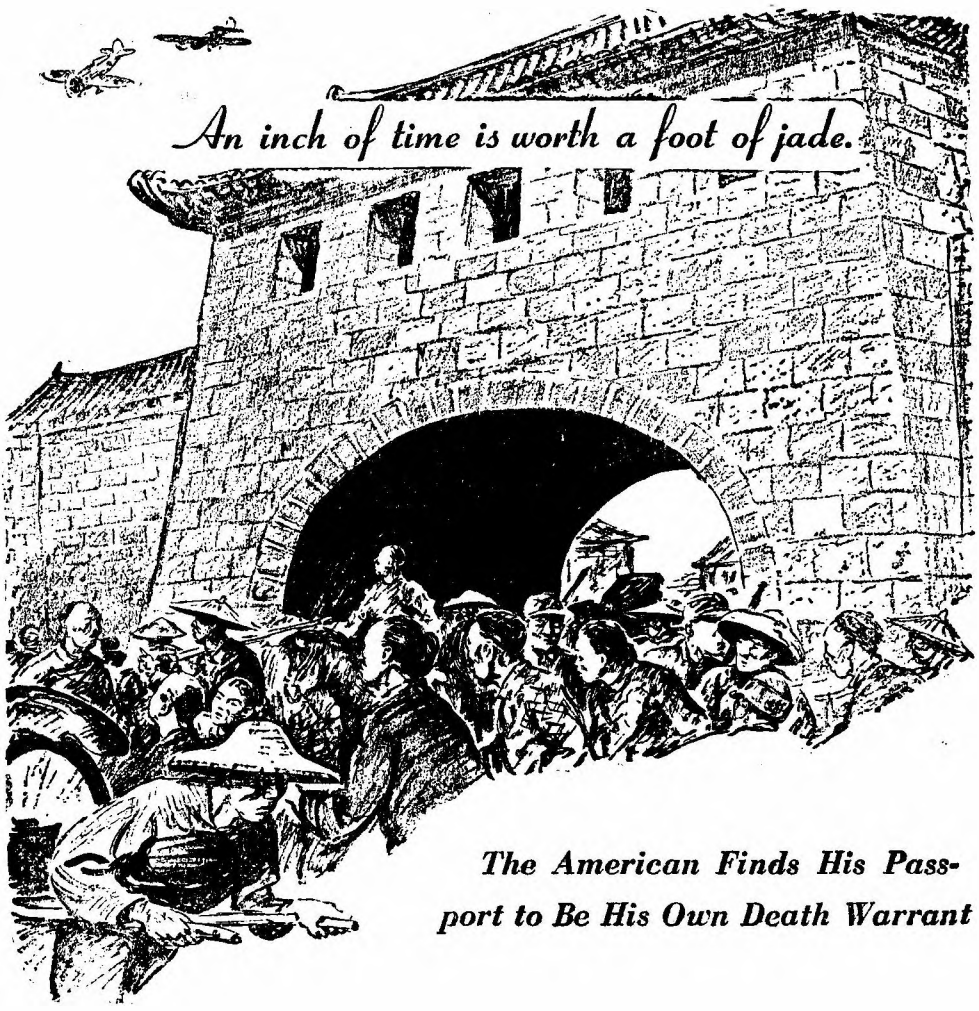
Author of "Rewards, Incorporated," etc.

Part III

THE STORY SO FAR

PAUL COURTLAND, an American, had been a jade collector and trader in China. He found his firm had been used to smuggle heroin—in hollow jades—out of China, and after the death of his partner in Manila he accepts a commission from the Chinese and American governments to try to find who is guilty of the heroin traffic, his credentials being a certain significant Mexican dollar. He is making for the headquarters of a well-known Chinese bandit, General Huang, who is apparently playing the Chinese government against the Japanese invaders and on the Chengtai express surprisingly meets an American girl. She says she also is collecting jade and callously betrays a Chinese traveler to the Japanese authorities. She seems to know Courtland by name and introduces herself—Marta Reed.

Then the train is held up and Courtland finds himself in extraordinary hands—a Mexican officer who is training guerrilla fighters for the Chinese republic and a Eurasian woman called Mountain of Virtue. The Mexican says he won her in a poker game, but inasmuch as she shuffled the cards herself it was all right. Quinto, the Mexican, takes Courtland off the train and they ride into the hills, the girl Marta in the custody of Mountain of Virtue. In Wutai at Quinto's compound, Courtland



The American Finds His Passport to Be His Own Death Warrant

learns of the bombing of Pearl Harbor and realizes that he can no longer back out of Occupied China. He makes a confidant of the Mexican concerning his mission—and they both agree that in some mysterious way the heroin-jade mystery is tied up with the war. In Courtland's room a stranger is murdered, a man posing as a White Russian, and they later find the fatal knife in the possession of a Mr. Wu, an elderly Chinese scholar. They ask Wu to translate the inscription on the Mexican dollar whose possession is Courtland's passport, and though Courtland is still puzzled, Quinto appears to grasp the significance of it. There is in Quinto's household a strange old woman, Chom Doy, who aspires to marry Mr. Wu, and seems to have knowledge of the murder.

CHAPTER XIV

ALERTE!

SENORA CHOM DOY had been sighing somewhat wistfully, and admiring a pale, translucent *yuan yang* water-color picture of ducks framed over Mr. Wu's k'ang. In a downy way, they symbolized connubial bliss. But when she saw in Quinto's hand the knife that had killed the Russian, she let out a sharp scream and snatched at it.

"*Pu yoa chi,* do not be impatient,"

Quinto cautioned her in Chinese. His smudgy, intelligent eyes moved swiftly from Chom Doy, to Wu, to Courtland, then to Virtue.

Chom Doy scolded him in such staccato Cantonese that the vowels were outdistanced by her own breath. She reached for the knife again and Quinto held it above his head, out of reach.

"You stole the knife," she accused him.

"I did not steal it."

Chom Doy regarded the Mexican with unabated suspicion.

"You are holding it," she said.

Quinto took a deep breath. Courtland thought he was going to rub the strange old woman's mellon-shaped head to quiet her. But Quinto's patience had run its course.

"Enough!" he exclaimed, explosively.

He regarded the woman's saucer-face as though it were a thermometer which should cool down quickly. Then he spoke more quietly. "I wish to find something about this knife. You will explain, Wu?"

The old Chinese scholar looked perturbed. His weak eyes wandered toward the picture of the connubial ducks and his expression was one of a man ensnared by fate.

"Please excuse my stupidity," he sighed. "Captain Quinto understands behavior within the circle of right conduct and according to square of right action. Only possible conduct in this situation. All very proper." He sighed again, looking at the ducks.

Virtue interrupted:

"It is *kuei chü,*" or proper conduct, Gimienda. You will remember, after lunch today you ordered Mr. Wu to guard the room in which Mr. Shchegolkov was murdered. Naturally, Mr. Wu saw the knife. He knew it belonged to Chom Doy. It is possible that he took the knife, hiding it to protect her. They are in love, you know."

"All proper, *kuei chü,*" Mr. Wu put in, excitedly.

Courtland slowly replaced the cover of the chest and looked up at Virtue doubtfully. He sensed the immediate relief shown by Mr. Wu the resumption of strict politeness. In his mind, he wondered what the old man was still holding back, and his suspicion grew. Bluntness was needed to pierce through Wu's age-old Mandarin politeness.

He leaned forward, demanding:

"You know more about Shchegolkov?"

The Chinese glanced at him, startled. He said nothing.

"Please," Virtue put in, her hands on Courtland's sleeve. "Gimiendo is captain. It is his business, not yours. You must remember, Mr. Courtland, we captured you." Her glance wavered toward Quinto as though expecting an answer.

"*Si,*" Quinto nodded and coughed. "Señor Wu is a very sick man, I think. Altogether the subject of this knife has no importance today. We will think of something else—the message on the three-piece dollar, no?"

Courtland pulled his arm away from Virtue's touch. He felt the thinness of annoyance run through him. It was overlapped, momentarily, by this amazing display of teamwork between Virtue and Quinto. It was as if their minds met at pre-arranged points where they could pause a second, a little ahead of everyone else, and consider what lay ahead.

Virtue sent him one of her narrowing, oblique glances.

"You do not mind, Mr. Courtland?"

"I mind," he answered. But before he could say what was on his mind a gong sounded in the distance.

Mr. Wu glanced nervously toward the door and his gentle head strained on its scrawny neck to meet the dull, vibrant sound. Quinto straightened, feet planted firmly, head poised, listening beyond the gathered fury and expectant danger in the gong's sound. His face was exceedingly sober.

"*Alerte,*" he said. "The Invader."

Courtland's nerves tightened.

"Bombers?"

Quinto shrugged. *"Quien sabe?"* He sounded a little irritated.

Mr. Wu suddenly threw aside all formality. "Bombers—" he repeated. His long-nailed fingers grasped at a karakul coat on a nearby chair. The coat covered a bare fraction of his swirling Mother Hubbard nightgown. He snatched up a toothbrush and vanished through the door into the night. Chom Doy followed him as quickly. Quinto turned to Mountain of Virtue.

"Send the others to the orchards," he said. Then to Courtland, he added, "You must go quickly, Señor Courtland. If there is a bomber, it is very dangerous."

"I've been bombed before."

His answer was calm and unhurried, but he held down the tensions stringing through him; the kind of muscle-taut tensions which are always in a man before an air raid, no matter how many he has faced.

"You must by no means remain in the house, *savvy!*" Quinto's tone was firm. "Everybody goes out. Go the orchards beyond the East Gate. It will take seven minute for the flyers to come."

The Mexican and Virtue left the room. Buttoning his coat, Courtland listened for a moment. If planes approached, their sound was lost in the furious din of the air-raid gong on the drum tower in the center of town. He pushed his sleeve back and looked at the time. Eight-forty. Six and a half minutes.

HE OPENED the door and crossed Wu's courtyard. It was completely deserted and cold under the open sky and white enameled light of the moon. As he went through Chom Doy's smoke-filled kitchen four guerrilla boys passed him and ran excitedly across the next courtyard to the street gate. They were all highly nervous and it struck him as strange, these, the best of China's fighters running in fear.

Going around the spirit screen, he entered the outer courtyard. The packing boxes here stood in the moonlight like unfinished, gray granite tombstones. A stiffly frozen dressing gown, lately washed, rasped slightly as it hung on a bamboo drying pole. He glanced at his watch again. Three minutes.

Stopping at the street gate, he felt the fine edge of night wind. It cut at him. He saw someone run from the next house; a man loaded down with great piles of bedding. He was like a huge snail. All at once, he caught the first distant drone of planes. The sound beat against the sky as though pushing it aside and it ran a swift even chill through him.

Wutai lay under the full wide sky like a naked target awaiting the Japanese raiders. A strange extended silence held the mountain city. The sky-hammering of the plane motors widened. There were not many, Courtland thought, but their sounds were hellish.

He heard someone call out a little way up the street.

"T'u hao, local rascal."

A cigarette brightened behind the voice and it danced in the rigid cold of the night. Then he made out Quinto's figure. The Mexican argued with a donkey, trying to get it out of the danger zone. The rest of the street was utterly deserted. Wutai was giving the Manchu House a wide berth.

The noise of the planes rushed upon the town. He lost sight of Quinto and slipped back, waiting beneath the arched gate. His mouth felt wrung and dry; he knew, once again, the hard coiling and bundling of muscles in the pit of his stomach—the way fear comes to a man in war.

Then the planes came in a volume of sound. Two tiny black streaks. They winged into view from behind a temple roof, flying very low, their blunt prows bulging aggressively. Pigeons from the courtyard took to flight ahead of the beating sound of the planes. A new sound broke through, a thin wild whistle, then

the louder, hollow whine that unfolded, bursting into a nerve strumming deep rush of air.

He dropped to the ground by the gate, his shoulder in the angle of the wall. He began thinking, "This one is for me. This one." A second later he relaxed. The sound and its threat had overshot him. Looking up, he saw the bombs fall across the path of moonlight. They burst a distance up the street, in even rows. The yellow flare and the whoombbb, as they burst, shook the earth. "Not so large, and not too near," he thought.

A machine-gun clattered nearby. From the rim of the town he also heard the tat-tat-tat of a small automatic cannon. Tracers made their own slow, graceful curve against the night, following the rigid flight of the planes as they swept on, invisible but full of sound. The plane sounds banked against the unseen mountain walls rimming the Wutai Valley.

"They return with *máquinas*," Quinto called aloud. Courtland could not see him, but he heard the Mexican hawk and spit. On the heated barrel of the Bren gun, he thought.

Presently, the beat of the planes bent in the darkness, coming back. Courtland listened a second, then he changed his position to the opposite side of the archway. The planes rode higher and faster. He felt the tautness within as his mind went ahead to meet them. His thoughts were up there with them, following each as it peeled off, belly to the moonlight, the swift, breathless downward plunge. His hate went up there to meet them too; a hatred sharpened because he had no way of hitting back.

The planes peeled off now, one following the other in swift howling plunges down the slope of the night. He felt his nerves needled by the angry chatter riding above the confusion of the motors. Green-yellow fire spit from the stationary guns and the blunt noses of the planes raked the street with fire. Their sound was like the dry knuckles of death rapping out against the earth.

Amidst the confusion and sound, a donkey clattered by, fantastically matching the course of the first plane as it heeled upward. On the donkey's back, young Company Three fired wildly at the sky with a carbine. Now, the second plane hit the bottom of its stairway.

Courtland glimpsed Quinto a hundred yards up the street. The Mexican knelt in the clear open, in the downward path of the plane, calmly nursing a stream of bitter fire from his Bren gun. Tracers cracked the cobbles on all sides, spun dizzily into walls and buildings. The man was mad. It took one hundred percent courage to be mad like that, Courtland thought.

The second plane leveled off, wobbling almost within hand's reach above the buildings.

"Hola!" Quinto's voice rang out expectantly.

Courtland watched alertly. In the split-second that the plane hung overhead, he saw something flash downward toward him. His stomach turned rawly, knotting, an inward violence. Then the thing struck the wall and bounced on the cobbles with a metallic sound. The plane's motor gunned and howled skyward again, driving upward into the halo of the moon.

"Hijo de la chingada!" Quinto's voice swore at his erring marksmanship.

Courtland darted into the street, grabbed the object that had been flung from the plane. It was an empty 50 caliber machine-gun shell, and it was cold to his touch. He returned to the safety of the gate.

"What is it, Courtland?"

The English voice came from behind him, familiar and startling. He whirled and saw Marta Reed standing in the courtyard. She was in her corduroys again. She wore no hat and her hair shone luminous in the moonlight. Her eyes, meeting his, seemed full of clear excitement.

Then he noticed the dynamic Mr. Yin

beside her. Yin was tightly bundled in his mail-order plaid coat. His pincer eyes snapped brightly upon Courtland.

"Give up thing please," Yin demanded. He stepped forward briskly, thrusting forth his open hand for the shell.

CHAPTER XV

MESSAGE

COURTLAND looked at the Macanese with a slow speculative stare and said nothing. Yin shoved his hand forward a little further. But for the fading drone of the planes in the night sky, there was a momentary, cold silence.

He glanced at Marta and was preoccupied with his feelings toward her; the strong surge of emotion which he let ride over and through him, not resisting it. So much had happened since he last saw her, it seemed like days. Yet it was only this morning. Mechanically, he noted again that the machine-gun shell in his hand was ice cold. He wondered why it wasn't warm. It should be.

Ferdinand Yin's breath puffed forth in eager clouds. He broke the silence.

"Give me thing."

"Why?" he countered.

"What is it, Courtland?" Marta's question was annoying. It pressed down the quick emotion he had felt and left his mind clear and sure. She had now allied herself with Yin. Suddenly, he saw her gaze run past him and cloud. He glanced over his shoulder quickly and saw Quinto.

"Qué pasa?" Quinto questioned, scoldingly, as he entered the courtyard. He looked huge and black in the night. A Bren gun was snuggled in the crook of his arm as though he were going duck hunting. "Why is not everybody in the orchards? There is an *alerte.*"

Ferdinand Yin's conscientiously cunning eyes flitted coldly toward Courtland and his chest heaved out importantly. He jabbed his finger forward, accusing Courtland. "Japanese spy," he charged. "Object just dropped from aeroplane for him."

Courtland stepped back, surprise momentarily reflected upon his features.

"I witness it with my eyes," Yin added, his voice crackling.

"You're mad!" Courtland retorted.

"It is possible," Marta Reed put in. "Mr. Yin and I were here in the courtyard when the planes strafed. Something was thrown from the second plane. Courtland was below, waiting. He picked it up."

He pulled his breath back, looking at her, seeing the dramatic change in her light eyes as she further damned him. The deep motion of his thoughts and the anger rising toward her showed only in the narrowness of his eyes and the slight flaring of his lips.

Quietly, he turned toward Quinto, and handed him the cold shell casing.

"This is it, *hombre?*" said Quinto.

Courtland nodded. To his surprise, the Mexican immediately handed him the Bren gun.

"You see, I am trustful," Quinto grinned. He stepped into the full moonlight and carefully scrutinized the shell. "Cold," he observed. "It has not been fired this time."

Courtland watched him run those thick, powerful fingers lightly within the inner rim of the shell and heard him breathe a satisfied, "Ahh."

Quinto slid a square of thin rice paper from the shell's mouth. Marta and Yin watched with absorbed, inscrutable interest. Then the Mexican flashed the Macanese a grateful look. *"Muchas gracias,"* he murmured.

"A message?" Yin snapped.

Quinto scratched his thigh thoughtfully. "The Invaders are a most methodical little people," he sighed. "They have measured the flight of a swallow from a certain day." He glanced at Ferdinand Yin sharply, asking, "Huang does not have aviation, no?"

"Aviation?" Yin shook his head.

Quinto threw up his hands. "The message is foolish," he said in disgust. "It says: *In fifty hours a swallow can fly seven hundred li. Huang cannot fly. Huang is not a swallow.*"

"Please," Yin interrupted. "The message concerns General Huang. I must bring it to him for interpretation."

"You understand it, eh?" Quinto asked.

Yin shrugged. "No. But Mr. Courtland does. I shall also bring him. General Huang has methods which will make him speak forth."

Courtland showed nothing in his face, but his feelings ran quick and hard. For a second, he said nothing. He deliberately set the Bren gun against a packing case, faced Yin again and laughed softly. "Huang will see me when I'm ready," he said. "That will be soon enough. But not yet."

He saw Quinto crumple the rice-paper message and shove it into his pocket. Quinto seemed pleased. "One must learn about birds first, eh?" he observed wisely.

"No!" Yin's explosive response sounded doubly edged and icy in the cold courtyard. "The message is important to General Huang. I must have it."

"Huang is not very clever. He does not read well," Quinto replied. "Perhaps you will want to take poor Señor Shchegolkov to Huang? The message was for him, no? But he is also detained."

Yin ignored the barb. He carefully unbuttoned his plaid overcoat. With equal preciseness and consideration, he drew a revolver from a covered hip-holster.

"The paper," he demanded.

Courtland felt the muscles in his arms and body run loose and ready. He moved swiftly toward the Bren gun, then halted, nerve-taut. Yin had swung his revolver midway between himself and Quinto. The movement had been as slight and precise as his draw, and as coldly efficient.

Quinto, as though knowing the exact point where danger becomes lethal, glanced helplessly at the Bren gun, then sighed wearily. Marta moved over toward the packing case and the light machine-gun. Courtland watched her from the corner of his eye; and he wondered what thoughts and impulses moved her at this exact moment, or what involved her in this thing that was beyond her knowledge.

Above, in the night, the drone of a plane kept up a constant, irritating hum. Then the air-raid gong rang out once again.

Yin glanced sidewise at the packing cases. "The paper!" he repeated, his tone urgent. His revolver inched forward slightly.

Quinto took one look at the sky. "They return," he said cheerfully. "Perhaps this time I will shoot a duck."

Totally overlooking Ferdinand Yin, the big Mexican went to the packing case, snatched up his Bren gun and hurried out into the street. He disappeared beyond the arch, his head tilted upward like a shoebox, staring at the halo of the moon.

Courtland smiled a little, seeing Yin's face suddenly drop. For a second, the Macanese appeared like a business man who has been trying to sell gloves to a man whose arms have been missing for a number of years.

"Try again, Ferdinand," he said. His tone was taunting.

Yin looked at him abruptly and gave a mechanical grunt. His pincer-like eyes flashed toward the sky where the sound of the raiding plane swelled, vibrating the darkness with danger. Yin whirled with a peculiar military swiftness and hurried from the yard.

Beyond the wall of the Manchu House, Quinto's gun played its clipped, dry sound against the sky and was beaten back by the swift, roaring onrush of a single diving plane. The muscles in Courtland's body coiled once again. The plane overshot the house as straight as an arrow.

"This is it!" he yelled.

He lunged toward Marta, dragging her to the cobbles beside the packing cases and falling next to her. His ears echoed the

all-out, great, downward whirring and screech of the bomb. He felt the girl's fingers dig spasmodically into the flesh of his shoulder. Suddenly there was the broken-second impact, then the detonation. A blinding column of light puffed against the sky and smashed across the house eaves.

"Next house north," Courtland thought. "That close." Then the ground jarred from that awful violence. Broken bits of tile and stone and wood showered into the courtyard, and then the slower sifting down of dust through the night.

He sat up, shaking the rust away. Then he helped Marta to her feet. "Next door," he said, his emotions still taut and showing in his tone. "Too damn close. Do you want to get out of here?"

The girl looked shocked, her lips were parted. He saw that they trembled. She smiled at him weakly.

"They'll be back again," he said.

She was surer of herself after a moment.

"No, it's all right," she said, and smiled. "The Japanese are scientific. They quarter the town, then bomb it. They've done this quarter."

She dusted her jacket front and sat upon one of the packing cases. But she looked toward the night sky with an uneasiness, listening. The plane's sound banked against the distant mountain rim and vanished for a moment. Courtland looked at her, thinking out the contradictions he saw in her—the momentary helplessness that looked so lovely and now, her cool courage.

Her glance dropped, meeting his eyes, and she said:

"The message the Japanese plane dropped wasn't for you, was it?"

"You thought so a moment ago?"

"No, Courtland. I didn't think so."

"You acted as though you did."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to." Her voice sounded as though she were really sorry. It puzzled him.

He looked away for a second and in that moment was aware of the bending sound of the raiding plane. It was hanging high above the shoulders of the Wutais. Outside, in the street, voices gathered excitedly, apparently surveying the damage done. He heard some report, in Chinese, that the house next door had been empty.

Suddenly he looked at the girl again. "What's the game you're playing? You and I are playing?" he asked.

She looked at him, surprised.

"I wish you wouldn't say that," she answered.

"I told you that you'll need my help before you leave the Wutais," he replied. "That still goes. But you may not leave the Wutais."

She smiled a little wistfully. "I like you, Courtland. If I need help, I'll call. But I don't see why I need any. Perhaps you're worrying too much."

His glance carried toward her, questioningly. He wondered if he could ever break through and find the real girl in Marta. The strange turns in her relationship to him were completely confusing; the moments of appeal in which she struck at some chord within him, then the sudden turn, the quickening of words and emotions, the irritations and dissatisfactions.

He sat upon one of the packing cases. While rubbing the coldness from his hands, he spoke, but without looking at her for the moment. He said:

"You were in the room when Shchegolkov was killed!"

THE girl grew rigid. He followed the emotion with his eyes, watching the quick pointing of her narrow boot, the movement of her knee and then the tightening of her fingers, each in each. He glanced at her face. She sat motionless, not turning her head, not looking at him.

Then he said:

"You told me that you had seen the Russian when you came up from the train. You had not. The only chance you had of seeing him was in the short interval while we were at dinner and Shchegolkov was mur-

dered. He was in my room most of that time—being murdered."

She leaned forward, touching his arm, saying, "Please, Courtland." The gesture seemed almost impulsive and he sensed the deep underlying conflict motivating it without understanding. That was all she said and she still did not look at him.

He wondered if there were any way of understanding her. Each action, each change in her manner remained entirely apart from what had gone before. He realized that she had in her bearing, certain characteristics he could respect. Physical courage. Intelligence. Suppressed warmth. But even these were negated in the way she used them.

Suddenly he knew that she had relaxed. He saw her look across the courtyard and his eyes followed the direction of her glance. Mountain of Virtue came toward them.

The Eurasian girl walked swiftly, her body always poised, her oval face turned gracefully upon the stiff-quilted collar of her winter jacket. Virtue greeted them with a disapproving seriousness. "There is aviation," she warned.

"They're gone," Courtland replied.

Virtue stood near him. "They have gone on to bomb the Valley of Temples to the East," she said. "They will return, perhaps tonight, perhaps tomorrow."

Courtland listened to the sky. There was still the very faint drone of aviation, well beyond the rim of the valley. The planes were probably winging back to their base at Taiyuanfu. He could also hear Quinto's voice beyond the wall, issuing orders.

"Gimiendo will be disappointed," Virtue said. "He shoots well, doesn't he? But he does not shoot as well as young Company Three."

"The boy?" asked Marta.

Virtue listened for the planes again. Her pose was perfectly Chinese, but with a faint sureness of the Westerner showing through. But now, she listened with a Chinese alertness, intentness and calmness toward danger. Finally she smiled, saying:

"Company Three is the superior shot of Wutai. He is quite brave, like all my people. Last year he was only a child. His folk-name has been forgotten. But he was a member of the Wutai Patriots, Company 3, Regiment 1.

"Last year he went with thirty men of his company to cross the Invader's lines and to contact brother guerrillas in Manchuria. The entire company was drawn into a battle by the Invader near Peiping. All except the boy were killed."

Virtue's smile crossed Courtland and went toward Marta. Her glance went over the other girl's hair, down the boyish shape of her figure. Then she continued speaking as though her words were distinctly for Marta Reed.

"Alone among the enemy," she said, "this boy was like a small carp in the Lo River in Honan. The carp must change into a dragon to stem the waterfalls at Lung Men. He became a dragon. It took him five months to fight his way alone to Manchuria and back, and he returned with nine Invader prisoners. He was completely shy when he reported to Nieh Yong-sen for he reported each battle with the enemy, including the capture of prisoners—but he said that Company 3 had overcome the enemy each time and that he had merely been helpful. No one remembered his name. So since then, we have called him Company Three."

Virtue shivered a little in the cold and glanced, close-lidded at Marta. "It is very brave to fight in the name of something larger than yourself and not desire recognition for one's self, is it not?"

Courtland slid from the packing case and took Mountain of Virtue's arm.

"You're cold," he said. "Let's go inside."

Virtue smiled. "Such an act is brave, isn't it?" she repeated for Courtland.

He shrugged. "Too bad we're not all Company Threes. Everyone ran when the raid started."

Mountain of Virtue halted, looking surprised. "That—why, it is a matter of being sensible," she said. Her head nodded seriously toward the wooden crates. "These are filled with dynamite."

CHAPTER XVI

MR. SOVIET

THE soft yellow sunlight had already filtered through the oil-paper windows of Courtland's room when he awoke the following morning. He had suffered a difficult and restless night fighting the bitter Northwest cold. Upon the unevenly heated *k'ang,* he had been alternately drenched with perspiration, then chilled to the bone.

His awakening was equally eventful. Like so many Japanese officers in China, whose life expectancy reaches a thinning out point, he opened his eyes and found a stranger in his room—a stranger sometimes known as Mr. Soviet, *Su Wei-ai hsien shêng,* because on occasions he lived among the Reds of Yenan.

This Mr. Soviet crouched at the foot of the *k'ang,* grinning widely and happily. He was a man who could cross all of Japanese Occupied China without so much as being noticed, except for the wake of dead enemy officers and an occasional blown bridge to mark his course.

Courtland sat up with a jerk.

"Tenga Fa—"

Teng blew a quick puff of smoke at Courtland from his tightly rolled cigarette. An English one. He nodded, still grinning, and then stood up. He strolled around the room with a lively gait, showing off his recently captured Japanese Army greatcoat. A Cambodian military medal, the *Order of the Million Elephants and the White Parasol,* dangled from one lapel.

"You are glad I have come?" Teng questioned in his usual precise English.

Courtland stared at the other. He was still a little stunned and his mind worked furiously to set the picture right. He thought of the Taoist monk in the train; the fantastic bird cage stuffed with shoes. His mouth parted slightly.

He said:

"Certainly I'm glad."

Teng chuckled, reached down and handed him his boots. "You were quite sure I was dead," he said. "So many people in China expect me to die. It is delightful to surprise them."

Courtland began dressing. He felt inwardly pleased that the young Chinese Army agent had escaped. "Chengting," he said. "What happened?"

"I escaped, naturally," Teng Fa replied.

"Naturally!"

Courtland found himself echoing the word soberly. He heard Teng's delighted chuckle as the latter came to the *k'ang,* resting one foot on the edge. He wore fine leather military boots.

"A parrot's cage is not always innocent," the Chinese eagerly explained. "You remember? My cage was the refuge for old shoes. Very useless shoes. These shoes are filled with grenades." The grin widened on his broad, coppery face. Then he added, "Foot-grenades."

"You blew up the guards?"

"*Ayi,* almost the station. But luck was bad," Teng replied.

THERE was a knock on the door. Señora Chom Doy came in, carrying a breakfast of dragon's eye tea and a basket of persimmons the size of large tomatoes. She set her tray down beside Courtland, all the while favoring Teng Fa with glances dripping with admiration. Teng smiled, watching her until she went out.

"Good woman," he said to Courtland. "Know her long?"

Teng brushed aside the question. He sat on the *k'ang* and took a persimmon, breaking the skin and scooping out the meat with two crooked fingers. "I have spoken with Quinto," he said. "Quinto tells me you have been honest. You wish to destroy some heroin smuggling and you think

General Huang will know something about it?"

COURTLAND nodded, thinking with a single-minded absorption that the appearance of Teng Fa would bring a half-clarity to the troubles in Wutai. But he had not yet thought out how he wanted this clarification to affect events when Teng saw Marta Reed.

"I will remain here in Wutai only a short time," Teng went on. "But I will help you. Heroin is bad for China and for America. But it is not advisable for you to go down to Pao-lai yet, or alone. I am also one who knows everything. It is therefore not advisable to go to Pao-lai as a blind man."

"What do you mean—blind?"

"The boundaries between Partisan China, as here in Wutai, and the occupied areas are very liquid. Japanese agents have been known to visit us. And we are always visiting the Japanese, with explosives. It would not be sensible to attack Pao-lai alone until you know what is there, and what remains behind you."

The American stared at Teng Fa quietly, his thoughts forming agreements, and certain disagreements. Shrugging, he poured himself a bowl of tea.

"Please," Teng Fa frowned. "Squeeze a little persimmon into it. The flavor increases."

"Someone may follow me, eh?" Courtland said, returning to the question of General Huang.

"Precisely. Someone has followed you," said Teng.

Courtland's glance was momentarily guarded as he stared at the young, vigorous Chinese agent. He said:

"From Tientsin? Do you know who?"

Teng blew an energetic swirl of smoke from between his teeth. "I always know everything," he said. "But this time, I was not there. Did you see them?"

"No."

"Exactly," said Teng. "That is why you must use caution toward General Huang. You must be definitely certain of your rearguard. Quinto has already told me. You must learn the meaning of the code on the Mexican dollar. You must be sure of why Shchegolkov came here. The message from the Japanese plane must be understood. These things harbor danger for you."

Courtland followed the workings of Teng Fa's mind and felt a livening admiration. Like a *ma jong* expert who plays his pieces with amazing speed and bewildering intricacy, the young secret service agent shifted from one problem to another.

"The message concerning the swallows and Huang, where did it fall?" Teng now asked.

"Beside the outer gate."

"But it could have been aimed for the first courtyard which is large?"

"Yes."

Teng went to the door, flipped his cigarette outside and returned. Cold sunny air followed him. He looked at Courtland again.

"Quite clever," he said. "The first bombings were but to frighten people. It was known that there was dynamite in the courtyard so no one would remain there. The Japanese flyers then returned, ten minutes later to bomb the courtyard. The first bombing and strafing was to cause confusion, to give their friend, below, time to find the message. The second bombing was to destroy or cover the message in case their friend did not find it."

The logic was satisfactory and Courtland completed it. He said, "Ferdinand Yin, Miss Reed, myself, were there in the ten minutes. Perhaps Shchegolkov should have been?"

"The distance in the message is valuable," said Teng. "Do you know what is seven hundred *li?*"

Courtland shook his head. He watched the Chinese flip open a neat metal cigarette case and select a fresh cigarette.

"Taiyuanfu is seven hundred *li* from

Pao-lai by railroad. Taiyuanfu is a main Invader base. You see, I know everything," said Teng. He lit his cigarette and began pacing the room again. "Quinto tells me he returned the brass part of the Mexican dollar to you. The code has not been solved. You will let me see it."

"Sure." He put aside his tea bowl and reached for his jacket. He felt in the pocket. "It's gone," he answered quickly.

All at once his eyes and senses became aware of small changes. He had dropped the coat carelessly on the *k'ang* the night before. Now, it had been neatly folded.

"Your passport?" Teng asked.

"That's still here."

"Visitors," said Teng. "Door locks in China are not always good." He apparently accepted the bad turn of events as inevitable for a moment later a loud, perturbed early morning belch sounded in the enclosed garden and Teng's dancing eyes brightened. Then Quinto knocked and entered.

The Mexican was plainly disturbed. His smudgy eyes shot suspiciously toward Courtland, but then he sighed, perhaps giving up the thought that troubled him. He sat upon the *k'ang* and slipped a full persimmon into his mouth.

"Who was on guard last night?" Courtland demanded.

Quinto's cheeks bulged and his brows pinched downward questioningly.

"The three-piece dollar was stolen. The core."

Quinto gulped enormously and a little persimmon juice bubbled angrily upon his lips. He slapped one hand on his knee, and with his mouth half cleared, spoke sharply.

"The dollar—that is nothing. Shchegolkov is gone!"

"Gone?" Courtland stared at the Mexican. He knew that his mouth hung half open and that it was a foolish expression.

"He has been stolen," Quinto answered. "And you worry about a dollar. What is that compared to a body with mysterious teeth?"

"Have you searched?" Teng Fa asked.

"*Sí, hombre.* We are always searching. Even now. We have searched the house, the city. Company Three and the *guerilleros* are searching the only possible place left. He is looking in the graveyard. One can hide a body there so that no one will notice it."

Teng Fa walked a little circle in the room, following a patch of filtered sunlight that spread upon the floor. He glanced obliquely at Quinto, as though surprised that the Mexican had thought of the graveyard.

Quinto continued speaking, much as though he were clearing his own thoughts.

"Señora Chom Doy who sleeps near the outer courtyard reports that there was much movement in the night. Señor Yin has moved out. He was very angry last night and he has taken quarters in the town Guest House. A little later, Señorita Reed tried to leave. Chom Doy stopped her."

"Where is the American girl now?" Teng Fa asked.

COURTLAND'S pulse missed a beat for he saw Teng Fa's brown face brighten dangerously. He knew now that the effects of Marta Reed's attitudes and actions toward him were piling up and making cross-purposes and judgments within him. He was beginning to have a theory about this girl, but only time and the right instant would bring it into the clear. And he would also need to consciously ally himself with Quinto and Teng Fa, against her. He was thinking now that he knew whom she reminded him of.

Then he heard Quinto saying:

"Señorita Reed has just gone into the city. Chom Doy is following her. She is very good."

He looked at Teng. A settled expression, a mask of untranslatable bronze, guarded the thoughts behind that Chinese face.

Quinto began to speak again, then he stopped for there was shouting in the courtyard. Then young Company Three burst

into the room with a bubbling eagerness. He halted abruptly, saluted three times, then overflowed with news.

"We have located foreign *ta pitzu,* exactly in the graveyard," he explained in Chinese. "Already possesses headstone."

Quinto was on his feet. "Headstone?" he said in amazement.

"Small boulder," Company Three answered. His glance wandered enviously to the medal of the *Million Elephants and White Parasol* on Teng Fa's coat.

"The teeth have not been taken out?" Quinto said.

"No. All the same as yesterday."

The Mexican nodded sagely. Looking at Courtland he said, "*Madre!* You will notice, it is a strange mind we are working against. A mind with its own private logic. You would bury someone, no? But if you murdered him, would you think of a gravestone?"

As though disinterested in any answer, the Mexican took young Company Three's arm, and Teng Fa's. He propelled them toward the door, murmuring, "We will look, eh?" At the door, he paused only long enough to call back over his shoulder, "Señor Courtland, you will go through the city and find the *señorita.* I have a question to ask."

CHAPTER XVII

TOP-SIDE HEAVEN PIDGIN MAN

MARTA REED'S quarters faced on the outer courtyard. The rooms had once housed the Manchu official's third concubine.

Courtland waited until the courtyard was deserted, then tried the door and found it unlocked.

He slipped inside, and facing the room, his body froze still. Marta Reed's traveling bag lay opened upon the floor, its contents stacked all around it, neatly folded. Mountain of Virtue knelt beside the bag with her back to the door.

He waited a few moments, absorbing the scene. Virtue had not heard him enter. Then he said:

"Hello, find anything?"

The Eurasian girl suddenly straightened. She glanced at him and at the door, widely surprised. Then her own usual sureness possessed her.

"Mr. Courtland," she smiled. "You didn't knock?"

He smiled at her, but his mouth was a little severe. "I don't suppose you did, either," he said.

The girl stood up and she was like something out of a Northern silk painting. Her wide dark almond-shaped eyes ran toward him with rebuke. It was the pictorial glance of a lady accosted by a clumsy lover.

"Have you come, expecting to find Miss Reed?" Virtue asked.

He shrugged. But he was never a man to let his eyes and mind lie idle. He looked at the open traveling bag at Virtue's feet and saw how neatly the clothing had been folded. It reminded him of the condition of his jacket this morning. In the case, he saw an array of pale green jade objects, figurines and pendants.

Suddenly Virtue was holding her open hand toward him. In the small cupped palm he spied the brass core of the Mexican dollar.

"You lost it, Mr. Courtland. Did you lose it here?" she asked.

He nodded toward the leather traveling bag. "In there?" he asked.

"Yes," replied Virtue. "She must have wanted it very bad to pay a man's price for it?"

He gave her a queer look. He could feel her closeness now, and the direct and personal invitation of her eyes. Her mouth was parted in soft humor that brought a dangerous stirring within him. For the moment, he was tempted, then drawn to kiss her lips. When it had passed, he could not place his mind upon the reasons for that sudden act; somewhere, it was rooted in the trouble with Marta Reed. He had

felt that the instant he had touched Virtue's lips.

Virtue was now smiling at him slyly, but there was also an air of disappointment in her glance. It was as though, in that single moment, she had read what lay behind his emotions.

"The American girl is a clever girl," she observed, still watching him with those disturbing eyes.

He smiled inwardly. "And so are you," he thought. He was surer of himself now.

"I can tell you a secret," Virtue added.

"Yes?"

"She is a jade collector. You were in doubt, I think." The Eurasian girl knelt again beside the traveling case. She selected a round jade pendant with a dragon carved in relief. "Miss Reed does not pretend. This one is most perfect. It is boldly carved."

VIRTUE handed him the piece. He weighed it for a second, his senses reaching back, being as they had been months ago. The pendant had all the fluent lines and delusive softness of hard jade. A late Ming piece, he judged. The most perfect jade in China.

Taking the jade back, Virtue held it to the window light. A faint, polished smile crossed her lips. "It has all the qualities," she murmured. "It has *jên, yi, yung, tsi* and *chieh*—the qualities of qualities of kindliness, understanding, bravery, intelligence and purity. Jades are a rich man's toys, a poor man's labor."

She placed the jade back in its wrapping gently. "Miss Reed does not merely collect fine jades," she added. "Miss Reed understands them in the manner of the Orient."

He smiled, doubtful.

"No, Mr. Courtland. Do not smile. You collect such things for good carving, for age or for their rareness. But you do not know jades. You do not value the stone for its five qualities. Miss Reed does."

"Then she's not a professional collector," he said. "She claims that she is."

Virtue turned her face fully toward him, looking up. Her stare was as it had been before. "Perhaps not," she answered slowly. "Remember, her family is very wealthy. And she has other qualities. There were so many big men in Shanghai who would put up a price for Miss Reed, or even for a fraction of interest from her. She is not absolutely pretty, but she has a personality. That is something rare among foreign women in China."

He tried to picture Marta Reed in Shanghai. It was hard to picture her without her boots and slacks and corduroy jacket and loose flung yellow hair. Somehow, his thoughts turned to the missionary who had condemned the rich men's concubines in Shanghai. The missionary troubled him and he questioned Virtue pointedly.

Her answer surprised him.

"Oh, yes, we have one," she replied.

"But why the secrecy?"

"It has changed now," she said. "Yesterday we were not certain if you would remain in Wutai. But the war has enlarged and you cannot leave. You are one of us."

"Who is he?"

"Gimiendo must tell you," Virtue replied. "The missionary's name is something we never mention."

Suddenly the girl tilted her head to one side, listening. He heard it then—the drone of planes. A second later the air-raid gong on the drum tower reverberated over the city. He felt the quick tightening within and the raw hunger of startled nerves.

Virtue calmly replaced Marta's things in the traveling case and shut it. Then she rose and went to the door, standing beside Courtland.

"They seldom raid in daylight," she said, stepping into the clear cold sunlight flooding the courtyard. "They will probably pass over us and raid Ning-wu. Some

partisans from that direction are fighting at a puppet arsenal. While Teng Fa was in the territory he arranged that the arsenal make bullets to fit the size of our rifles. Our people are now collecting the bullets and there is probably fighting."

The drone of the planes grew in sharpness and the sounds could be differentiated.

"One is a Mitsubishi," announced Virtue. "The motor is quite lazy."

Courtland looked quickly to his watch, then to the sky. It was nine-thirty. The sky was swept clean of the early morning mountain mists. There was only the sun, and the sound, and a gleaming white cloud pillar. Then he saw the planes as they swung lazily above the south corner of the Wutai Valley. There were two; the ungainly Mitsubishi, and another smaller pursuit ship. The big plane, with its visible red discs splotching the amber fuselage, rode high and level, apart from the quick-tempered little escort plane.

"The little one is Nakajima 97," said Virtue. "It carries several machine-guns and dual-carburetors. But it is not fast. It will do three hundred and sixty kilometers. I find them very hard to handle."

He looked at her oddly, wondering whether he had heard correctly. She had slipped from scholarly opinions on jade to the intricacies of aeronautical mechanics as though each were interrelated.

"You find them hard to handle?" he said.

"I stole one, once."

A note of admiration entered his voice. He asked, "You fly, too?"

"Oh, yes," she replied indifferently. "I stole the Nakajima in Nanking after the Japanese had occupied the city. It was necessary. The Republican Aviation School had just graduated a class and we did not have enough planes. Madame Chiang Kai-shek asked that we buy an extra plane from America. But America was very busy selling its airplanes to Japanese flyers at that time. So I stole one from the Japanese.

He flashed a doubtful glance at her and saw that she watched the planes with a familiar calmness. She was, indeed, a fragile but durable adventuress. His glance stole cautiously toward the dynamite cases in the courtyard. They had not been moved.

"They may circle the Valley once," Virtue observed. "Then they will go on. If you go to the South Gate you can watch the anti-aircraft cannon fire. I must remain here."

A CROWD had already gathered at the great South Gate when Courtland arrived there alone. The people about the gate jostled each other and shouted back and forth noisily in a dozen dialects. Upturned, excited faces watched the swing of the two planes. The little Nakajima 97 had come close over the city.

On the city wall five men operated a small cannon: an Oerlikon, 20-mm. automatic, Courtland decided. Four shells were fired in quick succession and their arc went quite wide of the Nakajima. The gunners stopped firing and consulted.

Suddenly the crowd began to cheer. The Nakajima changed its mind about looking at Wutai and made off hastily after the lumbering bomber. A youngster near Courtland argued with a wizened old man who complained about the effectiveness of the cannon.

He heard the boy say, "You see, old one, the cannon has its value. The Invader is afraid some day we will lose our tempers and shoot the fifth shell." The crowd slowly melted away, flowing back through the streets of the town. He remained at the gate a moment, hoping to see Marta Reed among the people, but there was no sign of her.

After a few minutes he drifted with the crowd, slowly heading back into the city. He came to the house next to the Manchu House and stared at the bomb damage of the night before. The building had lost one corner and a section of roof. The

gaping corner faced the street like a yawning mouth. He thought again of the dynamite cases in the courtyard of Quinto's *yamen* and shook his head. That had been awfully close.

He went on, feeling and breathing the colorful flow of life along the street. An old woman passed by, arguing insistently, but one-sidedly with a hairy pig. A barber, with his chair on his back, went along, plucking a long dying note from a thin metal triangle he carried. The musical triangle served as his striped pole, the symbol of his trade. The movement of people threaded through the streets, voices, sounds, new accents piling one upon the other gathered to make a picture of China that was as old as man, and as new.

A short distance up the street he heard a door suddenly open and a voice call him.

"Ah," Mr. Courtland."

He pivoted expectantly, then suddenly blinked. The missionary who had stopped him beyond the walls of Wutai the previous afternoon hurried toward him. That tall, gaunt man had eyes that were now alive with good humor. As he came he buttoned on his Roman collar.

"I'm so glad you're about," the missionary spoke again, grasping Courtland's hand warmly. "I'm Doctor Fitch."

"Fitch?" Courtland lost the smile on his face for a moment. The man's cordiality seemed too sudden and full.

The missionary's prim mouth cracked into a thrifty smile to match the humor of his eyes. "This way, Mr. Courtland," he said. His arm was about Courtland's shoulders, leading and urging him into the small house he had just come from.

They passed quickly through a small, deserted courtyard to a room that was tiny and plain.

"Use the bed, please. It is quite comfortable." Doctor Fitch gestured toward a Grand Rapids In-a-Door bed which was pulled down for use. It was covered with a stuffy mattress that crackled with the sound of *kaoliang* leaves.

Courtland surveyed the room quickly. It had a New England plainness, except for a few touches. A dwarf plum tree grew in a pot near the door. A glass bowl, beside the bed, contained vermilion tropical fish with filmy fins and quadrupled tails that looked like clouds tinted by red sunset. Opposite the bed there was a bookcase holding a few tattered volumes. Beside it a gun rack with standing rifles.

His attention turned to Doctor Fitch, who sat on a stool facing him. The prim missionary's collar was still soiled, much as is a soldier's uniform after hard campaigning.

"Well?" Courtland asked.

Doctor Fitch looked startled, then severe. "Why are you in Occupied China?" he asked. "I have not had the opportunity of speaking with Quinto yet."

A FAINT, guarded look remained on Courtland's face. He had suspected all along that the missionary might be one of Quinto's aides, but he was still puzzled by the Mexican's secretiveness concerning Doctor Fitch. He answered:

"That's my business." Then he smiled slightly. "If Quinto hasn't told you, why should I?"

"You are not against us?" Fitch demanded.

"Against who?"

The old primness returned in the missionary's mouth and his jaw grew grim. "Against God and China," he said flatly.

Courtland shook his head and grinned. Doctor Fitch's eyes still held him. They were fierce, splendid eyes, the eyes of a warrior. The American wondered what the Roman collar was doing on the man. "America is at war with Japan," he said. "Naturally, I'm China's ally."

That apparently satisfied Fitch.

"Will you remain in Wutai, or endeavor to reach the Outside?" the missionary inquired.

"I don't know yet."

Doctor Fitch produced a sealed envel-

ope. "If you go Outside, will you see that this letter is posted to America? To Boston."

"What is it?"

"A letter to my Mission Board, in Boston," Doctor Fitch explained. Then he added hastily, "It is simply a request that the Board send these Garand rifles to China instead of the usual allotment of Bibles. They are quite good, I understand. Garands. Do you know them? How is their action?"

Courtland smiled and took the letter. He folded it carefully, then gazed at the other with a steady, clear curiosity. He asked:

"Why has Quinto been covering you up? I saw you on the train, but he wouldn't admit it. You stopped me from leaving for Pao-lai and Quinto never once mentioned it. But Virtue finally admitted you exist. That, this morning."

Fitch seemed pleased to hear this. "It is nothing," he said, and the tone of his voice had a dry, deliberate crackle to it. "I once taught at Yenshang University in Peiping. Later, I had my own Mission School in the Western Hills. It was not very successful. The Chinese head is hard if you attempt making a religious dent in it as I tried. But I learned a way."

"What has that got to do with Quinto's silence?"

"Oh, it has," Fitch went on, undisturbed by the interruption. "You see, I had become tired of Japanese interference at my school. One day I decided to put up a show of resistance. Some small thing, you know. But a few hours later I found that I had a new parish of three hundred farmers at my door. They liked the idea of resistance. It took all afternoon, and into the morning, to baptize them. Since then I've been the—er—pastor of a guerrilla band."

"The pastor!" Courtland laughed, pleased.

"A most invigorating experience," Fitch nodded. "We acquired skill and were known as the Christian Bandits to the Japanese. To them everyone is a bandit. But, of course, the Japanese never learned that I was the leader. Since I am an American, and a missionary, I was permitted to travel widely within the Invaded Areas. Naturally, I gathered much useful information for the Border Government. Of course, Quinto refused to give you my name. But now that you and I are in the war—er—officially, it no longer matters."

"Then you knew Teng Fa?"

"Certainly, and I was surprised to find him on the train."

"Surprised?"

FITCH shrugged. "I had been in Peiping and Chengting had not heard he was in the region. I had been endeavoring to learn why Huang, that is, General Huang of Pao-lai, was dickering with the Japanese."

Courtland stiffened. "You find anything?"

"A little. But it's for Captain Quinto."

The American looked away from the lean missionary, thinking back across the space of hours, bringing small signs and sights back into the focus of his thoughts. He began to see the parts clearly now. He remembered the windswept station at Lukouchiao and the Japanese Major speaking to Marta Reed. *So, tell Huang so*— He looked at the missionary again and said: "Who was Major Tanaka?"

"Tanaka?" Fitch seemed surprised that he did not know. "Tanaka. A Japanese Army Special Service Corps man. Very dangerous. He was expected to dicker with Huang. For what we do not know."

Courtland nodded and he began fitting his picture together. He said, "So the train was stopped and Tanaka shot. Quinto figured the American girl, Miss Reed, would be frightened into talking. Might explain the Tanaka business. Well, I'm afraid she did not."

Fitch's thin mouth drew in, straight and rigid. "She is a traitor!" He expressed

himself bluntly and without qualification.

A long drawn out pause followed. For an instant Courtland could sense the missionary's intemperate mood; the righteous anger against Marta Reed. It was that strange, passionate, part-religious blending of Fitch's character with the Chinese struggle that puzzled him. It did not quite fit the picture in his mind.

He rose and went toward the gun rack for a moment, examining the rifles with interest. They were well oiled and cared for. Suddenly he faced the missionary.

He said:

"What kind of Bibles did you distribute?"

"New Testaments," Fitch answered.

"Bi-lingual? English-Chinese?"

Fitch nodded his long head.

The American stared at the missionary now, watching keenly for every change of expression, and he said, "Are you in the habit of leaving them in dead men's hands?"

Fitch's eyes widened, bewildered. "I'm sorry, I don't follow you," he said.

"The Russian, Shchegolkov, was found dead with a Bible in his hand."

"Oh!" Fitch's lips abruptly crimped. "I'm afraid if he had a Bible, it was a mistake. He was Russian, wasn't he?"

Courtland now stared, still more puzzled. "Your Bible," he said abruptly. "The one you were reading on the train."

"Ah," Fitch smiled. "That was careless of me, wasn't it? I had searched your things for Quinto when they were first brought up from the train. I imagine I must have forgotten it among those books Virtue brought in. You don't mind that I searched your things, do you?"

CHAPTER XVIII

JADE ROUTE

IN DOCTOR FITCH, Courtland had found a man who was both delightful and startling. By noon they had become fast friends. They lunched together. It was nearly two o'clock in the afternoon when he and the missionary returned together to Quinto's quarters. There they found alarming developments.

A crowd had gathered in the courtyard of the Manchu House and the anger of the people showed. Here and there the savage flare of a voice rose above the general hum of activity. Courtland heard someone swear eloquently against the Japanese and he felt the air of violence building up. In one corner of the courtyard he saw guerrillas digging their arms up to the elbows in sacks, and withdrawing them, fists bristling with cartridges. Young Company Three was sorting grenades while Chom Doy stood to one side, watching enviously. He looked for Marta Reed but did not see her in the crowded yard.

He and Fitch went on, through the kitchen house to Quinto's personal quarters. The place was jammed with people who crowded around the Mexican *k'ang*, murmuring over an old man who rested there. The man wore the clothes of a farmer and his head was bandaged. Blood had soaked through, splotching the whiteness.

"Ah, Señor Courtland."

Quinto emerged from the group of townsmen. He looked severe.

"What's wrong?" Courtland asked.

The Mexican jerked his head toward the *k'ang*. "An atrocity," he said. "The Old One has just been brought in from Taipu. It is a village seventy *li* beyond Taiyuanfu, on the route to Free China. The Invader burned the village, and murdered almost everyone. They have arrested one citizen, the village jade merchant and they take him to Taiyuanfu for questioning. Only the Old One escaped. But his head was bayoneted."

One of the villagers turned to Quinto.

"That is the way of the Invader," he interrupted. "I saw them smash a baby once. They smashed it on rocks like an egg."

Courtland stared at the villager and read

the intense hatred building within the man. His own features were set and he felt his own cold anger rise to equal the villager's. He remembered what he had seen in Shanghai when the Japanese had attacked. And he knew that in Manila people would now feel this way too.

He spoke slowly, answering the villager.

"There will be Japanese smashed also."

"But not babies," Quinto interrupted. "Babies are dangerous to handle."

Then the Mexican noticed Doctor Fitch. His brown features brightened pleasantly and he jerked his head toward the door.

"Venga," he said. "I have orders for you. You will come too, Señor Courtland."

THEY went into the enclosed garden. Here, the sun cast a pleasant, diffused yellow light through the wide, oil-paper windows. The scent of asters was heavy in the air. Courtland glanced across to the room which Shchegolkov had occupied. Then he looked at Doctor Fitch, searchingly.

The missionary stood with his back toward the room.

Quinto looked at Courtland, but with an air of tolerance. "Doctor Fitch has given you a letter, no?" he asked.

Courtland looked surprised, but said nothing.

"You will tear it up, please," Quinto continued. "If, when we are through with Huang, you should ever succeed in reaching Free China or the Outside, that letter would be quite dangerous. Dangerous for Doctor Fitch. The Señor Doctor is somewhat zealous and a little thoughtless. If his Mission Board receives the letter they might not understand, *comprende?* I am afraid that they would ask him to leave China. Doctor Fitch is too good a warrior to be released."

The Mexican turned to the missionary now. "Señor Doctor Fitch," he said, "you will take a small body of your men and watch the Chengtai Railway where it makes the junction with the Pao-lai spur, eh? You will watch for Swallows."

Courtland looked sharply at Quinto.

"Swallows?" he asked.

"Si, hombre, Teng Fa has a suspicion. The Japanese have a battalion in Tai-yuanfu called the Swallow Battalion. It would take them fifty hours to reach Pao-lai. That is the message from the Japanese plane. Perhaps the Invader is moving, *quien sabe?"*

Quinto turned again to Fitch. "What information did you find about Huang?" he asked.

"Plain rumors," Doctor Fitch replied. "Some say that he is dickering over jades which he stole from the Western Emperors' tombs at Miaofeng. But Huang has also been hiring jade craftsmen and carvers from Jade Street in Peiping. There are at least twenty of them in Pao-lai, and more coming."

"The dickering is silly," Quinto sighed. "The tiger does not dicker with the jackal."

Courtland no longer listened. His pulse had quickened at the mention of the jade carvers, and thoughts slipped through his mind, taking shape and order, finding logical slots. He stood there, making his thoughts so they had to be right, fitting each piece as it belonged; and when he was quite sure he knew there could be no other answer. Malone's suspicions, back there in Manila, had been correct.

He asked Quinto:

"How long has Huang been collecting jades?"

"Many years, very many," Quinto replied.

He nodded, completely satisfied. Another link had slipped into place, making the puzzle almost clear and whole.

He said:

"I'll tell you why the Japanese are moving. Huang has been a jade collector for years. He is acquainted with the jade men and merchants in all the villages from here to the Yellow River. He would be, if he

has collected that long. Very well, Huang hires craftsmen to hollow out old jades, to fake new antiques. He fills them with heroin he gets from the Japanese on consignment. Meanwhile, he has contacted his old friends, merchants in various villages between here and Sianfu or other points across the battle lines. You know, jade men form almost a secret society of their own. Huang has the stuff passed from village to village, from dealer to dealer, until it crosses into Republican territory. Probably no man goes farther than the next village. They avoid suspicion that way. As a result, I imagine, neither the Chinese Republicans, nor the Japanese police on this side know who is passing the stuff on. It's Huang's little secret. And his talking point."

Quinto's thick mouth dropped open. "*Hola,* you have been thinking," he said it, almost as though it were unfair.

Courtland did not answer. He was too clear and sure of his ideas to want interruptions. Instead, he went on with the idea, saying:

"I'm sure the Japanese do not know the route. It wasn't necessary, as long as they had a market for the heroin. But with America in the war now, and the possibility of much closer co-operation between my country and China, the Japanese are going to pay closer attention to small details."

He nodded his head toward Quinto's quarters, continuing, "The Japanese raided the Old One's village and captured the jade merchant. They're trying to find the route. It is possible they're also moving in on Huang at Pao-lai. They may want to eliminate him as middle-man because there is too much danger of guerrillas killing Huang, or of him fleeing China. That is the most likely reason for Huang's dickering. But I think he's afraid of the Japanese and refuses to sell his secret."

He smiled, waiting for the Mexican's reaction. Quinto had folded himself a cigarette paper and was lining the crease with shaggy yellow Fup'ing tobacco. Then the Mexican looked up, a vague doubt visible in his smudgy eyes.

"*Puede ser,* it can be," he said. "But there is one thing which worries me, eh? Heroin is not the most important thing to the Japanese. They can easily start a new smuggling route in one or two months, no? Then why do they make this route of Huang's so important?"

"It is important. Heroin is money."

"*Si,* but I am one who thinks—ah—"

The Mexican suddenly paused in midspeech. His rounded glance went to the doorway of his quarters as Mountain of Virtue came into the garden. He gulped in a deep breath and looked apologetically at Courtland, saying, "When I have not seen her for a few hours she always does this to me. It is like fleas inside my stomach, biting hard. You feel it, eh?"

Courtland looked at the Mexican quickly, certain that the comment was pointed. Then he looked at Virtue, but always conscious of guarding his feelings toward her.

"Doctor Fitch," Virtue nodded politely for the missionary. She wore her winter jacket and the green cotton trousers women wore in the Hopei province. She smiled at Courtland in her dazzling way and he felt that there was an inheld satisfaction in that smile.

"Your American friend is gone," she said, addressing him.

"The *señorita?*" Quinto questioned sharply.

Virtue gave a slight nod. "She has escaped to Pao-lai."

"The road guards will stop her," said Quinto.

"Possibly not," Virtue replied smoothly. "She carries high credentials—the *pitan* egg."

Quinto abruptly exploded.

"*Cag'n Dios,*" he raised his voice. "She is a thief, eh?" Then, all at once his anger simmered down, the look in his smudgy eyes changed and he stared at Virtue. "Ah, again, I understand, yes?"

Mountain of Virtue reddened slightly. She had the embarrassed airs of a lady who has got down to her petticoats and has no more secrets from the world, and is yet quite sure of herself.

"I lent Miss Reed the combination of the safe," she admitted.

"You lent it out, eh?" Quinto snapped.

"Naturally. But Miss Reed lent me a secret in return."

Quinto's expression filled with dismay. "You lend a *pitan* egg for a little secret?" he muttered. "That is a woman for you. I have seen men risk a life for a small bottle of whiskey, but I have never seen a man who will loan me his locomotive for a bottle of whiskey. One must have a *pitan* egg for that."

"It is a very valuable secret," Virtue explained, her glance shading toward Courtland also. "The secret of the Mexican dollar."

Courtland gave her a swift, searching glance. "The three-piece dollar?"

Virtue smiled. "You remember, I told you that Miss Reed's mind thinks in Chinese," she said. "Miss Reed also thinks in Japanese. She is able to think in Chinese in the manner Japanese think in Chinese. She understood the code on the dollar. She gave it to me because she is in love with you, Mr. Courtland. She asked me to warn you not to go to Pao-lai."

THE American stared at Virtue without saying anything. For a moment the sureness of his attitude and thoughts vanished. He could see the expectancy and hope in Virtue's direct, personal gaze; and her moment of unguardedness brought conflict between his thoughts of her and Marta Reed.

But Quinto was impatient. "Come *chiquitica,* you will explain," he said.

"There is no code," Virtue replied. "The dot and dash symbols have a new meaning only because they are not in their right order. But the interpretation of the meaning is in the proverb."

She brought the brass-core of the Mexican dollar from her jacket pocket and read the proverb aloud—*"A flaw in jade can be ground away; for flaw in speech, nothing can be done."* She looked at Courtland, adding, "The Japanese Special Service Corps gave you this?"

He nodded. "In Peiping."

Virtue continued speaking as though she already knew that, and much more. He realized that her question had been rhetorical.

"They gave this dollar to you, Mr. Courtland," she said, "because a flaw in speech had been committed. Perhaps you have overhead the flaw, or made it yourself. Such a flaw in speech can only be ground away by death. Yours, Mr. Courtland. The broken order of the *Yin* and *Yang* symbols mean that this must happen to the order in your life."

"Quite Japanese," he murmured, while inwardly his mind reacted in a cool, thinned down manner. He realized that this was Marta Reed's interpretation of the coin. A good one, too. And again, the reflections made a clear pattern. Marta had stolen the coin from his room.

"You carried your own death sentence," said Virtue.

"I am curious about this flaw in speech?" Quinto put in.

Courtland gave a short, humorless laugh and looked at the huge, puzzled Mexican. "I'm not," he answered. "They don't want me to see Huang."

But he saw it more clearly than this. He was now quite sure that the Japanese suspected him of being an American agent.

The suspicion may have only been slight, but it could be there. If they had not been certain, then he could understand why they had not stopped him immediately. During the past weeks, while they feverishly prepared for the surprise attack on Manila and Pearl Harbor, they could not have taken the risk of causing an international incident by murdering him in Peiping or Tientsin. Too many foreign journalists, too many friends would hear of it. But here, in the Northwest, it did not matter. General Huang was a puppet. Doubtlessly he would have, and still would follow out the orders on the brass-core.

A single doubt still broke through the certainty of Courtland's thoughts. He wondered why Shchegolkov had not murdered him in Sianfu, or even a little later. They had killed Jefferson. There would have been no suspicion of the Japanese if it had happened in Free-China.

Virtue's voice interrupted his thoughts.

"I think Mr. Courtland has something more to tell about the flaw in speech," she said.

He looked at her quickly.

"Another reason why the Japanese may want him to die," she added.

Quinto glanced at the girl. *"Chica,"* he said.

"Mr. Courtland is an agent for the American government, I think," said Virtue.

COURTLAND looked at her in utter surprise. He also saw the sudden expression of bewilderment on Quinto's features. There was no great point in lying now. He knew where Quinto stood. He nodded slowly.

"You are sure, *chica?*" Quinto asked.

The girl smiled. "I have suspected it. I think I am sure. Mr. Courtland is not a polished agent, like Teng Fa. I think he is an apprentice. It shows."

Quinto sighed and grinned at Courtland. *"Hola,* that is a burro of many different colors."

Courtland sensed the sudden, and full change of relationships between himself, Virtue and the Mexican. It was like walking on completely solid ground. When he spoke again, his voice was backed by new decisions which had quickly formed in his mind. There was a deliberate sureness in his voice.

He said:

"Now that that is settled, I want the Mexican dollar soldered together, as it was when I brought it."

Both Quinto and Mountain of Virtue looked at him in surprise. Doctor Fitch had returned into Quinto's *yamen.*

"Qué pasa?" Quinto queried.

"I'm going down to Pao-lai," he said. "I'm presenting the dollar to the merchant, Chang. I think it is time." The tenor of his voice was fixed, even and unchangeable. It betrayed an old attitude of mind; a desire to face trouble with trouble and be finished with it.

Quinto shook his head soberly, but there was a faint, pleased glint in his smudgy eyes. "It is dangerous," said the Mexican. "You are alone. What can a man do alone? You will give the coin, then be shot."

COURTLAND shrugged, knowing this well. "If I can put doubts in Huang's head, he may delay any execution," he said. "Delay it just enough to give me the time I need."

"The Invader will be approaching Pao-lai," Virtue suggested.

Courtland's mouth drew down, stubborn and set. "I'm not working alone," he said. "You're working with me. If Huang holds the key to the jade route and the Japanese are dickering with him, then he knows what importance they attach to it. The Japanese occupation-force had fifty hours from last night to reach Pao-lai. We have less time. I suggest we steal Huang."

Quinto's round face beamed. He nodded approvingly. "That is very difficult. It will be easier to shoot him."

"Perhaps," Courtland agreed, his

thoughts working ahead, fitting each possible step. "But my instructions are to find why the Japanese smuggled heroin through China to America, rather than along the shorter routes. And why they attach such importance to this particular route. After that, Huang—" He drew his finger across an imaginary throat. "I can at least get to Huang and work on the inside. You want Huang, too. Your men should attack from without. We'll coordinate it."

The Mexican hunched his shoulders and began pacing back and forth thoughtfully. He glanced at Virtue once and there seemed to be agreement between the two. Finally he faced Courtland.

"You will need protection in Pao-lai," he said.

"Only from the outside," Courtland replied.

"Ah, you do not know Huang. Tricky. You will need a bodyguard." The Mexican creased his brows hard, then looked up. "Señora Chom Doy will be your bodyguard," he murmured, as though this had solved everything.

CHAPTER XIX

PAO-LAI

LATE in the following afternoon, Courtland rode to within a mile of Pao-lai. Señora Chom Doy followed, bundled and uncertain of her seat, and then young Company Three. He pulled up on the heights above the village.

The hills before him fell steeply to the edge of the town made somber now by the promise of rain. Thin gray clouds clung to the edges of the low hills like great, diaphanous fungi, further magnifying the atmosphere of isolation below.

He shook his jacket loose and felt the cold that still ran through his body. In his mind, he put down the remembrance of the past night and morning; the bitter cold and the riding against snow in the windswept mountains. They had had to stop for warmth and food at the Eighth Route Army's *balu chün* or communication depot for Chom Doy's ear had frozen. And it had delayed them.

Company Three rode next to him and halted. He unwrapped a pair of binoculars and offered them. "It is a very young town," he commented. "It has no wall." The boy's face was stiff with a frozen smile.

At this distance, he could examine the life in the village below. Even now, vague fretful sounds rose in the gray chilly atmosphere. To the right, and behind the town, the American made out the slag heaps near the coal mines. The spur track of General Huang's railway issued to the South, linking the more leisurely slopes in that direction. Set somewhat apart from the village was General Huang's compound, a wall, a collection of one story villas and a garden.

He returned the glasses to the boy and glanced back at Chom Doy. The old woman was blue with cold, but courageous. And yet, he wondered why he had ever agreed that she should come. She sat there, holding a tightly rolled copy of the *Huang Ssa Chung Hua, Red China Daily News,* as though it were a baton with which to ward off danger.

Then he spoke to her in Chinese.

"When we reach the village, you will find me a room at the Guest House. Wait there."

He signaled Company Three to go ahead. The Mongol ponies moved jerkily, the crusted ice on their shaggy hides crackling. He felt the tension increase within him, slowly building forward toward an expectancy which he knew would reach its pitch in the next hours. There was nothing that could change now but the feelings within him. The movements and the danger to come, and he knew they would be there, were set and irrrevocable.

He held the memory of Marta Reed within the edge of his thoughts as he rode silently toward the town. He would see her again. Of that he was sure. And it

would be here that he would know for certain; the suspicion that he had might take sharp, abrupt shape. That would clear up Shchegolkov: everything but the teeth, he thought. As they rode into the town, his mind turned in upon the job he had to do.

A gray drizzling rain was falling. The afternoon's bleak light reflected upon puddles glazing the mud of the streets. The earth grew slippery underfoot. As they rode up the main street, Courtland was aware of eyes watching curiously from shuttered doorways. A wooly mountain dog barked furiously at the ponies.

Company Three stopped to make inquiries. He came back, saying, "Chang has jade shop on next street. Guest House on this street." He gestured further ahead.

Courtland nodded to Señora Chom Doy and the woman left them, going ahead alone. He followed Company Three toward the next street, meanwhile noting with satisfaction that darkness was rolling down the mountain slopes and into the village with suddenness. His feelings seemed, now, to stand apart from his thoughts.

Chang's curio shop had a large, drab, soaked pennant hanging before the doorway. Chang's name was stitched on it. His glance quickly absorbed details; the direction of the street, the brown oil-paper window of the shop through which a faint orange glow filtered.

He slipped from the saddle. "Wait outside," he said, handing the reins to Company Three.

The shop door had wooden hinges that creaked as he entered. Inside, a candle flickered on the wooden counter running the length of the left wall. The shelves behind the counter were bare and dusty.

He paused, accustoming his eyes to the dark, brown heaviness of the shop. Then, at the far end of the shop, near a small door, he saw Chang the Dealer. The man sat on a platform, his legs doubled under him, his feet projecting and clothed in *tabi* or ankle high white sox. The *tabi* held his attention for a moment. They were Japanese.

"Mr. Chang?" he said.

The man rose and came forward. Courtland's quiet stare quickly measured him. He was middle-aged. He features were bronze and cut to the expression of a hawk. Half-Japanese, half-Chinese, Courtland thought. The man wore a black silk jacket and black cotton skirt.

"I am Chang," he said, bowing. "My shop is honored with your presence." He shot Courtland an inquisitive glance, perhaps surprised that a foreigner should be in Pao-lai. "Do you wish to study curios?" he asked.

"Perhaps."

"I have many, but not all superior as you are accustomed to buying in Peking." The curio-dealer inflected his words so that they made both statement and query.

Courtland let his glance run through the depth of the shop again. It paused on the doorway at the rear, then came forward. He noticed a thimble-size cage with a fighting cricket in it.

Chang bowed again and went behind his counter. He pulled a stack of red satin boxes from a drawer and began spreading them on the counter. "English?" he asked Courtland. At the same time, he exhibited a bronze fox-head.

Courtland shook his head and watched the dealer narrowly. The Japanese, he knew, liked fox-heads. "Jades," he said.

"Ayi," replied the dealer. He quickly brought forth a carved Buddha. "It is pleasant. Foreign-style people like piece."

"Inferior carving," Courtland answered. He was aware of the harder beat of the rain on the oil-paper window. A wind was blowing up. It chilled the shop.

The dealer seemed pleased that he had rejected the Buddha and Courtland smiled inwardly. This was an old game which went on endlessly; this feeling out of men over a counter. Chang now brought forth a mat of rich plum-colored silk which he spread on the counter. He went to the

rear of the shop and soon came back with a lettuce-green jade bowl that was splashed with darker emerald. He rubbed it first, bringing forth the glow, then set it on the mat.

"Ch'ien Lung carving," he said. "So very rare." His voice was almost a whisper.

"Is it priced?"

"There is no price. It is General Huang's cup."

The American's lids narrowed instantly and his expression was guarded as he glanced at the dealer. The other's features lay bland upon a brown, hawkish face. Then, quietly, and without saying a word, he took the Mexican dollar from his pocket and dropped it into the bowl. He wondered if the dealer was the first man in Huang's smuggling chain.

Mr. Chang's eyes flickered momentarily when he saw the *chop mark* on the coin. He immediately covered the bowl with his brown fingers. "The general is difficult to approach," he said.

"Tonight?"

The dealer shrugged. "I must consult go-between, please. Will you wait?" He drew the bowl to his body and hurried toward the door at the rear of the shop.

Courtland watched the man go and waited alertly, measuring his time. He knew that now he had paid for danger and it would be returned. He was making himself a target in Pao-lai and had only the night to shield himself with. He began making a picture of Huang in his mind; a picture of how Huang might act. Then he heard voices in the back room.

One was the dealer's. He recognized it. Suddenly he moved forward lightly, his mind and being brought up tautly by the familiarness of the second voice. He reached the platform where the dealer had first been, then stopped. Ferdinand Yin appeared at the rear doorway.

Yin looked at him, his cunning, black pincer-eyes snapping forth excitedly.

"So nice, Mr. Courtland. You stand still," he snapped.

The American's glance went down to Yin's hands. The Macanese held a revolver close to his body, in his curious way. In his other hand, he held the brass core of the three-dollar.

Then the curio-dealer said, "Honorable go-between." He went on to the counter, depositing the jade bowl on the silk mat.

Courtland stepped back slowly and Yin followed. They were both near the counter now. "You stop," Yin snapped.

Courtland halted again. The first wave of surprise at finding Ferdinand Yin here, instead of in Wutai, washed away. His feelings were now stripped down and cleanly cut; the thoughts in his mind were clear and singled out; and he could stand there, facing death with a strange ease. In this instant, he knew that it was not General Huang who had been ordered to liquidate him—it was Yin.

The points clicked together in his mind; the uncertainties taking logical and tangible shapes. He knew now that Yin was the Japanese agent. He recalled Yin's insistence on bargaining for the Mexican dollar; the swallow-message dropped from the plane over Wutai. Obviously, it was Yin's job to keep him from meeting General Huang.

"You make a bad mistake to visit Pao-lai," Ferdinand Yin grinned coldly.

"Naturally. I had misjudged you, Yin. I hadn't thought you were one of the little brown rats." The tenor of his voice was

filled with acid for he sensed, now that the Macanese was pleased that Japan should be fighting America.

YIN signaled the shop keeper to shut the door, for it had blown open a little. The sound of the rain outside was angry and gusty.

"In a little while, Japanese battalion will come to Pao-lai to settle unrest," Yin said. "Of course, you will be dead." The laugh he gave crackled.

"I'm the unrest?"

"Oh, no. Just a little," replied the Macanese. "The general is restless too. And also Mr. Quinto." Yin tightened his grip on his revolver.

"Mr. Yin, please!" The jade dealer, who had gone behind his counter gestured politely, and worriedly toward the curios on the counter.

Yin's beetle eyes flashed there, then he shifted his position slightly so that his shot, if it erred, would not injure the merchandise. Courtland smiled within himself. The Macanese was efficient and calculating, but was still a business man.

"Shut your eyes," Yin ordered.

Courtland shrugged. "What difference does it make?" he replied deliberately. Suddenly he noticed that Yin had forgotten to snick back the safety on his gun. The man was a fool, or could be utterly quick.

He watched the bland, set expression on Yin's face. It revealed a character which would neither mince words, nor waste bullets. Courtland had already set his own mind against the shock and his gray glance narrowly watched the cunning in Yin's eyes. The locked safety disturbed him. His thoughts worked with a suspended, hard coolness. He showed no feelings in his eye and nothing marred the smooth blankness of his rigid cheeks.

Then, with a deliberate abruptness, he turned his back on Yin. He listened for the soft snick of the gun's safety. It did not come. He glanced at Chang the Dealer and picked up the jade Ch'ien Lung bowl.

"Your price now?" he asked. His voice was steady and casual, carefully guarding all the alertness within him.

There was a sound at his back, like a quick drawn breath and he showed a momentary hardness. Then he smiled. He knew that Yin's mouth must have dropped open in astonishment. That was what he wanted, and had counted on. Within him, his nerves were drawn and alive across the frame of his body.

The curio-dealer showed utter surprise. His hawk glance shot toward Yin, then back. "Price?" he gulped and his eyes went fearfully to the priceless bowl.

"It is a very fine piece. It must have a price? And it should be matched with a Yung Chêng bowl." Courtland heard the outflow of Yin's breath behind him. His own flesh tightened coldly as the seconds split into hours.

"Yung Chêng—" The curio-dealer's brows lifted sharply. A flash of pleasure crossed his bronzed face. "It is not worthy a Yung Chêng," the dealer apologized.

"The carving is not worthy, but the stone itself is," the American replied. He kept his voice at the same level. He wondered how long he could keep this up. "What is the price? I will offer ten thousand *yuan*."

THE dealer seemed to forget Yin. "Ten thousand?" he breathed.

"I should think it is a good price."

"For such a piece?" the dealer shrugged. "How can you consider— Remember, I paid twelve thousand for it. You, please, put my profit to it."

Instead of answering, Courtland balanced the bowl in one hand and raised his arms a margin. His elbows were close to his side, taut. He was aware that Yin had moved closer and he felt a quick satisfaction. This was what he had wanted. It was what he had gambled on in reading Ferdinand Yin's character. His smile tightened.

He laid the bowl gently on the coun-

ter and said, "Your sacrifice is too honorable."

Suddenly he lashed out. Half-pivoting, and grabbing at the gun with one hand, he smashed his fist in Yin's face. The gun came away. He struck again and Yin's body seemed to lift up gently, then rock back, falling.

He stepped back. His countenance was fixed hard, with only the slight flare in his eyes showing his angry satisfaction. He covered Yin and the dealer with the gun. The latter was frightened.

"Hard bargain, wasn't it?" He threw the words down at Yin.

The Macanese sat up, both his hands planted flat upon the floor, bracing himself. He fixed Courtland with a bitter, infuriated stare. "No one escapes Paolai," he said. "You will die anyway."

The sound of rain from the street enlarged as the door blew open. Dampness swept in icily. The American whirled about, his back against the wall so that he could cover both the counter and the door. Then he saw Marta Reed.

THE girl paused at the door and her face was pale and wet as she quickly looked about. Then her eyes widened, seeing Ferdinand Yin struggle to his feet and observing the gun in Courtland's hand. A swift, momentary expression of relief showed in her eyes.

"You all right, Courtland?" she asked.

He covered the surprise that came into his eyes, but his attention remained on Yin.

"Don't shoot him," she said.

"Why not? He's with the Japanese."

"Please," she said, her tone urgent. "Let him go, but get out first. He's got men in the street, waiting. Please, Courtland."

He glanced at the jade merchant who was still behind the counter. The man was frightened. He relaxed slightly and looked at Marta.

"You get around," he said.

Her fingers dug into his arm. "Listen to me, Courtland. Get out now. There is no time."

He found the tone of her voice strange to his ear. For a few seconds, silence lay between them. He tried to make some sense of her sudden appearance. His attention also returned to Yin who remained fixed upon the floor, completely uncertain of his future. The curio-dealer had now recovered from his fright. He looked as though he had thought up another bargain.

"Come on," he said. He took Marta's arm, guiding her firmly toward the door.

As they paused in the street, feeling the direct, chilling onslaught of the rain beating against them in the darkness, he saw young Company Three holding the ponies.

"Bad sign," the boy shouted, gesturing toward something which lay hidden behind the screen of darkness that thickened and thinned with each assault of the driving rain and rising wind. "Min-t'uan soldiers there. Min-t'uan bad for China."

"Where?" he asked.

He could see nothing up the street. The town huddled beneath the fury of the elements. Water sluiced down roofs, hazed the lights and made the mud foam, ankle deep in the street. He had to shout against the rain and fury to make himself heard.

"Go ahead with the ponies," he ordered Company Three. "We'll follow."

The boy nodded and gave Marta Reed a curious glance. The girl reacted quickly. "Go on, Courtland. Go with him. Hurry," she said. Then she turned, to go back into the shop.

"Wait a minute," Courtland held her.

"What are you doing?" she said.

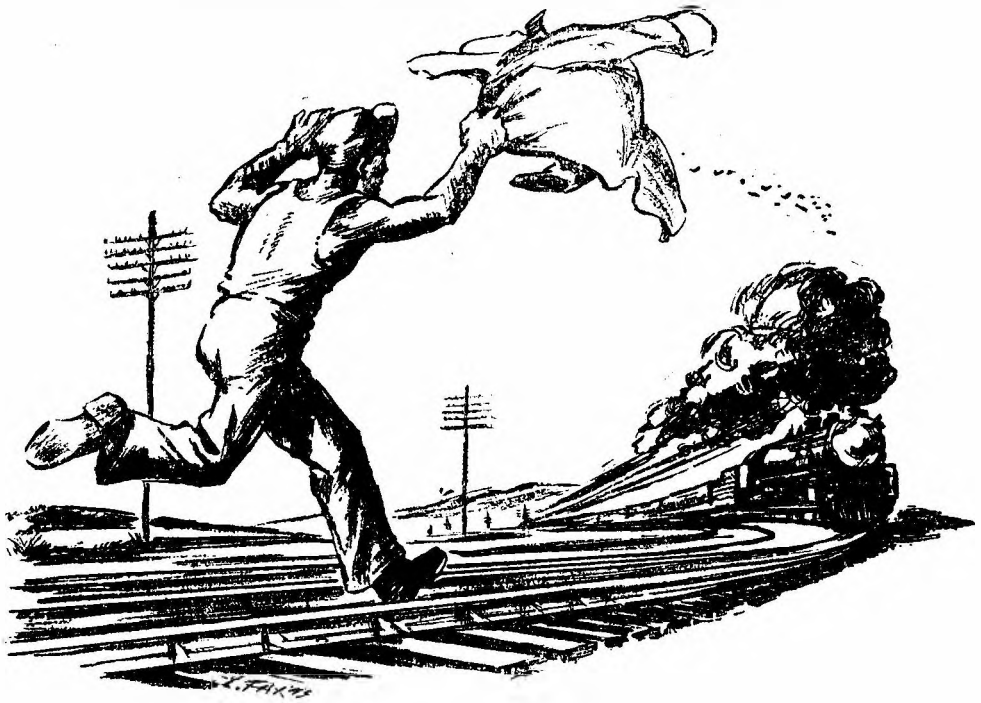
He still held her arm and he was very aware of her nearness and the conflicting emotions it made within him. She looked lovely, leaning here against the rain. Then he urged her along the street.

He said:

"You're going home, Marta."

(*To Be Concluded in the Next* SHORT STORIES)

Crime Doesn't Pay. . . . But What Does?



HANDMADE HERO

By LEE TILBURNE

I

I WON'T go so far as to say that Danny Kerney was a rat, but seeing as how I work for the same heel he used to, I guess I should be able to judge. I saw the whole thing from start to finish, except for the part he spent in jail. I didn't have to go there with him.

It all started about six months ago, when Danny, myself and another squirt that worked for the *Star,* which is owned by Boss Heally, who is a member of Congress as well as a big shot in our town, walked into the Golden Slipper Bar and Grill on Hanover Street. Danny wasn't a gentleman of the press like me, but he was the right hand man to the right hand man of Boss Heally. You know how it is. Boss Heally loved to see results, but didn't like to work for them, so he hires a man named Dawson, who runs the districts and cribs for him along the river. Plenty of votes come from there along with free drinks and a buck when you cast your vote in the right direction. Now Dawson couldn't have picked a better man than Kerney for his first lieutenant, to sort of hop around and make sure the votes got in, no matter how or why.

Just as long as Boss Heally was still elected, when the rush was over.

Dawson might have been Heally's man Friday, but Kerney was the whole week to Dawson. So now you can see why Danny Kerney got away with so much around town. That went for us gentlemen of the

press also. Anything Boss Healy had his finger in was safe in the town.

We all put in our orders for drinks and started to make a night of it, seeing as it was Saturday. Unfortunately we didn't get very far past the second bottle before someone yelled, "You lousy so and so." Then the fight was on. Danny was a big guy and loved fights, except when he was right in the middle of it. So he backs off with a beer mug and watched. Fists are flying thick, curses fill the air and Danny just holds that beer mug waiting for a chance to use it. Myself and side kick step back out of the line of fire and watch. We've seen this happen nearly every Saturday night and so get sort of used to it. A man reached back for his gun and with a quick throw Danny hits him on the head, the beer mug bouncing off and crashing into the bar mirror.

Before the glass has stopped tinkling, Danny is out the door and into the night. But the man on the floor was dead. Died from wounds inflicted on the head, the coroner said. Then before Danny can even draw a quick breath. the Criminal Court says "Guilty as charged," and they slap Danny Kerney with a twenty-one year sentence in the pen, at hard labor. Poor Danny, with his young-oldish face and thick head. He tried to sneer the whole thing off, but he didn't do so well. Twenty-one years is a long time.

Now this might have closed the whole affair including this story, but for one little matter. Boss Healy was due for a new election in November and he was hot on Dawson's ears, to make sure he would get elected again. Now Dawson knew he was like a man without his right arm, without Danny Kerney. Boy, he needed him worse than anything. All those lodging houses to look after, along the river and a proper delivery of a round and safe majority from the river wards and such items.

While this may all be thus euphemistically described in words, in plain deeds it was one hell of a job and needed the careful guiding hand of none other than Danny Kerney. So the putting away of Danny Kerney a few miles up the river at this time was most inopportune. This year too, the up-state liquor antis were threatening one tough battle. In other words the governor was going to try to clean up this part of the state, even if Danny had been out of prison, which he wasn't. A less stubborn man than Dawson would have cast about for a successor to the husky Kerney. Dawson, however, couldn't think of anything more expedient than the liberation of his strong-arm assistant. Now there were many things in the way. A man in prison, for murder, and a barroom one at that, wasn't exactly in good standing with the governor, who was so strong against liquor, he wouldn't even sniff a cork for stimulus. But Dawson knew in June that November was on the way with all of November's strenuous work to be done. Some way, he decided, Kerney must be set free for duty at the polls. So Dawson sat in his office, at the *Star,* the rag I work on as a reporter of crime, and chewed endless cigars trying to figure out a way to get Danny out.

TWO days later, Dawson, with a stubble on his chin and a victorious look in his haunted black eyes, dashed into Boss Healy's office. He's got it, he's got it. Bugs perhaps, the Boss wants to know. No, it's a way to get Danny Kerney out of prison and a good way to. It will help everyone, including Danny. Boss Healy nods to the crazy guy and asks what he wants in the way of help.

All Dawson wants is plenty of spread in the paper and the time of Miss Marvin, our sob-sister. And at this point, let me explain, that Miss Marvin is an ace at ringing doorbells and also wringing tears from the meanest man or woman. She does all the stories on firemen rescuing kittens out of trees and the Christmas Dinner at the orphan's home.. She ain't

a bad-looking gal, about thirty, with plenty of sense and is poor and believes in herself, which is more than I can say for any other sob-sister that I know. She sort of plays a big part in this picture, that's why I'm giving you the lowdown on the thing.

At any rate, Boss Healy gives Dawson as much rope as he wants to put this thing over. Only not to take too much or he might get tripped up and break his neck.

Dawson then walks out of the office, briskly, as one with business to do and on his way to do it. He didn't linger long, 'cause as I explained before Boss Healy don't care for the details, as long as he gets the right results.

Well, being a crime reporter, I get around a lot and if I say so myself I got a pretty good picture of what went on during the next week. If you had watched Dawson as closely as I did, you might have had reasons to say that he wasn't very idle. One of his frequent paths led into the front of a grocer's shop, just to the left of the Golden Slipper Bar and Grill. A guy with a good eye like mine would also notice that he never came out with any groceries. Dawson had a certain amount of Puritanism in him, that sort of kept him from going into the drinking joint at any time, so the place next door was just as good, seeing as there was a little back room in the shop, that could be entered either from the saloon or the grocer's shop.

A number of conferences took place in that dim little room in the alley. In that sheltered cubicle was a table, surrounded by a circle of odd-looking chairs. On the wall within easy reach was a button. Ranging about the walls were all kinds of pictures, from ladies in the flesh to prize fighters, and up the scale to famous race horses. In other words it was nothing but a back room, where the business of the Golden Slipper was transacted as well as the political side in the handling of the river wards of the fair city.

Into this retreat, one late afternoon at the end of this famous week of bustling about, wandered Maike Blannon, still bearing traces of grime of the engine cab. He seated himself at the table in the back room and ordered himself a beer. Taking out a pack of cards, he alone used, because they were filthy and dirty, he took up the time in playing the good old game of Canfield. He looked up as Dawson came in later and went right on counting his cards. They threw a greeting at each other. Dawson pressed the wall button and waited for his gingerale. He sometimes carried the pure side of it too far, seeing as how he was really a heel down inside of him. Gingerale was the strongest he would touch—in public. Dawson slipped into a chair and watched Maike cheat himself at Canfield. The formalities of the drink concluded, they start to get right down to the facts of the business. I wasn't in with them, but I can draw the picture from experience.

Maike Blannon held the throttle on the M. W. and K. Limited, the crack train of the division. He also held sway, as the kingpin among the rail workers on that line, therefore he was a power to be dealt with and used as part of Boss Healy's machine.

Without pulling any bones, 'cause Maike knew he would get a good cut from the Boss himself, he asked what Dawson wanted. Dawson being the guy he was laid his cards on the table, something like this:

"We got to get Danny Kerney out of the pen in time for election. Now look what I've got in mind. Dawson with a wet finger started to draw a rough sketch on the table top. It was a map of the river and the prison, with the railroad line that ran by it.

"The prison is three miles up that way and the tracks run along between it and the river like this, with a sharp turn toward the bluff, like this—don't they?" The engineer nodded his head and watched the fat wet finger at work.

Maike Bannon started to smile as the plan was unfolded bit by bit. Dawson went on to explain how Kerney was made a trusty and had been put on the outside of the wall, at the ice house. So that left plenty of room for Danny to move around in if anything should happen.

The two guys then put their heads together and before Dawson left he passed a wad of bills over to Blannon. Out went Dawson through the grocer's shop and into the street.

Maybe at this point things don't seem very clear, but they will when you see how it worked out. Somebody may think they were planning a jail break, but you know that wouldn't accomplish nothing. This was far better than a jail break. It was an honest way to cheat the law. You never heard of it, eh? Well, you will soon.

The next thing Dawson did was to take a trolley trip up to the prison, where Danny was working like a dog, at the ice house. Danny met Dawson on one side where an obliging guard, with extra cash in his pocket, let them alone. I know, for I followed the story for a real follow-up. Of course, I wasn't going to spill the beans or nothing, but I wanted the facts. I'm a crime reporter.

Danny's number was 1298, a very sweet number and fitting to Danny's personality. Being a dumb lug and with nothing on his mind, but how he was going to get out and who he was going to bust in the jaw next, he was very glad to see Dawson and listen to the plan.

So on the way back into town, Dawson stops off at the office of the *Star* and tells me, as if I didn't know something was up, not to forget to put a reporter on the train that is going up to the State prison tomorrow with all them kids.

Maybe you don't think kids had something to do with it? Well, every year they collect a lot of kids and take 'em up to prison and show them that crime doesn't pay. Then they take 'em home again. It's supposed to be very educational, but really the kids don't know what it's all about, but love the ride on the special train and the free lunch.

I asked him if he had anyone in mind. Yes, he did. He wanted to have Miss Marvin to cover the story, as she was such a good writer on that type of subject. I nods and he leaves and the smell he brought in with him lingers on.

So on the morrow, at two sharp, five hundred kids plus Miss Marvin get on the special train and with—I hope you note—Maike Blannon as engineer, the train pulls out of Union Station. The kids are yelling like a tribe of Sioux Indians and with it goes a stream of orange peel and apple cores, that have been left over from the free lunch. I stood in the train shed and watched them go. Dawson, for some reason, was also there. He waved very friendly to his pal, Blannon. The whistle blasted our ears and away went the mob. Crime doesn't pay, I thought, and wondered exactly what did pay. Leisurely, I went back to my desk in the office of the *Star*. To my surprise Dawson walked in and sat down by the City Editor's desk. He must be expecting something, for he keeps glancing at his watch. I'm all ears after that. The little drama is about to come to an end. I could feel it in my bones.

ABOUT ten minutes later the phone jumps around on the hook and the C. E. picks it up, lazy like. He comes to life, though in a couple of seconds. Dawson leans forward and so do I. The C. E. is leaning on a pencil copying down the facts of something or other. Finally he puts down the phone and wipes his forehead. "Listen to this," he says, "I just got this from the Marvin gal. She reports the following. 'Special train was coming around last bend before coming to prison station. Train was making thirty miles an hour. I got the rest of what happened from Engineer Maike Blannon!' The

C. E. smiled, as if it were a joke and continued. 'We were just slowing down for the curve for the station when a convict from the camp came running down the tracks waving his shirt. I applied the brakes, but it wasn't enough to stop from hitting him. The man, convict 1298, Danny Kerney, was hurt. The reason for his actions was a split rail just around the bend.' "

I let out a long sigh and went back to my desk. So Danny Kerney flagged a train full of kids, gets hurt and Dawson and Blannon had something to do with it. You can figure the set-up as easily as I can. Even a guy as thick as Danny Kerney could.

He sure did a swell job. Now he would be a hero. The results that would follow came to me even before they started to happen. What surprised me the most, of course is what really happened at the end. Maybe you think the Boss was defeated? Maybe you got the right idea, but that ain't the ending, that's just an effect or result of what came about.

As Miss Marvin flounced into the press-room, after coming back from the incident at the prison, I began to see more light. Why should Marvin cover the story? You'll find out.

The C. E. saw her and gave her the go ahead on the story. She was to put her all into it, by orders from Heally himself. She, believing in herself as well as her job, really laid it on thick. How should she know the whole thing was a phony? She didn't, I'll tell you that. Even up to this day she doesn't know what a dope she was.

TWO hours later Marvin has written up the whole story. With a tear in her baby blue eyes she takes the copy to the C. E. himself. He reads it and tells her to go home and get some rest. She don't want to do that. She wants to go to the prison hospital and have a heart-to-heart talk with convict 1298. For some reason, she wants to write his life story or something.

C. E. being a guy not fitted to argue with a polecat, says he don't care if she does. It should make a good story. Hero, hero is all I can think of every time I see Danny Kerney's palooka face in front of me. Boy how they spread it on. Front page stuff not only for us but the A. P. also. The whole country would hear about Danny Kerney, who killed a man with a beer mug and then rushed out and saved five hundred kids from being killed or hurt. "Rats," was all the stronger word I could muster for the occasion. Nevertheless with all this ballyhoo going on, I manage to piece the rest of the story together.

Miss Marvin hops the next trolley to the prison to see poor 1298. She gets there in a hurry and already there is a room full of flowers for the big mug. He just lays there with a bunch of bandage wrapped around him, so he looks like a dug-up mummy or something.

He's sort of laughing to himself over the whole thing. Him a hero after what he's been all his life. He is hurt a little though. Just enough to fool the sway-back bunch of doctors around the prison. Well, here he is looking pretty when this Marvin gal comes trotting in with her pencil and paper floating after her. She's got a motherly look in her blue eyes that sort of make her beautiful. Danny sees it too. He don't pay much attention to it. Women are women with him.

She sits down and starts to question Danny about his life and past. He handing her a line a mile long and skipping the beer mug throwing incident as much as possible. She drinks it all in, as if she hadn't been living in the same town with him for the past twenty years as well as working for the same Boss, only on different things.

Things is going along swell, with Miss Marvin. She gets a great kick out of talking to the big punk, and he sort of enjoys telling her lies. Every day a bunch of

flowers come in. Candy, cigarettes and even money. Women with babies in their arms thank Danny for saving their children from being killed in the wreck. Fathers come around with offers for work for him as soon as he gets out. Gosh, there are so many presents and things for Danny Kerney, he has to give half of them to his fellow prisoners to keep his room in the hospital from being swamped.

All this time, a matter of about a week, Miss Marvin is right by his side taking this all in. She keeps telling him what a hero he is. Danny being thick forgets what a big fraud he really is and starts to stick out his chest. After all he did save five hundred kids from an early grave, even if Dawson and Maike Blannon had something to do about it.

DURING this week, back in town, Dawson and Heally are slapping each other on the back. Boy, they really put a fast one over. Dawson was going to get a nice bonus from Heally for his good work. Dawson was going to slap Kerney right to work to get the river wards into shape. But first they had to work on the governor a little more. With all the letters he was receiving, plus the women with pleas for Danny's release, the governor was sure to weaken. Danny still wasn't ready to leave his bed, but Dawson wanted him up and out pronto.

Well, a week later, the pardon came through. It was a full pardon, with no strings attached to it. Danny Kerney was a free man. I remember him thanking everyone as he went out, as if he owned the joint. Following alongside of him was Miss Marvin, with her pencil worn down to a nub, writing the life story of a hero. Yeah, a handmade hero. That should have been the title of her story, only she didn't know it. Only Dawson, Blannon, Heally and Kerney knew it. That quartette should have been dunked in a barrel of hot oil and left there for the buzzards.

The city put on a big blowout for the return of their hero, and of course Danny was only too glad to take it. He was a little heavier from over-eating and his bluish jowls seem to quiver with every handshake. Right along with him wherever he went was the Marvin gal. I often wonder if she followed him when he went to sleep. She really did a job right when she did it.

As the old saying goes, the guests were gone and all the food had been consumed, so Dawson and Heally called Danny Kerney into their office. Things had worked out right. Danny was free and back on the working end, or so they thought.

I don't want you readers to miss a thing on this last scene. I know I won't forget it as long as I live. Neither will Dawson and Heally, the rats.

The inner office was all decked out with flowers and a big print of Danny being handed the hand-painted cuspidor by the governor himself. Dawson was seated back smoking a long black cigar, the light of victory playing over his unhealthy face. Heally made it a special point, as head of the *Star,* to be in the office when Danny arrived.

Most of the newspaper people were told to get out of the office. Miss Marvin, for a change, wasn't there. I learn that she had more important things to do. I and a few choice people, like the C. E. were allowed to view the handsome hero.

Funny how a guy, that thinks he is something or somebody actually gets to look like the person or something. I'll swear, after all the years I knew him and went to drinking bouts with him, I've never seen him look the way he did that day. His face looked clean and his eyes kind of held your attention. His shoulders were back a bit and he looked you straight in the eye, as if he really meant what he said. I don't think Dawson or Heally noticed that look until too late.

Well, I was sitting in the back of the small office with the C. E., Dawson and Heally sat behind the cracked mahogany desk, while Danny walked in. He shut

the door sort of quiet like and held his hat in his hand. His smile beamed on all, fresh and clean as a daisy.

"Good morning, Boss," he said out of habit.

"Well, howya feel?" snapped Dawson, smoke curling up into his eyes. "Ready to step back into the old game. We need you bad. Very bad."

Danny Kerney gulped a little and he still stood up. He cleared his throat and then said, "I ain't going to work for you no more, Dawson." The office was like a tomb for a couple of seconds and then Dawson leaped out of his chair.

"What in hell are you talking about? Didn't I get you out of stir? Didn't I make a damned hero out of ya? Didn't I?"

Danny only nodded. Dawson blinked and sat down, his face red, far too red to be natural. Heally was dumbfounded. He glared and looked at Dawson. Their scheme had backfired, or so it seemed.

"If you'll listen to me for a second, Boss, I'll explain. Just don't interrupt me. I ain't used to saying much, but cuss words, so I'll make it short and clear."

"You'd better," snapped Dawson.

I nudged the C. E. and he smiled sweetly. He was enjoying this as much as I was. Seeing Dawson and Heally double-crossed legitimately was a treat that only came once in a lifetime.

Well Danny Kerney, hero number one, shuffled his big feet and tortured his hat, then begun.

"I was born in this town, Dawson, as you know. I always was a bum and a bully. I never had much of an education, but I managed to get along. Well, when I was a kid, about eight, I saw a guy, who was nothing but a bum like me. He risked his life, really risked it, to save a couple of women from a burnin' house. Gosh, he was given presents and money and a good job. Ever after that he was tops around that town. I always wanted to be like that guy. I never had the chance, though. I grew older and then I joined this bunch. It was a good racket and I fitted in. Well, I sort of forgot about that hero, until about a week ago. I was laying in bed with a laugh on my lips, thinking what a bunch of suckers everybody is. Nobody is wise to me but about three people. I think it's a great joke. My room is full of flowers and everybody treats me like I was somebody. Still, I ain't quite convinced that I'm a hero, even after reading all the papers.

"Then this Miss Marvin comes up to write my life story. Boy, she sure put me right. Everything I said, she turned it around a little, so that I sound like I might have been a good guy. You know, sort of on the border line, between good and bad. This gets me thinking and I realize that I am really a hero. That rail was really split and if I hadn't come running the train would have been wrecked. So, I listen to Alice and she tells me I'm tops."

Right then I spotted the whole thing, when Danny said Alice. The big boob had fallen for Marvin. He stops being nervous and takes a big deep pull of fresh air and continues.

"Alice—Miss Marvin and I are going to get married. I've got a swell job with a trucking firm over in East Bullen and everything is set for a good clean happy life from now on. So there," he snaps off at the end.

Dawson gets to his feet, still red and burned up. "So there, eh?" he comes back. "Suppose I open up and tell Miss Marvin, you lovey dovey, what you really are? What then, stupid?"

"She wouldn't believe you, Boss."

"What if I should tell the governor and the prison board that it was all a fake to get you out of prison, so that you could clean up votes in the river wards for Heally? What then, eh?"

"Why, I guess you'd go back to prison with me, Boss," smiled Danny, like he had a mouth full of honey. That stopped Dawson. His hands were tied. He couldn't expose Danny Kerney, his ex-strong-arm

man, without exposing himself and Healy.

Dawson slumped down in his chair and Healy cursed softly under his breath. I wanted to laugh, but still wanted to keep my job, as I didn't appreciate an empty stomach.

Danny, without saying good-by or go to hell, turned on his heels and walked out of the office and the hands of Dawson. I got up, followed by the C. E. I said, "Shall I put a new caption on the spread, Dawson. 'Danny Kerney is to marry reporter and settle down as truck driver'?" All I got was a glare and a smile of approval from the C. E.

So I went back to my desk and sat there for a long time. Crime is slow in this town and still doesn't pay. I looked at my typewriter and clicked the keys a couple of times and then wrote.

"Miss Alice Marvin, the sob sister, who did such a beautiful job on the story of the convict and the five hundred kids in a special train, which culminated in finally getting Danny Kerney, convict 1298 a pardon, also did such a beautiful job of convincing the same, Danny Kerney, that he was a hero and really not a bad guy, he married her.

"The final outcome is that Danny has turned respectable, is going to get married and live like a human being." I tapped that off and then tore it up. I knew the C. E. would laugh, but Dawson wouldn't, after he had read it.

So that's what happened. Healy lost the election and is now running a slot machine racket.

Dawson is collecting the take and the paper is now in the hands of a regular guy. So Healy got nothing for his troubles, Danny got everything and it was all due to the little Marvin gal, because she believed in what she was doing. Gosh, I wish I could feel that way sometimes. Honest.

Adventurers All

By Toenail and Eyebrow

BARRING the efforts of such personalities as the unpleasant Mr. Hitler, people ordinarily get into jams as a result of their own bullheadness and carelessness. It has happened to me at various times and places in the past, and will undoubtedly happen to me again in the future, unless the disciples of the aforesaid Mr. Hitler or his allies bring about the premature termination of a somewhat undistinguished career. The experience which I am about to describe is a good example of what happens to people who should know better, but are too lazy to use their knowledge. While it did not seem wildly exciting, it did have the effect of keeping my hair in an erect position for a matter of some three hours, and gave rise to the usual flock of resolutions to keep out of similar predicaments in the future. Like all such resolutions they have been more frequently

honored in the breach than in the observance.

It all happened because the lake at which we were camped was too small to harbor big trout, and the lake which did have the big trout sat up on a shelf five hundred feet or so above. Since the small lake was a much better place to camp, we camped there and climbed up to the big lake to fish. There was a good trail which followed the slope of the shelf to the big lake, but this took us a couple of miles out of our way, and since we were not overfond of unnecessary walking, we took the direct route, which led up a steep talus slope to a tiny gully where the overflow from the upper lake came down. The rest of the hillside was sheer cliff, ranging up to perhaps four hundred feet in height.

On this particular day my brother and I had been fishing in the upper lake, and started back to camp late in the afternoon. We had cut cross country instead of following the lakeshore and headed down a draw which we expected to bring us into the gully which we had come up.

The gully soon became a miniature canyon, with straight sides fifteen or twenty feet high. It ran into rather rough going, since the bottom was only about two feet wide, and every now and then would drop off straight for four or five feet, but we continued on down it, expecting to come out on the trail at any moment. Finally we reached one of those "steps" which was twelve or fifteen feet high, and it became evident that we could go down all right —but we couldn't get back up. However, it was a case of going on or retracing our steps for quite a distance, and we hated to think of climbing back up all that distance, so like a couple of idiots, we dropped down the ledge and almost immediately wished we hadn't. The gully for which we had been looking was just around the next corner—only the crevice in which we were now apparently permanent residents came out some fifty feet above the bottom. Moreover, that fifty feet was straight up and down, and almost as smooth as a cement sidewalk. We obviously couldn't go down there without wings, and we couldn't go back, so it looked as if we were due to spend considerable time right where we were.

WE SAT down to talk the situation over, and remind ourselves just exactly what sort of damned fools we were to come down over a ledge where we couldn't get back up, without knowing what lay ahead of us. Both of us knew better than that, but the knowledge didn't seem likely to do us much good in the future. Some one *might* come along with a rope—but it was very unlikely that anyone would, for a week or two anyway, and in the meantime we might get a little hungry. Also, there was no firewood or water within the confines of our domain, so all in all, the prospect was not in the least inviting, and it was evident that something should be done. The only question was "What?"

The more we saw of our present quarters, the less we liked them, and the more evident it became that we were in a really serious jam. We could not live long on this ledge—mountain nights were cold, and there was no firewood here, not to mention a definite shortage of food and water. Since we couldn't live on it, and apparently couldn't get off of it, the answer seemed pretty clear, and not very reassuring. We were fast developing an antipathy for that ledge that amounted to loathing.

Said my brother, "I wouldn't be found dead in this damned place." I agreed with him all right, but it seemed very much as if that were just what was going to happen, regardless of what we thought about the matter.

The only possible chance to get off our perch seemed to be a crack in the rock which ran around the surface of the cliff about three feet below our position. It varied from an inch or two to perhaps six inches wide and seemed as if it might be

deep enough to afford a foothold to a climber, but as far as we could see, it didn't go anywhere. It ran out of sight around a corner some distance away, and it was slanting downward but not so steeply as the floor of the gully, so that as we followed it we would actually be getting further away from where we wanted to go.

Finally, we decided that anything was better than sitting on that ledge, so we tossed our fishing tackle to the bottom of the gully to be retrieved later — if we needed it—and I held my breath and eased over the edge of the cliff and dug my toes into the crack, which was deep enough to support me at this particular spot anyhow.

Like most mountain-bred people, we never climbed a mountain if we could help it, and if we did, we always picked the easiest way, so we had not too much experienec at rock work. We were both wearing rubber-soled sneakers, however, which are better for clinging to granite than the traditional hobnails of the mountain climber, and we had reasonably good nerves—and a burning desire to get off that damned ledge.

We spread ourselves out as thinly as possible on the face of the cliff and worked ourselves slowly along the crack, praying that it would not end suddenly and leave us hanging a couple of hundred feet above the ground. Fifteen or twenty minutes of this, and we found ourselves on a tiny ledge, perhaps six inches wide, and two hundred feet up, and progress became more rapid.

This was too good to last though —it ended abruptly in a section of wall which sloped at an angle of about sixty degrees for a few feet and then became sheer again. Ten feet away across this, was another ledge, and the wall here seemed cracked and irregular enough to give promise of a way down—but that ten feet! We could certainly have used a pair of wings right then. We had come too far to back out now, though, so I finally gathered enough of my nerve together and launched myself out over that smooth spot, with my stomach twisted into a knot, and my hair holding my hat a good four inches above the top of my head. (I know it was four inches, because that was how long my hair was, and I know it was standing up to its full height.)

Three steps and I was across, and holding my breath as I waited to lend a hand to my brother as he ran the gauntlet safely, then we both rested a few moments while our hearts got back to something approaching normal. It took us another hour and a half of hanging to the rocks by our toenails and eyebrows before we reached the bottom, but if I live to be a hundred, and go through a couple of wars in the meantime, I will never forget those three steps I took across that wall—and I am firmly convinced that it is an impossibility to scare a man so badly that his hair turns white—because mine isn't even gray, and if any human can be scared worse than I was—well, he just ain't human, that's all.

Wallace Murcray.

TARLOC, island of the Caribbean, was old in the ways of pirates, had seen the rise and fall of Master Races of other days, knew how to deal with buccaneers. . . . . .

THREE GIBBETS ON TARLOC

A novelette by

WILLIAM CHAMBERLAIN

RAY MILLHOLLAND

A police inspector leaves crime and decided to spend all his time fishing, but . . . . . .

Headlines by Inspector Ferguson

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February 25th

THE North—ever perilous, ever luring, ever full of high adventure. . . .

SKOOKUM JEAN RENNAULT

by

MICHAEL OBLINGER

Sioux on the War Trail or quietly in camp? Who was to know; they were unpredictable.

RED DEVILS AND BLUE COATS

A novelette of frontier days

by

WILLIAM HEUMAN

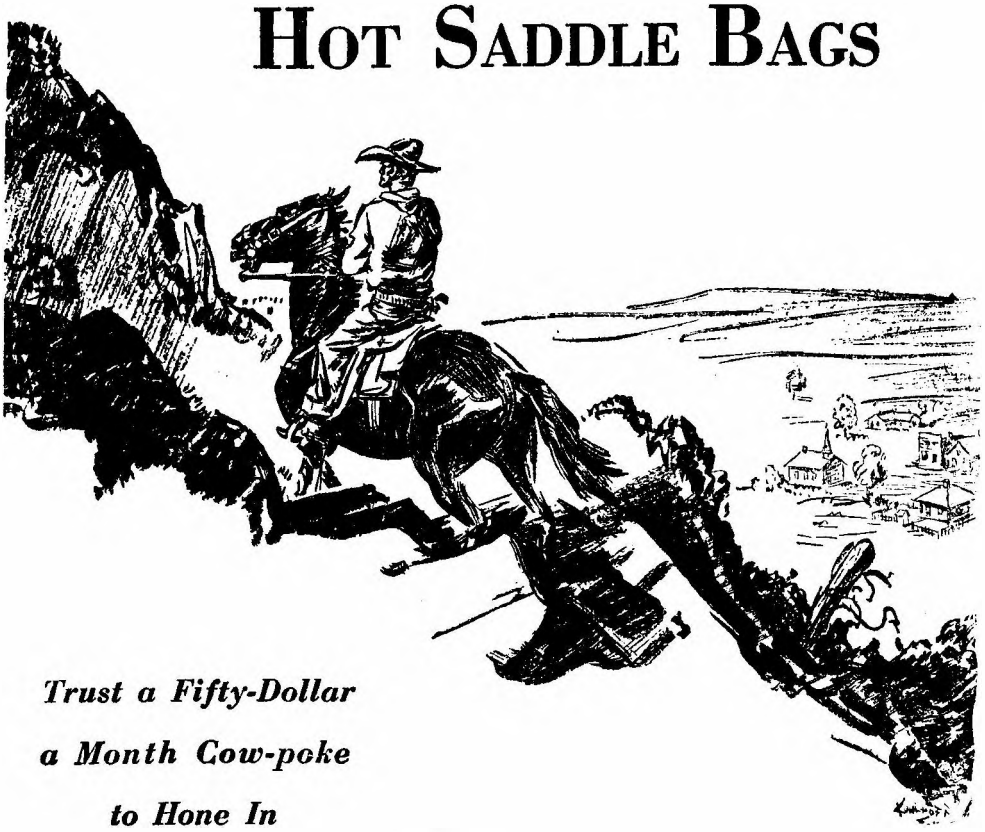
JAMES NORMAN

H. BEDFORD-JONES

OLIVER PRUDEN

CLAY PERRY, etc.

HOT SADDLE BAGS



Trust a Fifty-Dollar a Month Cow-poke to Hone In

I

APACHE had the colic. Danny Reddington had been up with his favorite pinto until midnight doing everything he had ever heard of to ease the horse's pain, from drenching it with linseed oil to rubbing turpentine on its legs.

By that time the horse was out of danger and Danny went to bed in the bunkhouse. Two hours later, however, he crawled out of his bunk without waking anybody and went out to the stable to see how the animal was getting along. Apache lay quietly in his stall and seemed to be free from pain.

Danny, after petting the horse a few minutes, was about to go back to bed when he heard voices. He knew that the owners of the ranch had gone to town, and this would be them coming home. They would kid him about wet-nursing a horse, and he decided to stay out of sight in the stall. They would go to the house in a minute and never see him.

"Well, reckon we're safe," he heard Ray Deever say in a relieved tone.

"Hell, we were always safe. Nobody saw us, an' nobody will think of suspectin' us. That's where havin' a brother for a sheriff comes in handy," Fred Juglar answered.

"An' it's costin' us ten thousand dollars," Deever complained.

"We've still got nine thousand apiece, where we wouldn't have had nothin'."

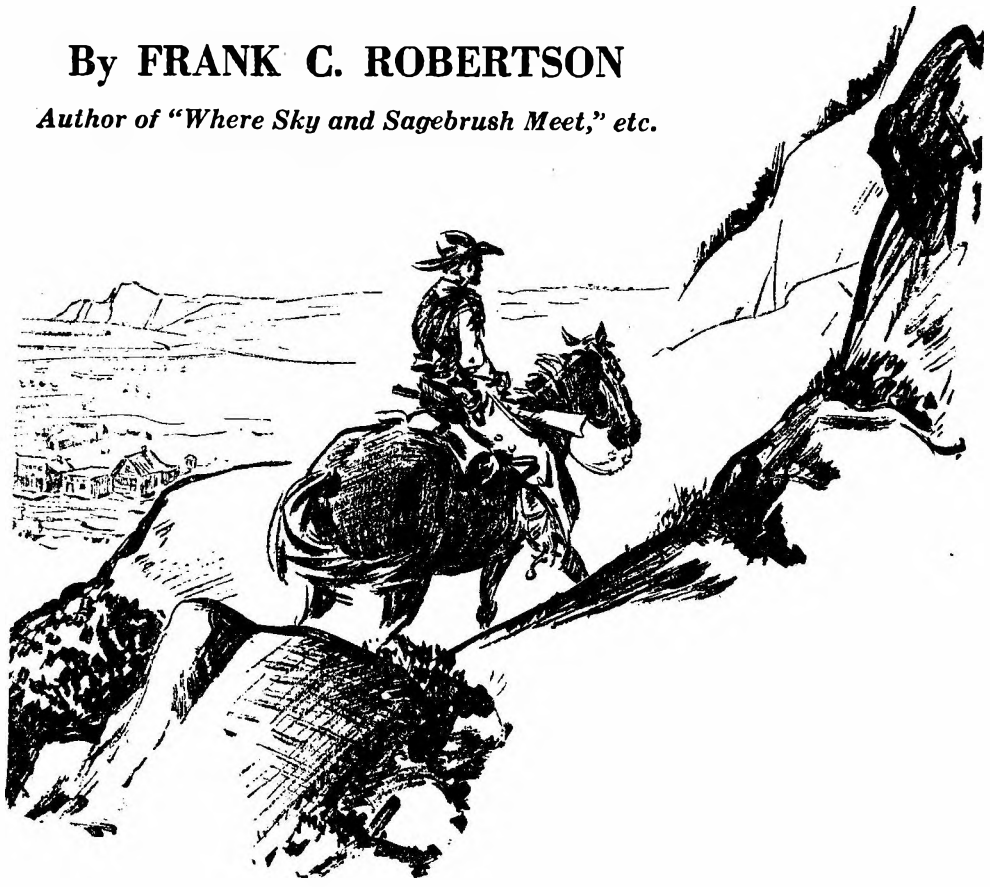
"Unless somebody suspects something."

"Hell, Deever, don't be an old woman," Juglar said irritably. "All we've got to do is hide this money in the smokehouse for a couple of months, an' when we start spendin' nobody will ever know we didn't make it the usual way here on the ranch."

The men were unsaddling as they talked. So familiar were they with the inside of the stable that they didn't bother to light a lantern.

By FRANK C. ROBERTSON

Author of "Where Sky and Sagebrush Meet," etc.



Danny Reddington, now scarcely daring to breathe, crouched in the corner of Apache's stall. In two minutes time, though he didn't realize it, Danny had grown up. For the first time in his twenty-two years he had been thrown face to face with grim reality. He had had responsibility ever since he was fourteen—plenty of it, with his mother and younger sister to support. But he had accepted the men with whom he worked as plain fellows; some good, some not so good, but none very bad. And now, if he could believe his ears, the men for whom he had worked the last four years were crooks.

His first reaction was a pain that was al-almost physical. It would have been hard to find two men who, outwardly at least, seemed finer specimens of real Western cowmen than Juglar and Deever. It was true that Fred Juglar was something of a bully, and backed by the influence of his brother Pete, the country sheriff, sometimes made himself disagreeable. But Danny had well nigh worshipped Ray Deever—and Deever's daughter, Maurine.

THE two men walked out and closed the stable door behind them. Danny tried to tell himself that what he had heard meant nothing; that they had been kidding about something. He walked to the front of the barn and peered out through a knot-hole. Fred Juglar was carrying something over his shoulder, and they were heading for the smokehouse, a building which ordinarily would not be entered by anyone until hog killing time nearly six months hence.

They were inside the small building nearly twenty minutes before they came out and went to the house.

"Dang you, 'Pache, you would have to pick tonight to git the bellyache," Danny said angrily. There was no help for it, he had come into information which he didn't like; information which might easily ruin

his whole life—and what was more Maurine Deever's as well.

It was a sober young man who scurried back to the bunkhouse, and hated himself for having scurried like a thief. He told himself that he didn't have to say anything to anybody. He didn't know where the money had come from. But even as he debated with himself he knew that he was going to find out more about this business than he already knew. That much money couldn't be taken and nothing be said about it.

HE WAS about to enter the bunkhouse when another thought entered his mind.

Some of the boys were certain to ask him about Apache's colic in the morning. Old Chuck Henson had been out with him until ten-thirty. That was certain to arouse his bosses' suspicions. They might change the hiding place of the money at the first opportunity.

On the other hand if he changed it now—A cold shiver ran down his back. Neither Juglar nor Deever were men to stop at destroying an opponent. They were not the kind of enemies to choose deliberately.

He turned and walked back to the smokehouse. There was a heavy padlock on the door, and he knew that the key would be in Ray Deever's pocket. That seemed to settle that. He could not, however, tear himself away.

His face suddenly turned more resolute than it had ever been in his life. He walked over to the blacksmith shop and returned with a heavy screwdriver and a wrecking bar. He had to take out nine heavy screws to release the strap hinge that held the back of the door in place, and he had to work fast lest daybreak arrive before he had finished, and he had to work quietly lest he disturb someone inside the house or the bunkhouse.

He got the screws out and with the sharp end of the wrecking bar finally pried the door out so that he could slip inside. It was anything but a warm night, but the perspiration ran off his face in streams.

The good smell of woodsmoke and bacon still lingered, although the building had been empty for some weeks. He looked up. All there was there were the hooks on which pieces of meat had hung while curing. No hiding place for anything up there. He looked down. The floor was undisturbed. Only one place remained.

In one corner stood a heavy oak cask in which meat was soaked in brine before being hung up to cure in the smoke. There was a lid on the cask with a heavy rock on top of it. Danny removed the rock and raised the lid. Reaching to the bottom he fished up a pair of leather saddle-bags.

Without waiting to investigate he replaced the lid, let himself outside and hurried back to the stable.

There was a loose board in the floor of Apache's manger which he had been meaning to fix. He pried the loose end up enough to thrust the saddle-bags underneath, and pounded the nails down lightly with the wrecking bar. He hurried back to the smokehouse and replaced the door. So far as he could see there were no marks to show that the door had been tampered with. He scuffed out the tracks, replaced the tools, and slipped into the bunkhouse.

The heavy breathing told him everybody was asleep. He hoped fervently that no one would question him being up with his horse, in the presence of either of his employers. As he lay in his bunk he wondered if he had himself been guilty of stealing something.

II

DANNY was the first to roll out in the morning, and he saw to it that everyone else in the bunkhouse was disturbed. The time to get them to ask their questions was now.

"Ole 'Pache was a pretty sick horse for a while last night," he volunteered.

"Yeah, I thought you was gonna set up with him all night," Chuck Henson said.

"Nope—only till midnight," Danny answered. "He was all right before that, but I wanted to make sure."

They had all heard him. Asking them not to mention the matter would only excite suspicion. He let the matter drop.

They did the chores, washed up, and when the breakfast gong sounded Danny hurried to the big dining room in the ranch house with the others, affecting a zest which he was far from feeling.

He was relieved to find neither of his employers at the table, but the crew had hardly started to eat when Maurine entered.

She was a pretty girl, small and neat, with black hair, and with just enough freckles to be cute. Everybody on the outfit adored Ray Deever's motherless daughter. She came and went as she pleased, queening it over the whole outfit without offense.

"Morning, boys," she greeted cheerfully. "You wolves left enough for a hungry gal to get a bite?"

"Sure. I'll bite you if that's what you want," Charley Poole replied.

Maurine dropped into her usual place beside two empty plates. "Well, Dad and Fred must have got into a poker session last night."

"What makes you say that?" a voice sounded from an inside door.

"Oh, hello, Dad. You're late for breakfast."

"Been up for hours," Ray Deever answered easily. "Me an' Fred have been goin' over the ranch books."

"An' it's a headache," Fred Juglar said as he came into the room.

"What time did you gay old dogs get in last night?" Maurine asked.

"A little after twelve," Deever answered easily. He reached over and pinched his daughter's cheek.

"Hey, you fellers must have about caught Danny here out in the stable," loud-mouthed Charley Poole said.

Danny saw the two men give a quick start. It seemed to him that he had never really noticed the cattlemen before. It would have been hard to find two handsomer men than these. Juglar was the bigger of the two. He was big, raw-boned and blond, with a perpetual smile upon his face, but Danny remembered now that humor had very little to do with that smile. Juglar really seemed the most amused when he was hurting something, branding a colt or a calf, or breaking a bronco. He was a notoriously cruel horseman, and it was seldom that his horse wasn't bleeding at the mouth, or dripping blood where the spurs jabbed. His light blue eyes were small and close-set, and they never betrayed the man's real thoughts.

Ray Deever was different. He, too, was a big man, and he was as dark as Juglar was light. When he smiled his dark eyes sparkled. In his youth he had been the best bronco twister in the country, and could still take the kinks out of a bad one when he wished. His worst fault was his occasional sprees, and his propensity to get into fist fights or wrestling matches which usually led to fights. The only man with physical prowess with whom he had never tried to get into a scuffle was his own partner. Deever was the cattleman of the outfit, while Juglar bossed the ranch. The combination seemed to work well. Deever had been a widower for ten years, and his whole life was wrapped up in his daughter Maurine.

Danny felt his flesh crawl as the two men looked at him.

"Yeah," Fred Juglar said. "What was Danny boy doin' in the stable?"

"He was settin' up with a sick horse," Poole guffawed.

"Oh, how is Apache?" Maurine asked. "Ting-a-ling told me he was sick."

The bland Chinese cook grinned at being brought into the conversation.

"He got all right," Danny said curtly. "I was in bed before twelve." He saw relief pass over the faces of his employers. But once they missed the money he knew what they would think. There was no help for it now. He was going to find himself in a mess of trouble.

The conversation changed onto other topics. Danny had nothing to say. His head lifted abruptly as he heard Fred Juglar say, "I'm ridin' up on Ladybug Mountain today to look for cedar posts. Want to go with me, Maurine?"

"Gee, yes," the girl replied eagerly. "I love old Ladybug."

A stab of jealousy shot through Danny. He had never actually made love to Maurine, but it was he who took her to dances, and he had considered her his girl. Some day, when he got a small stake saved up, he had meant to ask her to marry him. It occurred to him now that of late Fred Juglar had been unusually attentive to the girl. He felt a surge of vicious hatred against Juglar rise within him.

Strangely enough he had no such feeling against Deever, and yet the evidence of his own eyes and ears assured him that Deever was just as guilty as Juglar.

DANNY had no intention of riding Apache today. Apache was his private horse, and he only used him as a night horse, or to ride to town. He was saddling a long-legged bay when Ray Deever walked up.

"Want to talk to you about that horse, Dan," he said. "It makes no difference to me, but Fred don't like it much about you keepin' him in the barn an' feedin' him hay an' grain."

"The outfit gettin' hard up?" Danny asked.

"Why do you say that?" Deever demanded sharply.

"I hired out for fifty dollars a month an' my keep. You know that includes my horse."

Deever seemed struggling to control his temper. It was the first time he and Danny Reddington had never come close to having words.

"You can turn the horse out with the cavvy, but no more hay and grain," he said firmly.

"All right, Ray," Danny said bitterly. He knew the order had come from Juglar. Had he consulted his pride he would have quit. He was a good man. There were plenty of other outfits who would be glad to give him a job, but there was Maurine—and now there was this other business.

"What was the matter with 'Pache last night?" Ray asked in a kinder tone, yet Danny knew he was fishing.

"Colic. First time he ever had it, but I'll take him home the first time I can get off. My mother has got a little pasture."

"Don't get razor-edged about this, Danny," Ray said curtly. "It won't pay."

The man started to walk away, but Danny called him back. Uncertainty had preyed upon the puncher's mind for hours, and now he had made up his mind.

"I want the day off," he said bluntly.

Deever hesitated a moment, "All right, take it," he said curtly.

Danny led Apache out of the stable. The bottom of the manger was covered with hay, and he was sure no one would discover the money. He curried the horse to kill time until Maurine and Juglar rode away together, and as they were leaving the corral Ray Deever joined them. He said something, and Maurine turned and rode back to where Danny stood. That left the two owners together, and Danny knew very well what they were talking about.

"Dad says you're going to town today, Danny," Maurine said. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I just made up my mind."

"I'd have gone with you if you'd given me any notice," she pouted. "Now I've promised to ride with Fred."

"Your dad told me Apache was costin' the outfit too much for hay and grain, so I'm takin' him home."

"I don't believe it," the girl flared. "Nobody ever before called Dad stingy."

"He said it was Juglar's idea. Of course they said I could keep him in the pasture, but if he ain't worth stall room he ain't worth keepin' around."

"I don't like Fred doing that, but I think you're acting small about it," Maurine said. "I was going to ask you to get me some things at the store, but you needn't bother."

She wheeled her horse and loped back to the partners. Danny started to call her back. Thought better of it.

The Spade was a peaceable outfit. Ordinarily the punchers didn't carry guns except for special purposes. This morning, Danny noticed, both Juglar and Ray were packing guns. As soon as they rode out of sight he entered the bunkhouse and put on his own belt and six-gun. He didn't know why. It just seemed advisable.

As he rode away from the ranch he was smitten by another of those sudden ideas which seemed to be flooding his brain this morning. As soon as he was out of sight he altered his course and presently bent back where he could watch the ranch from concealment.

Within half an hour he saw Ray Deever return.

The man acted queerly. He seemed to have business at the blacksmith shop, but Danny was sure that was only a pretense. Ray moved in and out of the shop several times as though looking for something, and finally he passed directly in front of the smokehouse. Danny saw him linger there more than a minute, but he didn't go in. A few minutes later Ray mounted again and headed for the range.

Still Danny didn't know what the man had seen. It was highly probable that he had left some sort of mark on the screw-heads which would have betrayed him. He knew that the screw-driver had slipped a couple of times, and any bright mark on the rusty metal was sure to be seen by a man as sharp of eye as was Ray Deever.

That Ray hadn't tried to investigate further didn't prove a thing. Besides Ting-a-

ling, the Chinese cook, there were a couple of old fellows working around the ranch. Ray would be hard put to explain why he was opening the smokehouse at this season of the year.

The big question agitating Danny's brain was: what would Deever and Juglar do when they discovered that their stolen loot was missing, and they suspected Danny, as they would, of having stolen it from them?

III

THE neat, three-room white cottage which Danny had provided for his mother and sister stood well on the outskirts of the town of Rainville. There was a cool, green lawn in front, and a very practical vegetable garden in the rear. Mrs. Reddington kept a cow in a three-acre pasture beyond the small barn. There would be plenty of grass there for Apache, as well as Rosemary's pony.

Rosemary, a pretty girl of sixteen, ran out when she saw Danny. He gave her a hug and a kiss. "Gee, why are you leading 'Pache?" she asked after a moment.

"He kind of got sick, so I'm bringin' him home to rest up. I want you to take good care of him," Danny grinned.

"Good! He'll be company for Patsy. But have you heard the news? Everybody in town is all excited. Oh, I'll bet you haven't!"

"Hello, Danny," Mrs. Reddington called before Danny could ask what the big news was about. "This is a surprise."

They kissed affectionately. It was always a pleasure to Danny to come home, where his women folks made such a fuss over him.

"What's this big news sis is bustin' to break out with?" he asked, forcing himself to smile.

"The courthouse was robbed last night!" Rosemary exclaimed." The eggs took twenty-eight thousand dollars!'

"The 'yeggs,' darling," Mrs. Reddington smiled.

"Oh, I thought they said eggs," Rosemary retorted. "Anyway, robbers broke into the county treasurer's office last night, opened the safe, and took all that money."

"They don't know who it was?" Danny asked.

"No. Sheriff Juglar says it was done by experts," Mrs. Reddington said.

"I was talking to some of the girls," Rosemary broke in, "and they say that their fathers say that it must have been an *inside* job." Rosemary's eyes were big with excitement.

"What makes it look bad for Mr. James is that he had just gone out and collected a lot of taxes from those transient French sheepmen. They paid in cash, and he got back too late to put the money in the bank so he left it in his safe overnight. Ordinarily he doesn't keep money in the safe. Whoever opened the safe must have known the money would be there, and James is the only one knows the combination," Mrs. Reddington explained.

"Somebody used the combination?"

"Yes. Sheriff Juglar says there are cracksmen so cunning they can open a safe that way. Why, Danny, you look as if it were your money that had been stolen."

Danny forced himself to smile. "Part of it is," he said. "I pay taxes."

"Yeah, four whole dollars worth," Rosemary said.

"Well, tie up your horses and come in. We haven't had a real visit with you for a month. I'll get you a nice dinner," Danny's mother said.

"I've got to go uptown," Danny said. "Take care of 'Pache for me, kid. Be back for that dinner, mom."

Excitement hovered over the town like a fog. Everywhere Danny went all anyone talked about was the robbery. Wild stories were extant, but none of them came near to the real truth as Danny Reddington knew it.

The accepted belief was that professional cracksmen were responsible, but suspicion turned more and more toward the treasurer himself.

The personality of Willis James had something to do with the suspicion directed against him. He was a dried up, cranky little man with no close personal friend. He had come to Rainville as a schoolteacher, and because he had some education and was thought to be honest he had been elected treasurer. But now that suspicion pointed at him people everywhere were saying that they had never trusted him. He had always covered up an inferiority complex with an assumption of arrogance which reacted against him now. On top of everything he was easily excited and confused.

Danny found himself in a saloon where a crowd had Sheriff Pete Juglar surrounded.

Danny joined the edge of the crowd. Pete Juglar was an older edition of his brother Fred, except that he was not so big, nor so handsome.

"No," the sheriff was saying as Danny came up, "there ain't a single clue. There ain't been no strangers in town, so I can't see how they could have sized up the job. Still, I ain't sayin' that outsiders didn't do it."

"Juglar, you know damn' well that little wart of a James stole the money himself, an' fixed up a cock-an'-bull story, to try to clear himself. Why don't you arrest him?" a man cried angrily.

"Can't arrest a man without evidence," the sheriff pointed out. "Got to track down all the other clues first."

"But you say you ain't got any."

"I've questioned James, an' I've got to admit he tells a kind of garbled story," the sheriff said. "I'll put him through a course of sprouts again."

Danny turned away, sickened. Quite plainly the sheriff and his guilty accomplices intended to fasten the crime upon the little treasurer, whether they got a conviction or not. Danny could understand the Juglars doing a thing like that, but it was hard to believe that Ray Deever could be so contemptible.

HE COULD see that in a little while suspicion would crystallize around James. Danny knew the truth. Sheriff Juglar had access to the treasurer's office. Someway, perhaps quite easily, he had learned the combination of the safe. He had simply got the money out and turned it over to his brother and Ray Deever. And now Danny himself was the only person who knew where that money was.

How was he going to prove anything? Even if he could steel himself to expose the father of the girl he loved how was he going to make himself believed? He couldn't just say, "Here is the money." Who was going to believe that men like the Juglar brothers and Ray Deever were crooks?

The plain fact was, he acknowledged bitterly, that he would incriminate himself. He had been out of the bunkhouse that night plenty long enough to have ridden into Rainville. But how could he keep quiet and let an innocent man be convicted of the crime? He felt hatred for the Juglars growing within him like a cancer.

He forgot completely about his promise to go home for dinner until it was long past noon. He had just started out when he saw Willis James scurrying for his boarding house like a frightened rat. And as he saw the man a group of small boys suddenly sallied forth from an alley with a barrage of tin cans and garbage.

"Thief! Thief!" they yelled. "Ol' Willis James is a sneakthief."

The dried up little man weathered the first storm by holding his arms over his face, but as the urchins came closer he began to make futile little rushes which the children easily avoided, as they made faces and cried out taunts.

Then one awkward fat kid tripped and fell. James pounced upon the youngster, and in his rage slapped his face twice. Then a pair of ranchers named Carr and Walton from out near the Spade appeared on the scene.

"Hey, you damn' thief, what're you doin' to that kid?" Bill Carr bellowed, as they made for James.

James let the fat kid go, and gesticulated excitedly, but plainly these were two of the men already convinced that James was the thief.

"I'll learn yuh to beat up on kids," Carr gritted.

"While yo're about it make him own up he stole that twenty-eight thousand dollars of tax money," Walton said.

James wouldn't weigh over a hundred and twenty pounds. Carr, a big man, shook him till his teeth rattled. From time to time Walton added a painful kick.

Danny had no personal liking for Willis James, but knowing what he did he couldn't let this go on. He sprang from his horse, and seized Carr by the shoulder.

"Lay off," he said angrily. "I saw the thing start. It's these kids who ought to be shook."

"Oh, mebbe you want to stick up for this crook, Reddington," Garr sneered.

"I'm not the judge in his case, an' you're not the jury," Danny retorted. He wasn't surprised when Carr swung on him.

Danny was no infant. The hundred and sixty pounds he carried on his five foot ten frame contained no surplus fat, and it was

distributed in the right places. Carr's fist knocked the hat off Danny's brown locks, then Danny stepped in swiftly and raised an uppercut to the rancher's chin which stretched Carr on his back.

Walton gave Danny a push. Danny whirled and fired an unexpected hook to Walton's jaw. The man staggered back, then rushed in and they went to it, hammer and tongs, while Carr was getting up.

Danny knocked Walton down as Carr rushed in, and succeeded in flooring Carr when Walton came back for more. A crowd, anxious to see a good fight, quickly gathered.

Danny found himself getting winded. Finally Walton got up before Danny could knock Carr down and he had both of them on his hands. He was still able to deal out more punishment than he received, but he was out of breath, and so were his foes.

Suddenly Rosemary broke through the crowd, and flung herself between Danny and the men he was fighting. "You cowards," she cried furiously, "you'd stand there and let two men double onto one."

Carr and Walton fell back. They were glad to have the fight terminated. They had been prancing in and out, each man trying to make the other take the brunt of the fight.

"He oughta be licked," a man growled. "He was stickin' up for this dirty thief."

"Any man who would stick up fer ole James oughta be rode out of town on a rail," another man said.

Danny wiped his hand across his mouth and smeared blood over most of his face. "Why don't you get some proof before you go calling a man a thief?" he demanded. "James didn't steal any money. If he'd taken it he'd have had sense enough to make it look like an outside job."

Sheriff Pete Juglar elbowed through the crowd. "Here, what's all the fuss?" he demanded.

WILLIE JAMES, dancing from one foot to another like an enraged blue-jay began to scream out denunciations of everybody, while Carr, Walton and the kids tried to yell him down.

Danny suddenly caught sight of Ray Deever's face on the outside of the crowd. Ray Deever was looking right at Danny.

"Come on with me, James, I'll take you back to the courthouse," the sheriff said. "Looks like it ain't safe for you around here."

Rosemary was tugging at Danny's arm, whispering, "Please, Danny, come along with me. Don't get into any more trouble."

"Darned if I'd like to be known as a friend of Willis James right now," Danny heard a man say. It was another knot in the strangling string which had resulted from Apache's colic. If he ventured to return that money now everybody would say he had helped James steal it, and then got cold feet.

He permitted Rosemary to lead him away. They stopped at an irrigation ditch and she helped him wash the blood off his face.

"All that blood would scare mother to death," his sister said. "Why did you stick up for Willis James?"

"Wouldn't you if you saw a gang of kids picking on him, and then two men jump on him when he tried to defend himself?"

"Guess I would, but he shouldn't have stolen that money."

Barely in time Danny closed his mouth against the words that rose. He was, he told himself, ageing fast. This was the first time he had not been able to take his mother and sister into his confidence.

He had to tell his mother about the fight, for the visible evidence of it could not be ignored.

"I'll never blame you for getting into trouble defending the weak," Mrs. Reddington said.

The dinner was cold, but he enjoyed it. After dinner he stretched out on a quilt on the green lawn. Rosemary lay down beside him, and his mother sat in a chair a few feet distant. It was one of those domestic interludes which Danny enjoyed so much, but he had the feeling that it might be the last.

"It's so good to have you come home once in a while, Danny," his mother said, "but how did you happen to get off today?"

"As a matter of fact, Mom, I had a little argument with Ray Deever. I'm not sure that I'll go back to work at all."

"But I thought you liked Mr. Deever so well!"

"And Maurine a lot more," Rosemary put in her two cents worth.

"Me liking them don't necessarily mean that they like me."

"I'll bet they do," Mrs. Reddington said.

"Anyway, we'll soon find out," Rosemary chirped. Here comes Mr. Deever now."

IV

DANNY walked to the gate when Ray Deever stopped. He waited for his employer to speak. So far as he could see Ray's customary friendly expression was in place.

"Hate to disturb you, Danny, but if you are comin' back to the ranch tonight I'd like you to ride out with me. Want to talk to you," Deever said.

"All right, Ray. Just as soon as Mom rustles me some clean clothes and I saddle up. Better get off and come in."

"Thanks, I will. I always did like to chat with your mother."

The good-looking cowman dismounted and walked into the yard. He carried his big black hat in his hand.

"Come in, Mr. Deever," Mrs. Reddington said. "Nice day, isn't it?"

"It's always nice here, Ma'am," Deever said. "Shade and grass—that's always heaven to a cowman. And when there are beautiful ladies present—"

"Why, you flatterer," Mrs. Reddington blushed with pleasure. "Rosemary, go and make some lemonade. Oh, it's not for you, Mr. Deever. If you're going to take Danny away I must give him some lemonade. But of course if you like lemonade—"

"I'm crazy about lemonade," Ray Deever grinned.

Mrs. Reddington naturally turned the conversation to the robbery. "I know Mr. James is a pompous little crank, but I just can't believe he would steal money from the county, do you, Mr. Deever?"

"These days you can't tell who might be a thief," Deever said. "You just can't trust anybody."

"Oh, I wouldn't say that," Mrs. Reddington smiled. "I know I can trust my son, and I suspect he trusts you the same way I do him."

Danny came up in time to hear that, and he saw Deever's hand tremble as he put down his glass.

"Well, Danny, if you're ready—" Deever said.

"I'm ready," Danny said firmly.

They rode in silence for a couple of miles. "I noticed someone was prowling around the smokehouse last night," Deever threw out with assumed casualty.

"That so? I thought the smokehouse was empty."

"It is—but they went to the trouble of taking the hinges off the door to get in."

"Anything missing?"

"I don't know. If there is, somebody wants to watch his step. There might be a funeral."

There was no mistaking the threat. Ray Deever's bold eyes were upon Danny even more threateningly than the words. Danny suddenly resolved to have the thing out in the open.

"I forgot to tell you, Ray," he said. "I was out in the barn when you and Fred got home last night."

"I see," Deever said after a period of silence. "So it was you who visited the smokehouse?"

"That's right."

"Where's the money?"

"I don't know anything about no money. If I did my memory is bad."

"It can be restored—or stopped like a clock," Ray Deever said grimly. "Listen, Danny, you're not much more than a kid. Some things you don't understand. Don't shoulder into a game where you don't savvy the rules."

"You've already blasted Willis James' reputation," Danny replied. "I can't think you'd have anything to do with a thing like that unless the Juglars had something on you. I've looked up to you, Ray, almost like you were my father. In fact I hoped that some day you would be. Maurine and me haven't ever talked, but—"

"Maurine is going to marry Fred Juglar," Ray said harshly. "I've liked you, Danny, but a man like my pardner is a hell of a lot better match for my daughter than a fifty dollar a month cowpoke."

"Looks like I'd have to lower my sights," Danny said finally. "I figured you for a top man, but I guess you're just a snake with his belly in the dust."

"Why, you young squirt!" Ray Deever snarled, and wheeled over against Danny's

horse. His eyes snapped fire. He seized Danny's reins and threw the horse back on its haunches, and made a desperate effort to throw the animal. Danny's foot flew up and kicked Deever's horse in the nose. It reared back and Ray's hold on Danny's reins was broken.

"I suppose you want to beat me up," Danny said. "You can probably do it. I never figured I could lick you, but if you want to get off I'll do my little best."

"I'd better not," Deever said, breathing hard. "But if you don't hand over that money you stole, or if you ever mention any of this business to Maurine I'll kill you, and I don't mean maybe. Who the hell do you think you are that you can stand up to me and the Juglar boys?"

"Just as you said — a fifty dollar cowpoke."

"You won't give it up then?"

"No."

"All right. All I got to say is watch yourself. You make one move and you'll find yourself in a barrel without even a bunghole to breathe through. And from now on stay off the Spade. I'll settle with you in town on the first of the month."

Deever wheeled his horse and galloped rapidly down the road.

Danny suddenly found himself as weak as a rag. He was fired, but he was glad that the issue was now out where it could be grappled with. He was still stunned by Deever's tirade, and bitter and angry over the fellow's avowed intention to have Maurine marry Fred Juglar. It hurt to think that he had been so completely fooled by a man. Deever was acting as he would have expected Fred Juglar to act.

HIS impulse was to turn back to town and tell everything he knew about the robbery, but there were angles. His foes were powerful and tricky enough to leave him out on a limb. They might even contrive to send him to the penitentiary. And there was Maurine to consider. He didn't want to hurt her until he was absolutely forced to do so.

He started to turn back to town, but he stopped after he had gone a short distance. He hated to tell his mother that he had been fired. He wanted to remove that money from the Spade, but Deever and Juglar were sure to be watching against that, this night at least.

He was still riding a Spade horse, but until he got his wages he was entitled to the animal. There was a line cabin belonging to the outfit up in Buckaroo Canyon which was not being used right now, but was always stocked with simple groceries in case a puncher dropped in. It would be a good place to think things out.

The only thing he could think of to do was get that money back to the county some way. That would clear Willis James of suspicion, and perhaps keep Maurine from knowing that her father was a thief. Of course Deever and the Juglars would be after him relentlessly, but that could be faced later.

Danny was well into Buckaroo Canyon before he remembered that it divided Ladybug from Tamarack Mountain, and that Maurine was up on Ladybug that day with Fred Juglar. However, she would be on the other side of the mountain and there wasn't a chance that he would meet her. But he hadn't gone half a mile further when he met the girl right in the middle of the trail.

"Maurine!"

"Danny!"

Their exclamations came simultaneously.

"What are you doing—" Once more their voices blended, and they both laughed, but without much mirth.

"I'm riding down Buckaroo Canyon and you're riding up. Now let's begin singly. How do you happen to be riding up here when you're supposed to be in Rainville?" the girl asked.

"Your dad fired me, so I'm hunting a three-year-old colt I thought might be ranging up here."

"That's a lie. Now let me think of mine."

"No lie," Danny said. "I was really fired. Your dad came to town to tell me."

"I can't understand it," the girl said. "Yes, maybe I can, too. Maybe it ties up with my reason for coming home this way."

"And what is that?"

"Fred Juglar just asked me to marry him."

"I'm not surprised. Ray told me it was in the cards. He didn't want you throwing yourself away on a cowpoke."

"Oh, Danny, why didn't you ask me to marry you long ago?"

"I wanted something to offer you."

"Like Fred Juglar has got. Property. Money. I don't care anything about it. He's thirty-eight years old — only four years younger than my father. I told him that I wouldn't marry him, but he only laughed. He seems so *sure* I will. He said Dad wanted me to, and if he fired you it looks like it," Maurine said angrily.

"I wish there was something I could do," Danny said miserably.

"You can marry me, can't you?"

"Not—not yet."

"Of course if you're not sure that you love me enough—"

"Good lord, I'm crazy about you! But until things straighten out I can't do a thing."

"If I wasn't in love with you, Danny, I'd probably marry Fred and think I'd made a good bargain. Don't put too much strain on a girl."

"Wait till I get a job," he pleaded.

"If we get married Dad would hire you back whether Fred liked it or not. If he wouldn't then we'd go somewhere else."

"You know I have to support my mother and Rosemary. I wouldn't take a chance the way things are, on your account. That's why I've never said nothin'."

"That's no way to go about getting a wife, Danny," Maurine said. "You wouldn't have said you were in love with me if I hadn't dragged it out of you. And by the way—*did* you say you loved me?"

"I've always loved you."

"But you won't marry me?"

"Not now. Not until—" He simply couldn't tell her that her father was a thief.

"I never liked the idea of being an old maid, Danny. Danny! You've been in a fight. Was—was it with Dad?"

"No, it was with a couple of other fellows."

"Well, I'm going to have things out with Dad. Oh, I wish I hadn't grown up. It was nice being a kid, and everybody's pet, without somebody wanting to marry me. Somebody I don't want to marry, I mean." She spurred her horse on down the canyon.

He rode on to the line cabin far up the canyon and hoppled his horse. There was grub and he cooked himself a simple supper. He had an idea that he might have callers before morning if Maurine told her father where she had met him. For that reason he didn't think it advisable to sleep too near the cabin. He habitually awoke before daybreak, so that when dawn came over the canyon he was where he could see the cabin, but could not be seen from there.

There was nobody in sight, but he had an uneasy feeling which he attributed to an over-excited imagination. He circled clear around the cabin, but could see no tracks. Finally, as the sun came up, he decided his fears were groundless and approached the cabin. Then, as he opened the door and stepped inside, a loop suddenly dropped over his shoulders, and he was jerked to one side. As he struggled against the rope a heavy fist drove into his face and he went to his knees. Someone stooped over and removed his gun from the holster.

Dazed, Danny staggered to his feet. Through half-glazed eyes he saw that Fred Juglar held the rope, while the man who had hit him was Fred's brother Pete, the sheriff. No sooner had he got to his feet than Pete Juglar hit him again, and once more Danny went to the floor.

V

AS DANNY went down the second time Fred Juglar put his foot in the middle of the puncher's back, and cinched up the rope until Danny's arms were pinioned to his sides, and he was unable to even move them.

"Now, cowpunch, want to do some talkin', or do you want a real workin' over?" Fred demanded.

Danny said nothing. He lay on his stomach with his face pressed against the dirty floor. The heel of Fred's boot grinding into his spine caused him exquisite agony.

"Won't talk, eh?" the sheriff said, and kicked him contemptuously in the ribs.

The men dragged the puncher's hands behind his back, and the sheriff slipped on a pair of handcuffs. Then they lifted Danny to his feet, and Fred allowed the short lasso noose to slide down to his ankles.

"Now we ain't goin' to fool with you, sonny," the sheriff growled. "You hid twenty-eight thousand dollars you stole, an' we want it. Where is it?"

"I don't know."

Pete Juglar's fist cracked against Danny's

jaw, and as he fell Fred jerked the rope. The back of Danny's head hit the dirt floor with resounding force. He lay half stunned.

What followed was to remain a nightmare to Danny. He lost all count of how many times they lifted him up in order to knock him down. His only possible defense was to let his legs go limber and collapse as soon as they let go of him. He knew that they took turns beating him, but soon he ceased to even care who hit him, or how hard. He drifted into merciful oblivion at last.

Danny revived only when they threw a bucket of cold water over him. He opened his eyes and an involuntary groan escaped him. Every fiber of his body shrieked from pain.

"Yuh goin' to talk or do you want us to do it all over again?" Fred demanded.

"You can beat me to death. but you can't make me talk," Danny said weakly.

"By God, I'll show you," Fred roared.

"Wait!" Pete ordered. "He's a stubborn coot. Now listen, Reddington; you don't understand the situation. The game is up. Willis James has confessed that he took that money out of the safe, and turned it over to somebody else. We can make him say it was you. All we want is the money back. Tell us where it is an' no charges will be filed."

"We can easy prove you wasn't at the bunkhouse night before last," Fred added.

"You're talkin'—I'm not," Danny defied.

"Be reasonable, an' save yoreself any more grief," the sheriff argued. "You can't git away with that money, an' if you try givin' it back you'll only convict yoreself of bein' the man who made James open his safe. We're holdin' James in jail because everybody knows he was the only one that could open the safe, an' nobody believes he was scared into doin' it."

"I've rested up now, I can stand some more beating," Danny told them.

The blond brothers looked at each other. Bullies at heart, they couldn't understand this kind of defiance.

"You think it over," Sheriff Juglar said. "I'll be back tonight, and if we can't make you talk then I'll take you in. It'll be the penitentiary for you."

The officer leaned over and removed the handcuffs, but they tied his hands with the other end of the rope. They went out, leaving him stretched out upon the floor. He soon drifted into a sleep that was more like unconsciousness.

Danny roused when he heard someone rattling the door, but he was too sore to move, and too sluggish in his mind as yet to realize that he was tied. Then he heard a voice crying out. "Oh, Danny, Danny, what have they done to you?"

Then, although it was like driving spikes into his flesh, he managed to roll over on his back, and open his blackened and swollen eyes just enough to recognize Maurine.

"What are you doing here?" he asked through thickened lips.

"Hush," she said tenderly. "Let me cut these ropes."

It was but a moment until his hands and feet were free. She helped him sit up, then pressed a dipper of water to his lips. He had never known that water could taste so good. She helped him to his feet then, and from there to a bunk. Burning indignation blazed through the tears.

"Did Fred Juglar do this?" she asked.

"Him an' Pete," Danny said. "I let 'em surprise me."

"It was my fault," the girl said. "I told Dad I saw you up here, and he must have told them. What's it all about, Danny?"

"They don't seem to like me."

Maurine frowned. "I asked Dad why he fired you, and he said it was because you were mixed up someway in that county treasury robbery. He thinks it was all a bluff about you having a sick horse, and that you were in town that night. I told him it was fantastic. I know you wouldn't get mixed up in a thing like that."

"I didn't. But they may hang it onto me just the same."

"Mr. James has confessed now that he was held up by a single man who forced him to open the safe. He says the man wore a mask. Some think it was one of those French sheepmen who got so mad at having to pay taxes, but Dad and Fred pretend to believe it was you."

Danny knew that if he told the girl the truth and implicated her father she would not believe him.

"How did you happen to come out here?" he asked.

"I don't know. I saw Fred talking to Dad, and I didn't like the looks of things.

I thought I'd find out. But if the sheriff was here and they think you are guilty why didn't they arrest you?"

"The sheriff don't think I'm guilty. He knows damn' well I ain't. But I've got information he wants."

"I don't know what it's all about," Maurine worried.

"Let it go," Danny begged. "Fred and Pete will soon be back here, and if you don't mind I'd rather not be here. But I sure am obliged to you for turnin' me loose."

Maurine put her hands on his shoulders. "Danny, if you can look me in the eye and tell me you know nothing about that robbery I'll believe you," she said.

"I can't tell you that," Danny replied slowly. "All I can say is that I didn't rob Willis James, and I wasn't in cahoots with him."

"It doesn't seem to be enough," the girl sighed. "What are you holding back?"

"I've told you everything I can."

DANNY got his hat and staggered over to the door. His foes had taken his gun, and they might have taken his horse.

"Danny, where are you going?" Maurine cried.

"Thought I'd see if they left me a horse."

"Danny!! If you don't even try to clear yourself on this charge I—I'll marry Fred Juglar."

He didn't look back. There was nothing he could say. He was so weak and sore that he slipped constantly to his knees on the slick pine grass as he climbed the canyon.

He found his horse presently, and got the animal back to where he had hidden his saddle and bridle. He rode slowly down to the cabin. He was sure the Juglars would not show up again before dark.

Maurine was gone, but she had not left immediately. She had built a fire, and there was coffee simmering in the blackened camp coffee pot, and a loaf of bread and a quarter of a pound of butter upon the table. These she must have brought from home. She had also sliced bacon, so all he had to do was fry it and he would have a meal.

He fried the bacon and ate with ravenous hunger, although constantly keeping watch against the arrival of his enemies. It was sundown inside the canyon when he finished. He wrapped the remainder of the bread, a chunk of bacon and three cans of tomatoes in his slicker and rode away. Every movement of his horse was torture to his beaten body.

He cut across through the timber to Ladybug Mountain, and gradually worked down toward the Spade. It was long since dark before he reached the outskirts of the ranch, but he waited another two hours before he concealed his horse far from the road and went on on foot. A tightly tied horse hair around his mount's nose would prevent the animal from nickering.

He had to get that money before the thieves recovered it. It probably wouldn't help to establish his innocence, but he had entered the game when he took it out of the smokehouse, and he was now going to see it through to the bitter end.

He couldn't understand why Willis James had confessed, since he had every reason to suppose that James had had nothing whatever to do with it. He supposed sheer funk had caused the man to take what he supposed was the safest way out. But that false confession would make it difficult to ever convict Deever and the Juglars.

Long since Danny had come to the conclusion that Ray Deever was not worth protecting for his own sake. For Maurine's sake he hoped the man's part would never be known. But regardless of that Danny now had a score to settle with the Juglars which nothing short of death could stop.

He was an hour worming his way up to the back door of the stable. He stopped, rigid, when he heard the front door of the barn open. A minute later he heard Ray Deever speaking to his horse.

Danny stayed there, frozen in the shadow, while the rancher led his horse out the front way and mounted. Danny heard the man start to gallop furiously toward Rainville, then he swiftly entered the barn and dragged the pair of saddle-bags from under the loose board in the manger.

He was gone scarcely no time at all, but as he stepped outside again he heard a shot from far up the road. A shot at that time of night meant trouble. With the saddle-bags flung over his shoulder Danny ran desperately across the field toward his horse.

He got across an irrigation canal on a

headgate, but as he topped the opposite bank he saw a horse with an empty saddle trotting back toward the barn. He knew that it was the horse Ray Deever had just ridden away. Something had happened to Deever!

Danny dropped down behind the canal bank and waited to see if anyone else had heard the shot. He saw the animal stop at the corral gate, but no one came out. He made his way back to his own horse, fastened on the saddle-bags, then mounted and rode slowly along the fence toward the gate on the Rainville road.

Fifty feet from the gate he stopped. The gate was partly open, and there in the dusty middle of the road lay the huddled figure of a man!

Reluctantly Danny forced himself to dismount, and move toward the huddled figure without ever leaving a clear track which might be identified. He was not surprised to see that it was Ray Deever, and the rancher was dead. Maurine, it flashed into Danny's mind, was now wholly an orphan. And who, the thought came instantly, was going to be suspected of the murder? The answer was Danny Reddington!

VI

DANNY stood there for several minutes looking down at the man he had once thought to be his friend. All bitterness toward Deever vanished, but it only increased the hate in his heart against the two Juglars. They were the men who had wrecked Deever's life as well as Danny's.

Deever had enemies among the many men he had had fist fights with, but Danny doubted that there was a killing enemy among them. But somebody had killed him —someone who must have had some reason to suppose that Deever would be on the road at one o'clock in the morning. It had to be, Danny thought, one of the Juglars. Pete, probably, since Fred likely was at the ranch.

If the Juglars had killed Deever it must be because there had been some sort of falling out. And why, he wondered, had Deever started to town at that hour? What had happened?

He realized that Deever had been shot while he was off his horse opening the gate. He had fallen on his face. The man's six-gun was still in the holster—and Danny badly needed a gun. It took a minute for him to decide to appropriate the weapon. It was truly a momentous decision. If he was caught with Deever's gun in his possession it would be more damaging evidence against him than a written confession of murder.

Desperate gamble that it was he decided to take it. Any chance was better than being unarmed with men like the Juglars looking for him. With Deever's gun he might obtain another weapon and discard this one.

Still careful with the tracks he withdrew to his horse and mounted. He hated to leave the dead man lying there in the dust, but he had no choice.

"Nice fix I'd be in with this gun and these saddle-bags if I was caught now," Danny murmured.

He turned his horse and headed back toward Ladybug Mountain.

It was already dawn when Danny stopped at the workings of an old mica mine far up the timbered slopes of Ladybug. It had been abandoned for many years, but there was a great bank of the mica that glistened in the sun like pure snow. There were a number of old cabins, grown over and concealed by brush and moss. There was a spring of cold water near at hand, and the sarvis bushes all around were loaded with sweet, blackberries. They would go a long way toward helping out with his meager diet.

Carrying the two precious saddle-bags which had already given him so much trouble, and his small supply of food, he made his way to the best concealed cabin of the lot. Part of the roof had fallen in and there was no door. There had never been anything but a dirt floor, but it offered shelter and concealment, and rest. And rest was what Danny had to have. This night of riding and creeping after the terrible beating he had received from the Juglar brothers had weakened him so that every move was torture.

His horse still had to be tended. He got the saddle off, led the animal into a small, brushy draw and hoppled it. Then he got back to the cabin, spread the saddle blanket on the dirt floor and lay down.

He awoke completely bewildered, and so sore of muscle and tendon that he could

scarcely move. After a moment he remembered where he was, and he saw that it was twilight. He had been asleep for anyway twelve hours. He sat up and felt for Deever's gun. It was still there, and it was still just as pregnant with danger for him as it had ever been.

The saddle-bags were where he had left them. He opened them now for the first time, and there was just enough light for him to see that they contained dirty but perfectly good bills of rather large denomination. He counted the money, and there was twenty-eight thousand dollars.

He replaced the money in the saddle-bags, and tossed them far back under that part of the roof that had fallen in. Then he gouged a couple of holes in a tomato can with his pocket knife and consumed the contents. He lay back on his blanket and slept until morning.

Twenty-four hours of complete rest had restored his strength, and after he exercised a little he found his body and limbs less sore. He made a breakfast of another can of tomatoes, what bread he had and a few handfuls of sarvis berries. Feeling better he went in search of his horse.

By this time he would be publicly accused of the robbery, and of the murder of Ray Deever. It would break his mother's heart, and he knew that sensitive, affectionate Rosemary would think that her life was completely ruined. His mother probably was the only person in the world who would not believe him guilty.

He found his horse doing all right, and returned to the cabin. He looked for the saddle-bags and they were still there. He sized things up, put his weight against a rotten log, and the sagging section of roof dropped another two feet. The saddle-bags were completely out of sight, and they could be reached only by tearing away the broken timbers. No one would ever suspect that anything could have been hidden there.

That job was finished. Whatever happened to him the Juglars would never profit from their crookedness and murder.

He carried his things into the brush, and removed all evidence that the cabin had ever been inhabited. This done he climbed slowly to the top of a ridge overlooking the country clear to Rainville, and sat in the shade to watch.

He expected Sheriff Pete Juglar would have a posse out looking for him—perhaps several posses, for Ray Deever, in spite of his predilection for fistic violence, had been popular. He had last been seen in Buckaroo Canyon, so it was not improbable that the search would extend to Ladybug Mountain.

Nor was he wrong. About noon he counted a posse of eight men riding up to the old mica mine. He had been extremely careful, but he might have left some sign that they could find. They looked all around, and he was sure they looked into all the old cabins, but since they could not really expect to find him there at that time of day their inspection seemed to be casual. Only by an accident could they find his horse, and they didn't even look in that direction. The posse spent perhaps half an hour in the vicinity and rode away. They passed along the sidehill below where Danny watched them.

Forty-five minutes later Danny saw a lone horseman ride up to the pile of glittering mica.

The man was Chuck Henson, from the Spade. Henson dismounted and looked around. Danny could see that his inspection was much more thorough than that of the posse. Danny could feel a certain clamminess along the back of his neck that always came with a sense of danger. Yet he got up and moved down the ridge toward the cabins.

HENSON had been his best friend on the outfit. He was a much older man than Danny, being at least forty-five. He was peaceful and inoffensive, but undoubtedly loyal to his outfit. If he believed that Danny had killed Ray Deever he would be implacable in his vengeance. But why, Danny wondered, was he riding alone? Why had he come to this particular place?

Danny hunkered down not far from the mica pile and watched. Chuck could have been a great help to him if he could be trusted. Finally Chuck fought his way out of the brush, and to Danny's dismay he was carrying a freshly opened tomato can. Danny had flung both cans into the creek, sure that they would be carried far down the stream. Apparently one of them had lodged and Henson had found it. It was enough to

let the puncher know that Danny had been there.

As Danny watched Henson scooped out a hole in the white mica, dropped the empty can into it, and smoothed it over.

Was it a genuine desire to cover Danny's tracks? Did he hope that perhaps Danny was watching him, and would construe the act as a friendly one and come out? Danny didn't know. He just couldn't afford to take chances.

Finally Henson mounted his horse and rode away, but Danny was far too smart to show himself. For all he knew the puncher might be hiding in the timber watching the place just as he was.

Ten minutes later it seemed that this conclusion was right. Danny caught a glimpse of a horse through the timber, and then a horseman rode out in the small clearing around the old mine. But it wasn't Chuck Henson. It was Fred Juglar!

The big blond rancher dismounted and walked straight to the place where Chuck had concealed the tin can in the mica. Juglar kicked the can out, held it up and examined it. He didn't seem satisfied. Finally he tossed the can out on top of the mica pile where it gleamed brightly in the sunlight, and set off toward the cabins.

Danny was glad now that he had not yielded to the temptation to speak to Chuck Henson. Whether Chuck had proved friendly or not it would have been fatal. He got up, and with his hand on Ray Deever's gun, moved stealthily toward the cabins.

Fred Juglar was just coming out of the cabin where the twenty-eight thousand dollars was hidden when Danny stepped around the corner and spoke.

"You looking for somebody, Juglar?" he asked.

Juglar whirled, and his hand struck at his gun. He saw the gun in Danny's hand, and his arms spread wide in token of nonresistance.

"You dirty coward, why don't you go on and finish your draw?" Danny taunted. "You know I'm going to kill you anyway."

Juglar's white skin was whiter still as he ran his tongue over his suddenly dry lips. "Let's talk this over," he got out.

"You can talk if you want to, but you ain't got a rope on me this time, an' your brother to help you," Danny said. "When I shoot you, Juglar, I'm going to let you have it in the guts so you'll do some suffering. And I'm going to kick your slats in while you're dying."

"Look Danny—all I want is that money. Pete an' me forced James to confess that somebody took it away from him. We can still make him identify one of them French sheepmen."

"Don't you recognize this gun?" Danny asked cynically. "I know that Ray Deever was killed night before last, and the murder will be hung onto me. I'd rather be hanged for killing you than for killing Ray, even if I had killed him. You can make only one deal with me, Jugler."

"What's that, Danny?" the man asked eagerly.

"You can visit the Spade with me at midnight, and we'll call Maurine. You can take your choice then of telling her the truth about the robbery and who killed her father, or getting that bullet in the guts I promised you. And I'll take your gun now."

With his gun pressed against the man's stomach Danny reached out and took Juglar's gun. He stepped back quickly, and then he heard Chuck Henson's voice directly behind him.

"All right," Chuck said grimly. "Now I'll take both guns."

VII

DANNY didn't move. Chuck was directly back of him, and in position to shatter his spine. But he kept the gun in his own hand pointed at Juglar.

"You try to shoot me, Chuck, and I'll sure as hell get Juglar," he said without turning.

"I heard some talk," Henson answered. "I don't want to shoot anybody, but I want them guns. I can handle the situation." He took Juglar's gun out of Danny's left hand, then said, "Stand back, Juglar."

Juglar took a couple of steps backward. Then Chuck's bony fingers closed around the barrel of the other gun, and as Danny felt Chuck's gun pressed against his own spine he had to let go.

The instant Danny lost the gun Fred Juglar made a tremendous spring which took him around the corner of the old cabin.

"Fred, come back here!" Chuck yelled,

but he didn't fire. They heard the man bulling through the brush like a buffalo.

"By gad, if he leaves here he'll do it afoot," Chuck said. The puncher was loaded down with guns, but he made Danny move so that he could watch him, and Juglar's horse at the same time.

"Well, you raised hell, Chuck," Danny said bitterly. "If you'd have stayed out of this I'd have got this whole business cleared up tonight."

"That was Ray's gun you were packin'," Chuck said harshly. "Where'd you git it?"

"Out of his holster night before last."

"You killed him then?"

"I did not. I heard the shot that killed him, and I found him dead. I needed a gun, so I took his."

"How'd you happen to hear the shot?"

"I was in the barn at the Spade."

"What for?"

"To get twenty-eight thousand dollars that I'd hid under the manger."

"Then you robbed the county treasury?"

"I did not. That was Ray Deever and Fred Juglar. They hid the money in the smokehouse, and I moved it. I was up with my Apache horse when they got home, and I heard them talking about it. Sheriff Pete Juglar helped them git the money."

"I might believe that about the Juglars, but not about Ray."

"It was hard for me to believe, but he did. Look out! There's Juglar!"

Danny pointed toward some brush, and the old, old trick worked. Chuck Henson looked away from him for a moment and Danny sprang.

His arms wrapped around the older, smaller man, and he hurled him to the ground. Chuck struggled desperately, but Danny kept him pinned, kept him from using either gun.

Then Danny got hold of the gun which Chuck had carelessly thrust under the waistband of his trousers, and he shoved it into the puncher's ribs.

"Take it easy, Chuck, I don't want to hurt you," he urged.

"Fell for a sucker trick at my age," Chuck said disgustedly.

"Well, you put the *quietus* on me," Danny said. "I was safe enough here if you hadn't had to have a public funeral over that tin can. Now Juglar will soon be back here with a posse. I ought to stick your damned head in the crick."

"Why don't you give up?"

"Because I always figured I'd rather be shot than hanged. Anyway, while I'm loose I've got a chance to get me a Juglar."

The old puncher looked at Danny with considerable amazement. From being the best natured young puncher on the Spade he had suddenly become a grim, bitter fighter.

"Maurine didn't believe you killed her dad, but when she knows you're packin' his gun—"

"Did she send you up here?"

"That's right. She had an idee you might strike for here. Said you had said something to her once about it bein' a good hideout. She told me not to show up ahead of any posse. It looks like Fred Juglar musta guessed she knew where yuh was an' follered me."

"I've got to see Maurine," Danny said. "If I could find out why her father started to Rainville at one o'clock in the morning this thing might be cleared up. Listen, Chuck—I'm going to put my life in your hands. I want you to ask Maurine to meet me at the mouth of Buckaroo Canyon at one o'clock in the morning. Tell her that if she wants me to give myself up after I talk to her I will."

"All right, I'll tell her," Henson said. He didn't meet Danny's eye.

"If you think, Chuck, that I'll be fool enough to ride into an ambush you're mistaken. It'll only make you a laughing stock to tell the sheriff instead of Maurine," Danny said.

The puncher flushed. "Hell, can't yuh trust me?"

"No. Not as long as you think I killed Ray Deever. I can trust Maurine, and you ought to. If she thinks best for her to meet me without telling anybody about it that ought to satisfy you. All I ask is that you let her make the decision."

"I dunno. If yuh killed Ray—"

"Dammit, man, I didn't kill Ray. If I was just after that money I wouldn't be sticking around here. I'd be getting out of the country with the swag. You can come with Maurine if you want to. In fact I'd rather you did," Danny said impatiently.

"All right, I'll do it," Henson declared.

"I give yuh my word I won't tell nobody anything till I talk to Maurine."

"Good. You tell her to ride up the trail at a walk on her creamy horse, and I'll come to her. If there is more than just you two I won't show up."

"I get it, an' I hope yuh can prove yuh didn't kill Ray," Chuck said.

Danny gave the man back his gun, but retained Deever's gun and Juglar's .45. He watched Henson ride away, then got on Juglar's mount and brought in the Spade horse he had hoppled.

Ladybug Mountain was no longer safe for him. He led his own horse as he took a twisting course from canyon to canyon, always keeping within the shelter of the timber. When assured that the horse could not possibly be found by Fred Juglar he dismounted, tied up the reins and let the animal go. Mounting the other horse he continued on for a way, then turned back in the other direction, toward Buckaroo Canyon. If Juglar's horse was found the assumption would be that Danny had started to leave the country.

Sundown found him in a brushy draw running into Buckaroo. He dismounted to wait. Just before dark he saw the same posse that had been at the mica mine riding down the canyon on their way home.

HIS life was now in the hands of Chuck Henson and Maurine Deever. If the girl believed he had killed her father he couldn't blame her for trying to get him captured. And now that Chuck had seen Ray's gun in his possession the evidence against him would seem to be complete. He could only wait. The ensuing eight hours were the longest he had ever known.

Toward midnight he rode down the canyon, keeping well away from the trail at all times, except when he was forced to cross it when he came to some impasse. It was a cloudless night, with a thin slice of moon mowing its way through the stars. A steady breeze blew down the canyon, bringing the fragrant scent of wild flowers and pine. An occasional owl hooted at him from the tamaracks. It was the kind of night to make a man appreciate liberty.

He emerged from the canyon and struck a steady lope until he was a mile or more nearer the Spade than he had told Chuck Henson he would be. He rode into a dry wash close to the trail and waited. At a quarter to one he heard the pounding of hooves, and then the creak of saddle leather.

He tensed. In very few minutes he would know whether or not Chuck Henson had betrayed him. He could tell that there were two horses. Then, suddenly, Maurines' cream-colored gelding loomed before him, and the figure beside her on a gray horse was Chuck Henson.

Danny whistled, and they stopped. He rode in view and they turned off the trail.

"Chuck, this wasn't where—" the girl began.

"My fault," Danny said. "Mind riding over that low ridge there?"

"We are not being followed," Maurine said a little sharply.

"That's what Chuck thought yesterday, but he was," Danny said grimly.

They rode in silence until the ridge sheltered them from the road. Danny knew by their manner that they didn't trust him entirely. Why then, he wondered, had they come?

He turned to face them. They stopped their horses, but nobody offered to dismount.

"I brought your father's gun, Maurine," Danny said steadily. "I wish you'd take it home."

The girl took the gun, and balanced it in her hand. "If I was sure you had shot Dad I'd kill you with it right now," she said in a sudden torrent of emotion.

"Let's figure things out," he said. "You found me tied up in that line cabin without a gun. That night Ray was shot while he was opening the gate. He had fired me. We almost had a fight. Would he have handed his gun over to me, do you think, so I could have shot him?"

"I figured that out," she said. "That's why I'm here. But you did take the gun off his dead body, and you did rob Willis James of that money. If you didn't then my father did—and I'll never believe that."

"I wouldn't be in the fix I'm in if I hadn't tried to shield you and him," Danny replied, "but now you've got to hear the truth whether it hurts or not. I was in the stall with Apache when Ray and Fred Juglar got home from town. It wasn't midnight like they said. It was after two. They had

twenty-eight thousand dollars with them in two saddle-bags, which they hid in the brine barrel in the smokehouse. Maybe I should have let 'em get away with it, but I didn't see how I could. I took the door off and hid the money under the manger.

"Your father saw where my screwdriver had slipped, and since he found out I had been up that night he knew what had happened. He demanded that I return the money, but by that time I knew where it had come from and I refused. That's when he fired me.

"I didn't want to send Ray to the penitentiary. I hoped to get a chance to return the money, but when they threatened my life and framed me on a charge of taking it myself I had to pull out. I came back that night after the money. Just before I got it out from under the manger your father got his horse and started toward Rainville. Right after that I heard a shot. I went out there and found your father dead. I did take his gun. I hated to leave him there, but if I'd reported it I'd have been accused of his murder.

"Now what I want to know is why did he leave for Rainville at that time of night?"

Maurine gave a strangled sob. "It—it's hard to believe that my father was a thief," she got out. "He just couldn't have been."

"That's what I thought," Danny said gently. "This I do know: the Juglars are thieves. I hoped maybe Ray had left you some word, a note or something, why he went to town."

"If he had I'd tell you, no matter how it hurt," the girl said. "All I know is that he was badly upset when he came home. And he was more so when I told him about the way Fred and Pete had beaten you up. When Fred came home they had words, and Fred left for town in a huff. Long after Dad went to bed I could hear him walking the floor. But I must have dozed off, because I didn't hear him leave."

"It clears up one thing for me, anyway," Danny said. "Fred Juglar must have been coming home. He heard Ray, or saw him, and shot him when he reached the gate."

"If it was a killin' matter between 'em don't look like they'd have robbed the treasury together," Chuck Henson put in.

"What I think is that he was in with the Juglars getting that money, but he couldn't stomach what they did to me, and the way they forced James to confess something that hadn't happened. He walked the floor and finally made up his mind to clear things up. Fred knew he was likely to do that, so he killed him," Danny said.

"It's still hard to believe," Maurine said brokenly. "I know Dad had a violent temper, and was always getting into fights when he was drinking. But he didn't act like he had been drunk that night."

"Well, there's still only one possible way to get at the truth," Danny said. "One of the Juglars has got to talk. If they don't, it means a neck-tie party for me."

Maurine rode close, and her fingers closed over Danny's. "Danny," she said, "I don't believe you are guilty. I can't believe it. I want to help you any way I can."

"Me, too," Chuck Henson chimed in.

"Well, it's not half so hard to face if there's somebody believes in me," Danny said with relief. "Now maybe we can plan. The first thing is to get a hold of Fred or Pete. To do that, you've got to let people think the only thing you want is to see me hanged."

"I'll willing to do anything—short of murder," Maurine said after a moment.

VIII

DAYBREAK found Danny and Chuck Henson standing in front of the tumbled-down cabin where Danny had hidden the stolen money. It had been all the two of them could do to raise that roof enough to get at the saddle-bags, but now they were out—and empty.

The twenty-eight thousand dollars was rolled up in a slicker on the back of Chuck's saddle. The saddle-bags were on Danny's saddle.

"Now don't forget yourself, and untie that slicker to get a sack of Bull Durham," Danny cautioned.

"I ain't goin' to draw an easy breath till I turn this dang stuff over to Maurine," Chuck said. "You're the one to be careful. They'll be combin' this mountain again like a monkey lookin' fer fleas."

"I'll try to keep out of sight," Danny said. "I'll see you at midnight, same place."

He watched Chuck ride away, and heaved a sigh of relief that the stolen money was

no longer on his conscience. He got on his horse and once more headed through the timber toward Buckaroo Canyon. He had to spend the day there somewhere, probably dodging posses. He had no fear that Maurine would fail him, but would the Juglar brothers take the bait? It was his only hope for vindication, but he wasn't underestimating the danger either for himself or for the girl.

He still believed that the Juglars, much as they would like to get him out of the way, would rather have the money.

The tedium of waiting was relieved, not too pleasantly, by the sight of three different posses searching for him. Twice he had to move from what he considered perfectly safe places in order to avoid them. But with the coming of darkness he was reasonably sure the posses had gone home. Most of them, no doubt, believed that he had taken the twenty-eight thousand dollars and quit the country.

He could now move more freely, but he avoided the main canyon until he finally descended upon the line cabin where he had had such an unpleasant experience. His body was still sore from the beating, but it could be endured now without nauseating agony.

Assured that there was no one lurking about he approached the cabin on foot, carrying the two empty saddle-bags. Some cold cowpuncher had long ago dragged in a lot of dead poles to have handy for firewood, and it took but a minute or so to conceal the saddle-bags under the wood. He returned to his horse and rode cautiously down the canyon.

A girl had to be courageous in order to ride that lonely canyon alone at midnight, but Maurine was without fear. She would be carrying a gun, and Danny knew that she could use it.

That day Maurine was to tell Fred Juglar that Danny had asked for an interview with her through Chuck Henson. She would tell the man that she had at first refused, but on his second appeal that he would give back the stolen money if she would meet him, she had sent Henson to inform Danny that she would be there.

Then, hating him for the murder of her father, she had pretended to betray his confidence. She was to tell Juglar about the rendezvous so that his brother, the sheriff, could have a posse on hand to grab the fugitive.

If the Juglars showed up with a posse the plan would fail. Danny counted upon the fact that it was the money they wanted and that they would not take anyone into their confidence.

AT THE narrow place near the mouth of the canyon Danny halted, and hid his horse in a thicket, after resorting to the old trick of a horse hair to insure that his horse did not betray him. Then he moved down behind a big rock, just across Buckaroo Creek from the trail and crouched there waiting.

An hour and a half later he heard the creak of saddle leather. His heart beat tumultuously. It was dark in this part of the canyon, but the men would pass within twenty feet of where he crouched. Two men meant a possible chance for success. More than two meant failure.

They came into sight—two men! Danny recognized them by their bulk even before he could see their faces.

His hiding place had been cunningly chosen. Right below him the trail crossed the creek. He knew there were ten chances to one their horses would stop to drink. Cow ponies always tried to finangle a little rest by pretending great thirst every time they crossed a creek. The animals the Juglars were riding proved no exception.

"Let 'em drink," he heard Fred say. "We got plenty time."

"Plenty of time if that girl shows up," Pete answered.

"Don't worry about Maurine," Fred laughed. "The way she's hatin' Danny Reddington right now she'd ride through a forest fire to get at him. She ain't afraid of nothin' noway, any more than her old man was."

"Well, once we get our hands on that money we've got to be sure she keeps her mouth shut."

"Don't worry. Hell, she won't give us away. We can still make her believe that Reddington killed Ray, an' she'll give up the money an' marry me to keep people from finding out her dad was a thief."

The horses raised their heads and slobbered, and the men rode on.

Danny wanted to settle things with them then and there, but his personal feelings had to wait. What counted now was evidence that would stand in court. The stolen money was planted in Fred Juglar's room at the ranch right now, and if they could be inveigled into admitting the crime to Maurine their goose would be cooked.

It was still another hour before Danny again heard horsemen. This time it was Maurine and Chuck. He stepped out in the trail in front of them.

"Have they passed?" the girl asked eagerly.

"An hour ago. They stopped at the crossing and I heard 'em talk. They count on you to keep still because of your father, and because they think you still believe I killed Ray."

"Then we'll get them," Maurine said in a trembling voice.

"I hope so, but I wish to God you didn't have to take any chances."

"But the way we planned it I won't be taking any," Maurine declared.

"Yeah—if our plans work out. Plans sometimes slip."

"You couldn't make me back out," the girl said with spirit. "I've had time to think it over. I loved my father, perhaps more than I should. But if he was a thief I can't let innocent people suffer to shield his reputation."

"All right, but for God's sake don't let 'em look into them saddle-bags till you get back to the ranch."

"I'll not," Maurine promised. "I'll ride right up to the cabin, and drag the saddle-bags out from under the wood-pile. That will bring them out of their ambush, of course. I'll tell them that you intercepted me down the canyon, and that I promised to give you help if you'd tell me where the money was."

"And then they'll want the money?"

"And I'll tell them I want to keep it for the reward. Then they'll have to tell me the truth, and try to frighten me into keeping still because of Dad. Meantime, I'll be tying the saddle-bags onto my saddle, and I'll tell them I intend to keep them there till we get home, so I can claim Dad's share. There'll be no danger if you boys keep out of sight," she asserted.

"Maybe not. But if there is, you get on the ground and stay there," Danny said.

"Even if they do find out there is no money they'll only think that I have been tricked," Maurine pointed out.

"I wish I hadn't had to drag you into it. I'd rather go myself—"

"Which wouldn't prove anything at all, except that you would be killed. We're not going to change any plans, Danny," she said in a tone that ended further argument.

THE three of them rode slowly up the trail to within a short distance of the line cabin. They halted, and looked at each other silently. From here Maurine was going to be on her own. She was the least nervous of the three. Chuck was so visibly agitated that Danny dared not let him go further lest he unwittingly give the alarm.

"I'll be all right," Maurine assured them.

"Anyway, just remember I'll be on hand if anything goes wrong," Danny said. "You just concentrate on keeping out of the way of bullets if things don't work out right."

"What'll I do?" Chuck queried.

"You stay here with our horses, and come a-runnin' if you hear us holler for help," Danny directed.

He walked a short distance alongside the girl's horse. "I'll have to turn off here," he whispered. "Good luck."

"Good luck," she returned, and gave him a firm handclasp. He noted, however, that her hand was cold.

She disappeared in the darkness, and Danny took to the brush. It was darker than he liked. He couldn't see the cabin until he was within twenty yards of it. But a moment later he made out Maurine's horse. At the same time he heard the clatter of the wood-pile being disturbed. He could get no closer without too much chance of being seen. He wondered where the Juglars were. They were in hiding somewhere close, waiting for him to show up and be killed.

Then he had the answer. He saw Maurine walking toward her horse with the two saddle-bags, and then Fred Juglar stepped out of the cabin.

"Maurine!" the man called. "Where's Reddington?"

"He met me in the canyon. He wouldn't come up here for fear of a trap. But he told me where the money was," Danny heard the girl answer.

Danny hadn't looked for the man's greed to be quite so obvious.

"Give me the saddle-bags, honey," Juglar said. "I'll take care of 'em."

"No." Maurine's voice sounded a little thin, as if she were beginning to get scared. "I can take care of them all right. There may be a reward, you know."

"That money ain't goin' back to the county, sweetheart," Juglar stated harshly. "An' you ain't tellin' nobody that you ever found it."

"Why, Fred, I don't know what you mean."

"You soon will. Look, Maurine; do you know who stole that money?"

"Why, I thought Willis James or Danny Reddington were accused—"

"So they were. But Reddington had nothing to do with it."

"He didn't!"

"I kind of hate to break this to you, Maurine, but Ray Deever was the man that stole that money—your own father."

"I don't believe it," Maurine cried.

THE girl was hearing part of the truth, and that truth, even though she had been prepared for it was destroying her faith in the man who had been her idol. Danny wished that she could have been spared that.

"All Reddington done was ketch yore dad hidin' the money, an' he stole it. Then he killed Ray when he come back after the money," Juglar said.

"If my father did steal it you and your brother Pete were in on it," Maurine said clearly.

"That would be kinda hard to prove," Juglar commented. "I can prove that I wasn't even with Deever in Rainville till we started home."

The talk wasn't going the way Maurine had thought it would. Dangerous as it was, Danny edged closer, keeping the cabin between himself and them. Pete Juglar was close around, he knew, but he hadn't the slightest idea where.

"I'll believe Danny's story before I will yours," the girl said. "He says he caught both you and Father hiding the money. If he had meant to steal it when he took it out of that smokehouse he wouldn't have given it back to me."

"You'd believe the murderer of your own father?"

Excitement was creeping into Maurine's voice. The strain was telling on her heavily.

She could read danger no less clearly than Danny. This was her own idea, but Danny wished that he had kept her from getting into it.

"Danny didn't kill my father. You did," she accused flatly.

"So that's what you think. And now you're going to hand the money back to the county, an' accuse me an' Pete of murder. You couldn't prove nothin', but now that the county has lost that money it's goin' to stay lost. Hand over them saddle-bags," Juglar ordered.

"I will not. I—I'm going to see that I get my share," the girl cried.

Danny breathed easier. He had been afraid she would forget that part.

"Oh, so you're goin' to be reasonable after all!" Juglar exclaimed. "That's better. Now we can talk terms. You wouldn't want it to come out that your father was a common thief."

"No, I wouldn't," Maurine said miserably. "But keep away from me. If I have to keep still I'm going to keep this money till I get home an' make sure I get my third."

"You won't have to be satisfied with a third," Juglar smirked. "Listen, honey; you're my pardner in the Spade now. When we're married it'll be under one ownership, an' this money will help us make the biggest outfit in the country."

"I'll not marry you," Maurine defied.

"I think you will. A wife can't testify against her husband. I'm takin' that money now, an' handin' it over to my brother, the sheriff. You an' me git married an' everything'll be all right. If we don't, an' you try to squawk, it can easy be pinned onto your dad, an' Reddington will hang for his murder anyway. Hand it over."

"I will not. You keep away from me," the girl defied. She shifted the saddle-bags into one hand, and a thirty-eight appeared in her hand as Fred Juglar reached for her.

Juglar stopped. "Put that gun away before I take it away from you an' break your neck," he threatened. He circled around the girl, and she had to keep turning to face

him. Presently her back was toward the door of the cabin, and he stopped.

Danny saw her peril, but he could not warn her.

"Be reasonable, Maurine," Juglar pleaded hypocritically. "I won't cheat you."

"If you'll wait till we get back to the ranch you can have the saddle-bags," the girl bargained.

"All right, if you'll put away that popgun." The man pretended to surrender.

The next moment Sheriff Pete Juglar seized Maurine's arms from behind and held them as if in a vise. Fred leaped forward and tore gun and saddle-bags from her hands.

Danny heard Pete Juglar leave the door, but he was still thirty feet away. He dared not risk a shot for fear of hitting Maurine. In another minute the Juglars would find out that they were holding a pair of empty saddle-bags. What would happen then God alone knew.

IX

"LET go of me," Maurine cried furiously, but her struggles only gave Pete Juglar pleasure. The man pulled her tightly against him. Under such circumstances Danny could do nothing.

"See if the dough is all there, Fred," the sheriff directed.

Fred knelt and opened the saddle-bags. A whole-hearted oath ripped his lips apart a moment afterward.

"It's gone!" Fred bellowed. "Ain't nothin' here but leaves, an' a rock or two."

"Where's that money, you dirty little doublecrosser?" Sheriff Juglar rasped. He gave the girl's arm a twist that brought a cry of pain.

Still Danny bided his time. He had to.

"I don't know," Maurine told them. "I didn't take it. You saw me get these bags out from under those poles."

"So Reddington pulled a fast one on you, too, eh?" Fred muttered. "Took the money out an' sent you up here to get a pair of empty saddle-bags."

"And maybe he didn't," the sheriff said.

"What yuh mean, Pete?" Fred asked.

"I mean I think this damned girl and Danny Reddington are tryin' to put something over. She don't think Reddington killed her dad. She thinks you done it. She knew them bags were empty. They've hid the money somewhere else, an' she was only tryin' to make us say something that would give us away."

Danny fought hard to still the trembling of his limbs. Pete Juglar had called the turn exactly. The sheriff wasn't as stupid as his arrogant brother.

"By Gawd, if that's right we'll have to do something," Fred blurted.

"We will," the sheriff declared. "This girl knows where that money is an' she knows where Dan Reddington is. An' she's goin' to tell us."

"I'll tell you nothing," Maurine cried out. "I know you two stole that money, and I know that one of you murdered my father. I'll never rest until I see one of you hanged, and the other sent to the penitentiary."

She could not be blamed for having given way to her feelings, but she had confirmed Pete Juglar's guess. The men knew now that if she were allowed to go free she could accuse them, and the return of the money would go a long way toward securing their conviction.

"An' *you* wanted to marry her," Pete told his brother with contempt in his voice.

"What'll we do with her then?" Fred queried weakly.

"Hell, man, there's only one thing to do," the sheriff answered impatiently. "I'm the sheriff. The case against Reddington is complete. This girl will be found dead in the cabin with her dad's empty saddle-bags in the room. She was lured here by Dan Reddington, who had killed her father, and who then killed her."

"But the money?" Fred protested weakly. "How will we get that?"

"Maybe we won't, but I think more of my neck than I do of that dough! Don't you see that she knows all about the whole deal?"

Sheriff Juglar had been gradually pushing the girl toward the door of the cabin, and she was now so close that Danny couldn't see them without coming around the corner and exposing himself. The Juglars were merciless. If he delayed his interference too long the girl might be killed. If he acted too quickly he could do no good.

"There ought to be some way," Fred said.

"Killing me won't help you," Maurine argued.

"But if we let you go all you'd do would be to claim the reward, an' clear young Danny Reddington," the sheriff remarked.

"I won't bargain with you," Maurine's voice came clearly and unafraid.

Danny could stand the strain no longer. He couldn't just wait around the corner while the girl he loved was being murdered.

He stepped around the corner of the cabin. "Let go of her!" he yelled furiously.

The set-up was bad. Pete Juglar was actually inside the doorway, still holding Maurine's arms behind her back. Fred stood a little in front. Even as Danny spoke Maurine disappeared, jerked inside the cabin by Pete.

Fred Juglar still clutched the .38 he had taken from Maurine. The gun came up as he whirled to face Danny. The two guns roared as one. Two streaks of reddish flame made parallel bars in the darkness between the two men. Danny, more intent upon getting inside the cabin than in killing Fred knew that he had fired hastily. But so had Fred.

DANNY felt a stinging pain along his left arm, and the arm felt dead. It staggered him, and he reeled against the wall. At the same time he saw Fred Juglar's leg go out from under him as if turned to rubber, and the man toppled slowly to earth. Danny recovered his stride and leaped for the door. It slammed shut in his face. Sheriff Juglar's weight was against him on the other side.

Just in time Danny saw Fred Juglar's gun coming up again. He turned, and a well-directed kick struck Fred on the elbow. The .38 went spinning through the air while Fred cried out in pain.

Fred still had a gun in his holster. Danny's left arm was useless. He couldn't get that weapon without dropping his own gun, and Fred was far from out of the fight. He yelled for Chuck Henson.

Danny leaped to the side of the door so that Pete couldn't open the door a crack and get a shot at him, and at the same time he kept Fred covered.

"Fred, are you hurt?" Pete yelled from inside.

"I'm shot in the leg, an' Dan Reddington's got a gun on me," Fred yelled back. "He's—"

"Shut up, you," Danny grated. "One more word, an' I'll let you have it."

"I'm comin' out, Reddington," Pete Juglar called. "This girl will be in front of me. You try stoppin' me, an' I'll kill her."

Why didn't Chuck hurry, Danny Reddington thought? His arm was hurting now as if somebody had poured liquid fire into the wound. If he turned away from Fred Juglar for a single instant the fellow would go for his gun. The door opened, and Maurine stepped out. She was being forced to move by the sheriff. One of her arms was free, but the other was twisted behind her back by Juglar so that pain could be ruthlessly inflicted if she tried to stop. Juglar's gun was in his other hand, as he crouched low.

Danny had no chance at all to fire without hitting Maurine. Keeping the girl always between himself and Danny, and making her walk backwards as he was doing, Pete Juglar got around the corner of the cabin.

"Pete, for cripes sake, don't go way an' leave me!" Fred bawled out.

"I'll git you out of it, Fred, but I'm playin' this hand my way," the sheriff called back.

A moment later Chuck Henson's voice sounded shrilly through the darkness. "Danny! Maurine! Where are you?"

"Here," Danny answered. "Hurry, will you?"

Chuck came loping up on his long legs, six-gun swinging in his hand. It took half a minute to explain things to Chuck.

"Get Fred's gun away from him, then get our horses," Danny ordered. He was feeling weak and sick from his wound, but he dashed around the corner. Maurine and the sheriff had disappeared. He heard horses crashing through the brush. He called Maurine's name, but there was no answer.

Danny searched desperately, fearing what he might find, until Chuck called out to ask where he was. Pete Juglar had taken Maurine with him. Danny flung himself into the saddle, and with Chuck at his heels galloped wildly down the canyon.

A mile run without sight of the people he sought convinced Danny that they were not ahead. There were many places where they might have turned off. He stopped,

and they searched the trail for tracks. The last ones had been coming *up* the canyon.

Danny tried desperately to think. Sheriff Juglar had been about to murder Maurine in cold blood to avoid exposure. Would he still go through with that, and try to bluff it out? Danny refused to think so. If Pete had been going to kill the girl he wouldn't have taken her with him. He had heard Danny yell for Chuck, and must have realized that the game was up with the Juglars anyway.

The thing more likely to happen was that he would try to force her to give up the twenty-eight thousand dollars. With that much of a stake Pete would try to get out of the country.

After a minute or two of frenzied thought Danny got hold of himself. This was a time when he had to keep cool. The matter divided itself into exactly two possibilities. Maurine either would, or would not, yield to the crooked sheriff's efforts to make her reveal that the actual money was hidden in Fred Juglar's own bedroom in the Spade ranchhouse.

IF SHE did yield it would be only because she believed Danny himself would figure out what to do in such an eventuality. If she refused Pete Juglar would take her some place where he could torture her until she did tell.

"Listen to me, Chuck," Danny said soberly. "If Pete Juglar makes Maurine tell where the money is he'll head right to the ranch to get it. I want you to beat him there. All you need do is tell the boys at the ranch that Maurine found the money in Fred's room. Show it to 'em. Then wait till the sheriff shows up to get it, and grab him."

"What if he don't show?"

"If he don't come before noon it'll be because he can't make Maurine tell where it is. After that, if you haven't heard from me or Maurine you tell everything you know and start hunting for Maurine."

"I got it," Chuck said. "What you want to do is prove the Juglars robbed the county. But what if that buzzard kills Maurine?"

"In that event he's sure to show up at the ranch. The best way to get him is do as I say."

"All right, Danny. You're right as rain. I'll be there, an' all I hope is he does come —No, dammit, not if that means he's done away with Maurine. Aw, hell, I'll have all the boys waitin' for the dirty murderer," Chuck said in some confusion.

"And remember to tell the boys that it was Fred Juglar who killed Ray Deever, and that Maurine and me have got the proof."

"Don't worry about them," Chuck said, and started to ride away.

"Wait a minute," Danny requested. "I've got a busted wing. It's losin' some blood I may need later on. Help me tie it up, will you?"

Chuck ripped the sleeve away from Danny's arm, and a loud, "Whew!" escaped his lips. "Hell, kid, yo're hurt. That arm's danglin', an' the bullet has gone clear through."

"Just you help me stop the bleeding. I'll be all right," Danny said grimly.

Awkwardly, but effectively Chuck got a tourniquet around the arm, which lessened the bleeding perceptibly, and gradually a numbness for which Danny was profoundly grateful crept over the entire arm.

"You got any idea where Pete Juglar may have took Maurine?" Chuck asked, as the job was completed.

"It's a big country, an' there are thousands of places," Danny replied, "but the one that seems most likely is the old mica mine on Ladybug Mountain. He knows I was hiding there, and he may think that the money is around there yet, so he may figure taking Maurine there may save time. Anyway, that's where I'm heading first."

X

DANNY swayed in the saddle from sheer weakness as he neared his former hiding place at the old mica mine. From time to time waves of nausea, followed by spells of dizziness swept over him, and he had to cling to the saddle horn to stay on his horse. But he kept on, rigidly refusing to acknowledge that in his weakened, crippled condition he was no match for the powerful sheriff.

It was perhaps an hour before dawn when a woman's scream suddenly lifted him from a state of semi inertia into which he had fallen in the saddle. With a start he real-

ized that the deserted mica mine was just ahead.

A second scream made him fully conscious that his diagnosis had been correct, and, furthermore, that Maurine was being tortured.

He left the saddle, and sprawled weakly on the ground. He wanted to cry from a sense of pure futility as he got up and stood on trembling legs while he clung weakly to the saddle. Then a third half-suppressed scream seemed to pump new life into him. Hand upon gun, he turned toward the decrepit cabin from which the scream had sounded. He fell twice, but each time got up and stumbled on.

Some instinct warned him not to make any noise, and although he could now hear Maurine moaning from pain he forced himself to approach the cabin slowly, and soundlessly. He reached a corner and leaned against the logs, trembling from weakness.

This cabin, like the rest, had long since been bereft of doors and windows. There was but one doorway, and one window in the south side to be exact, and both were blank apertures.

He could hear Pete Juglar speaking. "You ought to know that two green kids like you and Danny Reddington can't outsmart me. I hate to be rough on you, but I want that money, and you know where it is. Will you come clean now, or must I swing you up again an' leave you there?"

Danny moved back to the opening where once had been a window. It was too dark inside as yet for him to see anything clearly, but there was a great hole in the roof through which moonlight poured full upon Maurine's face. Danny saw that her hands had been tied behind her back, and the lasso rope the sheriff had used for that purpose had been cast over the ridge pole. By simply pulling on the rope the man could lift Maurine off her feet so that all her weight came upon her cruelly twisted arms. Undoubtedly Juglar had already given her several foretastes of the agony in store, and she was even now standing on tip-toe.

A surge of murderous rage shot through the young puncher. He could see a vague blur that was the sheriff in his first swift glance, but if he fired and missed he would once more be helpless. He could take no chances.

He heard Maurine say, "Oh, I can't stand any more. Let me down and I'll tell you."

"Well, that's better," the sheriff said. "Now you're gettin' some sense. Where is it?"

"Let me down," she pleaded. "I can't talk this way."

"All right, but if you don't come clean back you go, an' a damn' sight higher than you was at first," the man threatened.

Danny heaved a sigh of relief. At least he wouldn't have to listen to the girl's screams of agony. He heard the rope sliding over the ridge pole as Pete Juglar slackened away. He ventured another glance.

Maurine had fallen to the dirt floor of the cabin and she stayed there. Danny saw the form of the sheriff looming over her, and Juglar had a gun in his hand.

"Where is it?" Juglar rasped.

"It's at home—in Fred's room," Maurine replied truthfully.

Sheriff Juglar swore angrily. "So that's it," he said. "You figured to trap me an' Fred when we went to git the money. Well, my girl, I'm not that dumb, an' I still hold the cards. I'm goin' to kill you, an' let the word leak out that Dan Reddington did it. It'll be easy enough to get that money, because everybody will be out here to see what kind of a corpse you make."

Danny whipped his gun across the rotten window sill. "Drop it, Juglar!" he ordered shrilly.

The dark bulk that was the sheriff gave a jerk. He had no time to shoot Maurine when faced with this new danger. He half turned, and his gun came up, but red flame from Danny's gun licked out at him like a serpent's tongue.

Juglar stumbled across Maurine as he fired, but his bullet imbedded itself in a rotten log. Danny fired again, and yet again, each shot striking around the faintly visible silver star on the sheriff's breast. Juglar came on, stumbling until he lurched against the wall, and fell backward in a twisting heap, his head almost striking the place where a door sill had once been.

Danny rushed to the door. He jerked the six-gun from Juglar's outstretched hand, but he knew that the sheriff was already forever harmless.

"Maurine, are you all right?" he cried out anxiously.

"Yes. I saw you at the window, and I remembered what you said about dropping to the ground," she replied. "Is he—is he —dead?"

"Plenty," Danny said grimly, as he opened his jackknife and severed the rope that bound her.

Maurine cried out with pain when she tried to straighten her arms as they got outside the cabin.

"It—it's been a pretty rough night, hasn't it?" she commented in a voice that quavered. "What happens next?"

"I don't know," he said. "If only he had gone after that money without trying to murder you, things would have been cleared up."

"You mean they may still believe you did it?" she gasped.

"I don't know. It's your word against Fred Juglar's. Anyway, if I have to hang I'd rather it would be for killing Pete Juglar than your father."

"They've got to believe us," she declared passionately.

"Well, the chips are down," Danny said wearily. "We'd just as well find out whether our cards are any good or not."

THE sun was above an hour high when they rode into the ranch. Chuck Henson and a half a dozen punchers came out to meet them.

"Yuh got her!" Chuck exclaimed. "Where's the sheriff?"

"He's dead," Danny said.

"He was going to kill me, and Danny shot him," Maurine added.

"Nobody showed up here," Chuck said. "We was sure gittin' worried."

"I still am," Danny said grimly. "Chuck, you hustle into town and tell 'em what happened. They'll send somebody back to represent the law."

"And bring back a doctor," Maurine said.

Two punchers were sent up Buckaroo Canyon to do what they could for Fred Juglar, and they were instructed by Danny to tell the injured Fred that his brother had confessed. He didn't believe it would do any good, but it was worth a trial.

Two other men were sent up to the mica mine to watch over Sheriff Pete Juglar's body.

There was nothing for Danny and Maurine to do except wait. They didn't feel like talking, but finally Maurine remarked, "The clock has stopped. I was supposed to wind it last night. Now my arms are so sore I can't. No, I didn't mean for you—"

Danny was already on his feet. The big seven-day clock on the shelf was just even with his eyes. Maurine always had to stand on a chair in order to wind it. He started to open the clock door, then stopped and stared at something on the shelf.

"What is it?" Maurine asked.

"An envelope. It's adressed to you."

"Quick, let me see it!"

The envelope was unsealed. Maurine drew out a single sheet of paper and read rapidly. Tears flooded her eyes.

"It—it's from Dad, Danny," she said. "He must have put it here just before he was killed. Listen:

" 'Darling Maurine: I can't stick this mess any longer, so I'm going to town to have things out with the Juglars, and to give myself up. Danny Reddington didn't steal any money, and Willis James is innocent, too. Me and the Juglar boys took that money. Pete knew the safe combination, and he turned the money over to me and Fred. All Danny tried to do was get the money back where it belonged. The Juglars scared James into the lie that he had been held up.

" 'I hate you to know I'm a thief, but I've got just this excuse. Last year I got into one of my fights down in Salmon City. I didn't mean to do it, but I crippled the man's back so he'll never walk again. If he got judgment he would ruin us completely. I settled out of court for ten thousand dollars, and then like a fool tried to make it back gambling and lost more. I let Fred Juglar talk me into this business. I told Fred today I wouldn't stand for the way they treated Danny. So if anything happens you'll know who's to blame. Lovingly, your erring Dad.' "

Maurine dropped the paper and sobbed bitterly.

Danny did his best to comfort her. "There was never anything little or mean about him," he said. "He just made mistakes."

"I know. And I know he would rather be dead than suffer the disgrace of prison. He must have known the Juglars would

kill him. That's why he left this letter. If only I had found it earlier—"

She paused, but Danny had his own question, and his own conscience. "If I hadn't taken that money out of the smokehouse none of this would have happened. At least your father would have been alive, and he probably would never have been suspected. In a way I caused his death. I want you to face that now. We can't have that between us if we're going to marry."

"It never will be, Danny," Maurine answered instantly. "You would have been a coward not to have done something about it—and I couldn't love a coward."

Fred Juglar later was brought in, loudly avowing his innocence, and demanding vengeance. Not until he was shown his dead partner's letter did his nerve finally break. Six weeks later he was sentenced to life imprisonment for the murder of Ray Deever.

OVERSEAS MAIL

(*Continued from page 7*)

been with me. There is so much more I would like to tell you all, but I hope I can soon be back home with mother and dad, then come to see you and tell you everything. I now have about $25 worth of pictures of the trip which I am very anxious to show you; also have several gifts from the Holy Land. I know you will love them. One more thing, I forgot to tell you, in Jerusalem, in one of the churches, they have a wax figure of Mary in a glass case and in this case is jewelry and gifts worth 12 million dollars. Close by is a statue of Christ on the cross. Here they have one of the largest chandeliers I have ever seen. Words cannot describe the beauty of this place. To me, it exemplifies the true spirit of, shall I say, comedy and romance mixed with Old World charm too beautiful for words. Maybe it is because these places I have just told you about have known all the joys and griefs that come to common humanity—birth and mating and death; the alarms of war and the benedictions of peace, victories and defeats; all of life's comedy and romance mixed with "old, unhappy far-off things and battles long ago."

Walking down the narrow, dirty streets the little native boys run up and touch your hand and say "Tarzan," or "Superman," that's what the kids think of us.

I am back at work now and looking forward to another trip.

Yours with love,

Corporal Coy B. Ivey.

Mrs. Anna Propson of Chicago sends us this one from her cousin, George W. Swanson of the Signal Corps, stationed in India:

Somewhere in India.

Dear Ann:

Thank you for the letter I received yesterday. I feel fine, the weather is the same, blistering days, cool and very damp nights. I was on guard duty the other day (24 hours). I had plenty of company during the nights. Cows here, you know, roam around undisturbed. I had six of them around me, a tree full of bats which have bodies as big as alley cats, and the jackels howl like coyotes and just about drive a guy wild. So I had quite a time with all my animal friends.

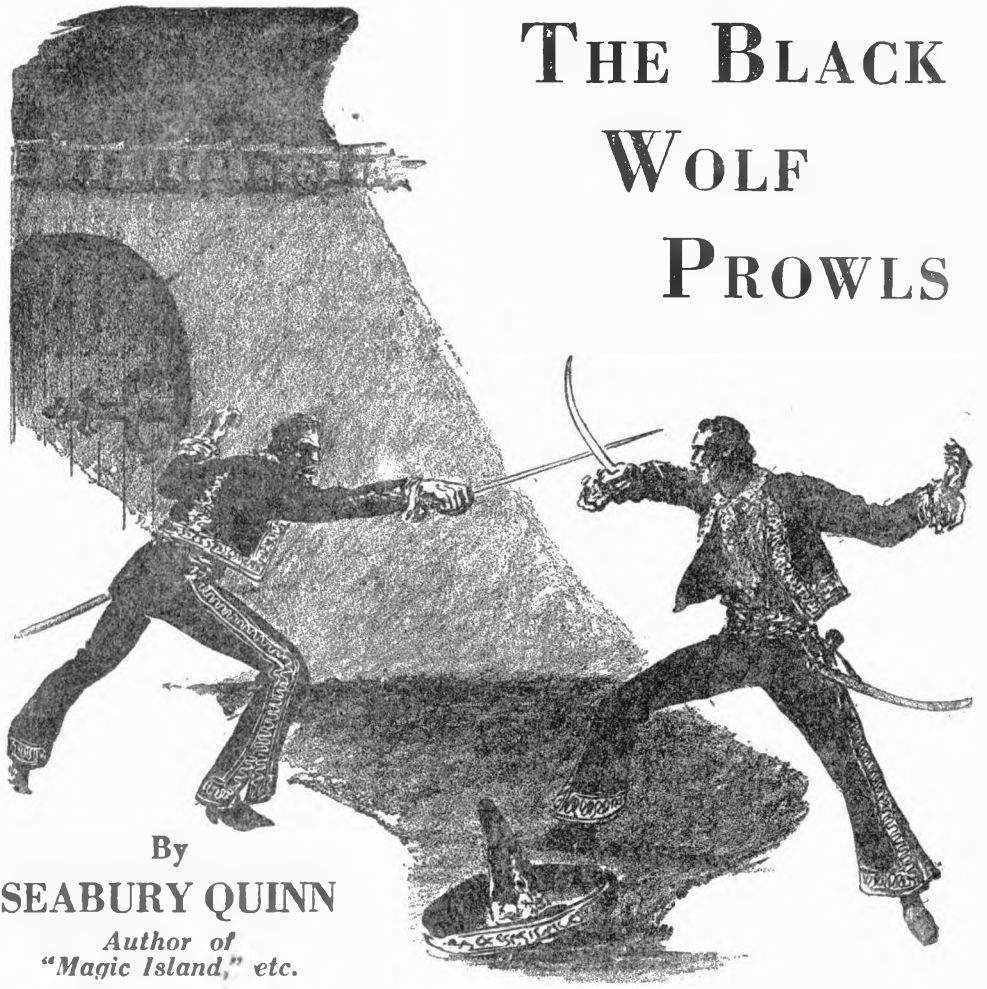
Also got to talk with an American missionary. She was cycling by. She and her husband are in charge of a civilian hospital here. They have been teaching and healing for 37 years and been home to New Jersey only three times in all those years. I had quite a long chat with her. Seems strange to hear a white person speak Assamese so fluently.

Some boys just passed my tent who had been out in the wilds around here. One of these days our tent is going on a little hike—just to meet and talk to people in their village is interesting, even though we use the sign language most of the time. It's surprising how many young Indians can say quite a few things in English.

Well, it's time for chow, so I'll close for now with best regards to everyone.

Your cousin George.

THE BLACK WOLF PROWLS



By
SEABURY QUINN
Author of "Magic Island," etc.

THE moonlight was so bright the night seemed starless. From San Francisco Bay where the little town of Yerba Buena cuddled like a bird upon her nest a light breeze blew, spreading skeins of silvery mist across the valleys, but here the hills and woodland stretched unbrokenly away, spaced here and there by ploughed and cultivated fields, all bright as polished silver in the lucence of the pale round moon. The black mare underneath the shadowing rowan tree stirred restlessly and pawed a pebble underfoot, curving her arched neck and making the silver bosses on her bridle tinkle with a soft bell-tone or music. "Quiet, *querida,*" her rider ordered in a whisper as he touched her flanks—but very gently—with the tips of his long silver rowels. "Be silent, *novia mia,* one comes!"

Like his mount he was all black and silver, and at first glance might have been mistaken for some *ranchero* in festive dress. His short, high-waisted jacket was black velvet heavily embroidered with stiff silver thread, silver bullion traced a pattern round the brim of his sombrero, the bell bottoms of his black velvet trousers were heavy with silver, and the *sarape* negligently draped across his left shoulder was

Slave Trader, Bank Clerk, Bandit . . . Black Wolf? Which?

woven in broad alternating bands of black and silver instead of the bright parti-colored pattern usually affected by Mexican dandies. But the silver-mounted horse-pistols cradled in holsters of carved leather at his saddle bow were not the weapons that a rancher carried for protection when he rode abroad at night, nor were the double-barreled pearl-stocked derringers and foot-long bowie knife that hung from his black silver-buckled belt the armament of one who rode in peace, and least of all the silver-mounted Saracenic sword, curved almost like a Moorish simitar, that swung in a scabbard of shagreen at his left leg. It seemed on inventory he bore arms enough to equip a full squad of soldiers, and he had need of them, for he was *El Lobo Negro*—The Black Wolf—the very mention of whose name struck terror to the wealthy landowners from Sacramento in the north to the city of Our Lady of the Angels in the south.

There was an overplus of *ladrónes* in California—discharged soldiers, disgruntled "patriots" who had gathered bands of lawless men about them, disappointed treasure hunters, and seamen who had left the semi-piratical ships that plied the China trade to prey upon the rich landowners or the wealthy little cities of the coast. But these were wolves that ran in packs, and could be fought or chased with troops. A company of infantry could hold off any band of robbers that attacked a town, and a troop of seasoned, well-mounted cavalry could pursue them to their mountain hideaway and cut them down or hold them at bay till infantry and guns arrived to batter down their fort about their ears, shoot down all who offered resistance and hang those who surrendered.

But The Black Wolf? *Por las muelas de Dios*—that was something very different! Assuredly. The wealthy *hacendado*—owner of a thousand fertile acres—might lie down on his couch for a siesta filled with good food and better wine to dream away an hour or two in pure content when presto! a soft step was on the floor of his chamber, and something hard as fate and cold as death—a knife or pistol barrel—was pressed against his neck while a soft voice whispered, "No move, if you please, *señor*. Stir but a finger and you die. A little matter of two thousand pesos, just a drop of the sweat you wring from your wretched *peons,* and all is well. Of course, if you prefer to see the blessed saints in Paradise—but then, *quien sabe*—who knows? Perhaps you would not be admitted through the pearly gates. Are there no sins upon your soul? Are you in a state of grace sufficient to go into eternity? Come, *señor,* is it worth the risk?"

AND so the wretched ranch owner, with the cold and ominous foreknowledge of sure death upon him, would rise from his bed, go to his strong box, and scoop out the broad gold pieces. And after that a mocking *"Muchas gracias, señor!"* the hammer of a speeding horse's hoofs that faded in the distance like an echo dying among the hills, and—nothing.

Sometimes a *carroza*—one of the stage-coaches that linked the City of the Angels with the country of the north—would round a sharp bend in the highway to find, as black as the twin shadows they cast in the sunlight, a coal-black mare and black-clad man who held two silver-mounted pistols in his hands. *"Saludos, amigos!"* he would greet. "Life is short, but very sweet, while gold is dross. Behold, I trade you the great treasure for the scobs of waste. Deposit what you have of worldly value on the highway and go thy ways in health, my friends, for death lurks in my pistols and my fingers itch upon the triggers."

He worked alone, this *Lobo Negro,* as silently and cunningly as the beast from whom he took his name. No man could say when he would next appear, or where. No one had ever seen his face, for it was masked behind a domino of black velvet, and the black-and-silver clothes he wore

were obviously a *costume de guerre* which he put off when he had finished robbing. He might be anybody's neighbor, some wealthy and respected *ranchero,* or—*Dios Omnipotente* forbid such sacrilege—a priest who served the Lord before the altar and the devil on the highways.

It was useless to set traps for him. Don Gaspar Alverez y Lopez de Quesada, who owned the Ranch of Saint Sebastian—five thousand fertile acres stocked with long-wooled sheep and white-faced Andalusian cattle—had tried it.

He had let the news be published that he had received five thousand pesos for some prize bulls and had stored the money in his ranch house. Moreover, it was whispered, Don Gaspar's servants had gone to the *fiesta of* Nuestra Señora la Reina de los Angeles, leaving the great ranch all but untenanted. But before he spread this news broadcast the crafty Don Gaspar had sent for soldiers to the nearest barracks, and there for three weeks they awaited the advent of The Black Wolf, lying in the sunshine, eating up Don Gaspar's substance, absorbing wine as desert sand sucks up water, and flirting with his female servants till the wenches were as useless as so many chickens.

IN THE third week came the feast of Saint John when fires were lighted and the cattle driven between them to insure increase in the herds, and while his servants and the soldiers danced and shouted in the mounting orange glare of the bonfires, Don Gaspar felt the cold disc of a pistol muzzle at the back of his neck and knew that The Black Wolf had struck. In vain he pleaded that he had no such sum as five thousand pesos in the house—that the story was a strategem to lure The Black Wolf into the net of the military. Either he must find the money instantly, the cold voice at his elbow told him, or he must forfeit his left ear. And at the last he felt a dreadful searing pain wash down his face and knew that his left ear had been sliced off. "And in a week you will deposit the five thousand pesos at the stone that marks the southwest boundary of your land, or I shall come and take the other ear," the chill voice whispered.

One week later the gold was sewn into two buckskin sacks and laid at the foot of the landmark-stone—and round it, hidden cunningly in the tall grass, the soldiers waited The Black Wolf's coming. Three days they waited, and two nights, and on the third night they heard such a howling as the fiends of hell might have made had they been loosed upon the earth, and from the timberland that topped the rise of the hill half a mile beyond Don Gaspar's boundary they saw fiery forms descending on them—wolf-forms dragging bundles of live flame that set the dry grass blazing in a circle round the marking-stone and sent them scurrying to the high-ploughed land for safety.

The Black Wolf had impounded half a dozen young coyotes and tied blazing tufts of oiled straw to their tails with long ropes, then turned them loose to rush in panic through the dry grass of the hay field, scattering fiery destruction in their wake. And while the soldiers sought the safety of the grassless land he helped himself to the ransom of Don Gaspar's other ear and rode away unharmed amid a shower of musket balls.

Exploits like these had won him fame that had become a legend. Ballad-makers sang of his adventures in the market places, attributing to him enough feats to have occupied an army for a generation. *"Como El Lobo Negro*—like The Black Wolf"—had come to be the strongest simile for courage, daring and resourcefulness, but his latest escapade had robbed him of all glamor, and every soldier who could be spared from his garrison, all members of the *Guardia Rural* and the armed *vaqueros* of at least a dozen ranches were out scouring the countryside for him.

Three months before Francisca Dorotea Ines Gutierrez, daughter and sole heiress

of Don Jaime Julio Gutierrez y Miranda, was to have married Captain Felipe Climaco, disdaining half a score of suitors who had paid their ardent court to her since she received her first Communion, but even while the marriage feast was in preparation and sewing women labored on the bride's trousseau there came a letter to Don Jaime demanding that the banns be set aside and Señorita Francisca be given to The Black Wolf as his bride.

This was too much. Indeed, it was very much too much. When The Black Wolf took a rancher's money it was something of a joke, for gold flowed from the lush farmlands like water from a spring, and there was always more where what the rogue had stolen came from. Even when he helped himself to Don Gaspar's left ear it was something of a jest, for Don Gaspar was hated by the peasants and cordially disliked by his own class, but to demand the hand of one of California's greatest heiresses, and one of her most lovely women in the bargain, to threaten to break up a romance dear to every heart—for it was a love-match without question, this attachment between the almost penniless captain and the heiress to the Gutierrez fortune—that was not to be endured.

The Black Wolf's popularity fell off like bark from the trunk of a plane tree, and the whole countryside simmered in a broth of indignation.

DON GUZMAN MIRAMON, the oldest, wealthiest and ugliest of Doña Francisca's rejected suitors, offered to protect the Gutierrez household from The Black Wolf, and actually came riding into town with twenty heavily armed cowboys at his back. They drew a cordon round the Casa Gutierrez, halting everyone who sought to leave or enter as if they had been regular soldiers, but on the night before her wedding Señorita Francisca had been waked by the strumming of a guitar in the patio beneath her window, and a tenor voice that sang:

Si á tu ventana llega,
Ay una paloma—
Trátala con cariño,
Que es mi persona . . .

If to thy window there should come a dove—
Ah, treat it tenderly,
For it is my soul . . .

And when she looked down to the courtyard she saw a tall man clad in black velvet heavy with silver embroidery, and with a velvet mask upon his face. She screamed, and though the armed *vaqueros* came running they could find no sign or trace of *El Lobo Negro,* though they searched the house from attic to cellar and turned the stables inside out.

The morning of her wedding day dawned clear and bright. The day was drenched with sunshine, vivid with color, dancing with life, alilt with music. But the bridegroom tarried. The candles on the altar were ablaze, the *padre* waited in the vesting room in chasuble and cope, the glowing charcoal had been set in the censer, but still there was no rataplan of pounding hoofs to say that Captain Felipe Climaco galloped from the *persidio* to claim his betrothed.

Then came Pepe, poor, half-witted *peon* that he was, to bring the dreadful news. He had been riding to the city with a load of melons and ripe peppers in his burro's panniers, for it was *dia de mercado*—market-day—and he had hope of selling his produce for at least two silver *reales* which he could wager on Juan Punta's fighting cock next Sunday, when he came upon the captain sprawled in the roadway dust with a great gunshot wound in his back and the lifeblood gushing from it like water from the rock that holy Moses struck with his staff.

The captain was a dying man, as Pepe saw at once, but he did what he could for him, fetched water from a nearby stream in his sombrero, carried him to the shade

of a roadside tree and wiped the death-sweat from his brow.

Captain Climaco gasped out his accusation. It was The Black Wolf who had shot him, not openly in fair fight, but treacherously from behind as he rode at breakneck speed to join his bride. He had heard the report of the carbine, felt the burning stab of mortal pain, and toppled from his horse as everything went red before his eyes. When he had wakened to a semi-consciousness *El Lobo Negro* stood over him and mocked him as he lay there. "Thus perish all who seek to stand between The Black Wolf and his prey," the masked robber had told him, and—Pepe spread his hands and raised his shoulders in a shrug that brought them even with his ears—that was all. *El Capitan* had died with Señorita Francisca's sweet name upon his lips, and he, Pepe, had taken two sticks, tied them in the form of a cross, and put them in the dead hands. "Come, *señores,* to the tree where I have left the captain's body with my panniers of melons and ripe peppers beside it, and see if Pepe lies!"

They buried Captain Climaco with full military honors in the *campo santo,* and that very night at candlelight Francisca had gone to the Convent of the Incarnation and knelt before the Lady Abbess, begging her to take her as a postulant, that she whose heart was in the grave already might pass such little time of life as might remain to her withdrawn from worldly things, and wait reunion with her beloved in Paradise.

Tears of compassion for the murdered bridegroom and his bereft bride were shed by everybody from the humblest peasant to the richest hidalgo, and with them mingled tears of rage and hatred for the vile miscreant who had done this thing. The *alcalde* of every town and village in the province offered a reward for his capture. Don Jaime Gutierrez swore to make the man who brought The Black Wolf in alive or dead a present of one hundred thousand duros. But the money mattered little. In peasant's hut and rancher's stately house, in the cabins where the cowboys slept and in the barracks of the soldiers, oaths were taken solemnly to bring The Black Wolf to justice or perish in the attempt.

So with a price of more than half a million pesos on his head and with every man's hand against him, *El Lobo Negro* waited in the shadow of the rowan tree while moonlight lay as bright as newly minted silver on the highway, and from the distance came the clink of horseshoes on the road. "Be silent, *novia mia*"—he touched his nervous horse's neck with black-gloved fingers—"one comes!"

THE moonlight threw two lengthened shadows on the paved highway and as the watcher in the shade of the rowan made them out he gave an exclamation of impatience. For the hoofs that tapped the road were those of a diminutive donkey, and seated on it sidewise was a woman in white habit and black veil who now and then tapped its flank with a stick, but scarcely hard enough to have disturbed a fly that might have chosen to share her ride. "Go forward, slow one!" she ordered with a blow that was almost a caress. "We are even late, and—*ay di me!*" She broke her command on a shrill cry of dismay, for the donkey which had crept at snail's pace now began to stagger, and even as she urged it to make haste dropped to its knees and rolled upon its side where it lay with lolling tongue and legs that stood out stiffly as if they had been frozen.

"*Aymé,* Catalina!" cried the nun as she knelt by the beast's head. "And dost thou truly die? Wilt thou leave me thus all lonely?"

The donkey looked at her with rolling eyes.

Its sides were heaving pitifully, and as she leant to take its head into her lap it gave a hollow, gusty groan and breathed its last.

"Alas, poor beast, why was it thou must choose this time, of all eternity, to die?" the nun wept. "Woe me, for I am far from

home, and the road is thick beset with robbers, even The Black Wolf—"

She looked up quickly and the lamentation froze to silence on her lips as the click of horseshoes sounded on the road beside her and a black-and-silver clad rider slipped from his saddle, and bowed gravely. "All is not lost, good Sister," he assured her, and despite the terror snatching at her breath she noted that his voice was low and pleasant, though his Spanish had an unfamiliar accent. "I much regret the death of your steed, but here is mine to ride on, and"—a smile that was more grim than pleasant flashed across his face—"I do not think that you will be accosted if you go with me as escort. *Arriba!*—up!" He held his hand out, took her trembling fingers and swung her by both elbows so she sat sidewise on his silver-mounted saddle.

SHE was a little dazed, but not entirely displeased, at his action. Her sacred habit set her apart from the world, men were wont to give her a degree of respect bordering on servility; since she had made her profession and received the veil no man's hand had touched her, yet this strange young man in black and silver treated her as if she were a woman, not a nun, though there was no hint of boldness in his manner. Apparently he had no idea he acted unconventionally.

She stole a sidelong glance at him. He was slim and seemed still slimmer in his tightly fitting costume of black velvet. She guessed him to be in his late twenties or early thirties, though what his age might be was hard to say, for the illusion of youth was heightened by the thin pencil-line of black mustache that traced across his upper lip and the tiny inverted exclamation point of beard on his chin. Deeply tanned, his face was as arresting as a question mark, the cheek-bones high, the eyes, beneath straight brows of startling blackness, a pale and smoky gray, the chin square-cut, and the skin for all its overlie of tan of fine white texture. Obviously he was not of *peon* origin, there was no trace of Indian in his features. Just as clearly he was no hidalgo, his features were too delicate for a Spaniard, but there was no trace of weakness in them. The smile he turned on her was warm and friendly and his voice was pleasant, though marred by an accent she could not place.

"Is thy convent far from here, good sister? If so it might be better if I rode behind thee, for it is late and they may fear for thy safety."

She noticed that he eyed the buckskin bag of silver duros in her hand with a look that might mean curiosity or cupidity, and her agile woman's mind supplied the cue for her next action. "Wilt thou bear these for me, my son?" she asked. "It is the convent's rent-roll. I was sent to fetch the moneys from our tenant farmers today, and rode on Catalina, one of our two saddle-asses, for the convent, you must know, has neither carriages nor horses, since such things are over-worldly." She put the leather pouch into his hands and it clinked musically. "*Ay di me,* Catalina ever was a glutton, and today she was more greedy than ever. At the farm of José Ruiz she thrust her nose into a bag of dried peas and had eaten half of them before I could drag her away. You know, my son, how lentels beget thirst. The poor beast must have felt as dry as a kiln, for at the stream that spans the road a mile or two before I met thee she drank and drank until it seemed she'd never have enough. *Aymé,* the peas began to swell and swell inside her till presently they burst her belly. Thou saw the end, my son. She lay down in the road and yielded up the ghost. Let us draw a moral from it. Gluttony is one of the Deadly Sins. The others, if you know your catechism, are covetousness, pride, hatred, rage and—ay—!" She broke her pious lecture with an exclamation of affright, for from the copse of juniper that fringed the roadside like a straggling beard a band of taterdemalions stepped and ranged themselves across the way.

FOUR of them wore the ragged remnants of army uniforms and were armed with rusty muskets, two more were in the tattered dress of *labradores*—farm laborers—and carried machetes, while the seventh sported a black costume which might once have belonged to a third-rate *ranchero* but was now so overlaid with grime and dirt that it was hard to say of what material it had been made. His face was hidden by a twist of dirty black cloth. He was evidently the leader of the band, for he stood a pace or two before his fellows and raised a saber which had once done duty in the army in salute. "*Alto!*—halt!" he commanded. "First we will trouble you for your money, and after that we'll argue out the question of allowing you your lives. *Soy El Lobo Negro*—I am The Black Wolf!"

"Thou are a liar out of blazing hell, but not for long!" the young man answered, and Sister Santo Sacrificio felt herself go cold with a chill sharper than the fear she had of the robbers at the change that came into his face. It was not so much a difference of expression as a hardening, a sudden freezing. It seemed his countenance had sharper lines, the eyes beneath the black brows seemed to retreat till they were like those of an old man—or a beast—and the lips seemed actually to lose their fullness, not merely to be pressed against the teeth. There was new sharpness to the chin, a pinched, almost frost-bitten shrinking of the cheeks each side the nose.

The buckskin bag of silver coins fell clinking to the roadway and his right hand grasped the stock of the derringer holstered to his right hip while his left hand snatched the weapon on the other side. The click of drawn-back hammers was almost a single sound, and the roar of the two weapons followed like the flash of light that comes when flint is struck with steel. He had fired from the hip without unholstering his weapons, but with mortal accuracy, for two of the men with muskets reeled drunkenly as the twin flashes stabbed the night. Now he jerked the pistols from their sheaths and they came up smoking, knocking down a third musketeer and shattering the shoulder of the man next him. The fourth rifleman fired pointblank, but the bullet struck short by a yard and ricochetted off with a sharp *whin-n-n-g*.

The three remaining robbers wavered for an instant, but before they could decide if they should stand and fight it out or flee the man in black had snatched the bowie knife from his girdle and hurled it like a bolt of lightning. It caught the foremost robber squarely in the chest and he fell staggering backward tipsily, one hand clasped on the handle of the knife, the other reaching futilely to the sky. "*Ay! Ay!*" he shrieked. "*Tengo la muerte*—death has me!" The cry ended in a choked, bubbling groan as the blood welled up in his throat and he fell to the roadway, knees drawn up to his stomach, then straightening out again in the death-agony.

The ragamuffin with the machete aimed a blow at the black-velvet-clad man as he charged, but he dodged it nimbly as a cat and slashed a sidewise blow that gashed the robber's face from brow to chin and hewed away the lower portion of his jaw.

The robber captain had no stomach for a fight with this black fury. Three of his men were dead, one dying, two so badly wounded that they were useless, and he—discretion was the better part of valor. He turned to run with a speed to which stark panic lent wings. But the saints he invoked must have been otherwise engaged at that moment, for a loose stone turned under his foot and he fell sprawling on his hands and knees. "*Piedad*—be pitiful!" he cried in a voice gone thin and mouselike with stark fear. "*Misericordia*—have mercy!"

"And *thou* art The Black Wolf—*El Lobo Negro?*" The words were hard as ice and cold as death. "Go tell the devil that, *cabrón!*" The sword point drove into his spine where skull and backbone came together, and he died without further cry or struggle.

Gentle Sister Santo Sacrificio who could

not bear to see a fowl's neck wrung had put her hands up to her eyes when the fight began, but now as silence settled on the road like a fog she spread her fingers and looked through them fearfully. "Remain hoodwinked a moment longer, Sister," came the voice of her escort. "There is that in the highway I would not have you look on." A hand was laid on the mare's bridle and her mount moved forward, picking her way daintily among the dead and dying.

After a while, "May I look now?" she asked a little shakily. "Have we gone past the place of slaughter?"

"Well past, good sister. You were speaking of the Seven Deadly Sins when we were interrupted, were you not? I think that I have won free from a heavy burden in the after-life since your sermon was broken."

"Free? From a burden?" she echoed puzzled.

"Exactamente. Does not the proverb say:

"*'El que mata un ladrón*
Tiene cien años de perdón.

"'Relief from torment for a century
Awaits the man who does a robber slay'?

"Five of them I killed and one more is quite like to die. That should dispose of six and loose me from the fires of Purgatory full six hundred years before my time."

"Ohé!" the nun crossed herself devoutly. "To think that thou hast slain six of thy fellow creatures—"

"Por Dios, Sister!" he laughed, not altogether pleasantly. "They would have done as much to us, and seized the convent's rent-roll, too."

"Válgame Dios, dear Sister Santo Sacrificio," the sister portress of the Convent of the Incarnation ran down the low steps that led to the great door of the nunnery, "we had thought thee surely lost. They say the dreadful Black Wolf prowls again, and—but where is the good Catalina? And this *caballero*—this gentleman—"

"Peace, Sister Joaquina!" Sister Santo Sacrificio laughed, "thou art the veriest babbler. Besides, the Reverend Mother must be first to hear my story. Meantime"—she smiled across her shoulder at her escort—"will you not have some food prepared for this kind gentleman? It was he who rescued me when greedy Catalina's gluttony brought on her death, and later saved me—and the convent's moneys—from one who called himself The Black Wolf—"

"Dios mio!" Sister Joaquina blessed herself fearfully. "The terrible Black Wolf? How? When—"

The other nun laid a finger on her lips and she broke off her questions as she turned to conduct the young man to the guest rooms, but at every step she twittered like a bird, the curiosity fairly oozing from her pores.

THEY brought him a boiled *congrejo*—one of those great Pacific crabs that make the largest of their cousins from the Atlantic look like pigmies—and with it a flask of the red wine pressed from their own vintage and a loaf of fine white bread. *"Gracias,"* he told the small Indian maid who waited on him and fell upon the repast with the ardor of a healthy appetite, but before he had picked out the succulent white meat from the crab's hard shell the Lady Abbess entered with Sister Santo Sacrificio.

"Para servir á Vd., Madre Reverenda—I am your servant, Reverend Mother," he said as he rose and bowed formally, "and for this food I give you hearty thanks—"

"Then show thy gratitude by eating, worthy son," the abbess answered with a smile. "We'll talk when thou hast finished."

He could hear the abbess and the nun in whispered conversation as he ate, and more than once he stole a covert glance at them. The Mother Superior lived up to her title he thought. She must have been beautiful in her youth, even now, when she was well past forty, she was handsome, with the

serene features of a Madonna and bright, intelligent dark eyes behind the lenses of her steel-bowed spectacles. Now and then she smiled as Sister Santo Sacrificio whispered, and when she did her pale, calm face was transfigured as dimples formed each side her mouth and her eyes lifted at the corners.

"Now tell me of thyself, my son," the abbess ordered as he finished. "Who art thou, and whence comest thou? Do not think us ungrateful for thy service to us, but—*Ay! Esto que es*—what is this?"

A thunderous knocking sounded at the gate and someone bawled, "Open in the name of the Republic! We come to search the place for robbers!"

"*Anda,* my son—be quick!" the abbess commanded, thrusting her visitor through a door and locking it after him. "Keep silent—have no fear!

"Yes, Señor Lugartiente?" she turned to the young Lieutenant of cavalry who came stamping into the room with eight troopers at his heels.

The young officer dropped to one knee before her and bent his head until she murmured, *"Benedicte,"* but kept his hand upon his pistol and his eyes were wary. "The Black Wolf is believed to be within your gates, Good Mother," he answered as he rose. "He was seen to come this way some time ago and we must search the place, for—"

"The Convent of the Incarnation harbors no robbers, *Señor,"* the abbess interrupted in a cold voice. "We have a guest, but it is not he whom you seek—"

"A guest, ha!" snapped the officer and drew his pistol. "We'll have a look at this fine guest of yours, with your permission—"

"You'll have no look at anyone with my permission," the abbess placed herself before the door that led from the refectory. "My word must be your surety, *Señor,* and if you step one foot beyond this room I'll call upon the Archbishop to pronounce you excommunicate—both you and your companions. Go, *Señor.* Go with God, and seek no more for robbers in this convent."

"But—" the young officer stammered when Sister Santo Sacrificio broke in. "I was held up on the highway by a band of ruffians, Señor Lieutenant, and would have been robbed and killed had not the gentleman who now sleeps here come to my rescue. If you will gallop down the road five miles or so you'll find the body of the man who called himself The Black Wolf—"

"The Black Wolf killed?" the officer ejaculated. *"Dios!* And there is half a million pesos reward for his capture, dead or alive! *Anda, anda, muchachos*—hurry, lads—there is a fortune waiting for us on the highway!" and followed by his squad he stamped out more hurriedly than he had entered.

"AND now, my son," the abbess repeated when the soldiers had left stormily, "you were about to tell me of yourself. You need not fear to tell the whole truth—have not our actions proved that you are safe with us?"

The young man smiled a little hesitantly. "You know who I am?"

"Perfectly. But not *what.* You are no Catholic, that much I know when you failed to genuflect when I came into the room. Nor do you speak like one of us. Tell me, whence came you?"

The boyish grin that spread across his face robbed it of its somberness. "My name is John Barlow—"

"Juan Bar-lo?" she repeated tentatively "It is a rather pretty name, but not one of ours."

"No, Holy Mother. I come from New York."

"Nueva E-ork? *Cascaras!* But that is in the *Estados Unitos*—three thousand miles away!"

"Yes, Reverend Mother, and till ten years ago I lived there, working in a banking house, very much afraid of my employer and very much in love with his daughter."

The dimples formed each side of her mouth again. "Yes?" she prompted as he fell silent. "And then?"

"All day I worked at the ledgers, and sometimes late into the night. My salary was five pesos a week, but out of it I saved a little every payday until I had a hundred. Then I asked my *novia* to wed—"

"*Dios!* Is that the custom in Neuva E-ork? You did not ask her father for her hand?"

"I did," grimly, "and he ordered me from the house and forbade his daughter to see me. She was a great heiress and I a starving clerk. Furthermore, he discharged me for my impertinence."

"*Mi pobrecito*—poor thing! And then?"

"I went out and got vilely drunk. *Como un lechón*—drunk like a pig."

The abbess gave a soft chuckle and her bright dark eyes were indulgent. "*Aymé,*" she murmured. "It is in Neuva E-ork as it is in Mexico, and the world over. *Las niñes al claustro, los hombres á la cantina* —the maidens to the convent, the men to the wine shop—when love is denied. And afterwards?"

"What else there was besides rum in my glass I do not know, but presently I woke to find myself aboard ship. Only God and His saints know what that hell-hulk did in New York, for she was a slaver plying between the Camaroons and Brazil and the Argentine.

"I was but nineteen and had no experience in life save as a schoolboy and bookkeeper. Now I had to study in a harder school, learn to swarm up the ratlines while the ship heeled over in a gale, to cling to the foot ropes and shorten sail in a hurricane or hang like a monkey to a jib-guy as the ship plunged her nose into the foaming sea. A rope's-end was the reward for slowness, death the penalty for one misstep aloft. Nor was that all. The ship's master, as villainous a devil as ever trod a quarterdeck, demanded that his crew be competent to do their work ashore as well as afloat, so I was taught to shoot and use the knife and cutlass, not as soldiers learn their trade, but in combat with skilled, hardened fighters who would have killed me if they could. Six of us had been shanghaied for that voyage. I was the only one of the sextette who reach Africa alive, and when we finally dropped anchor I'd learned the killer's trade in the hardest of all hard schools —I had survived where five others had failed and learned that in that fierce new world into which I had been thrown I had to shoot or strike first or be slaughtered.

"Sometimes we bought our cargoes of 'black ivory' from the native chiefs, sometimes we went ashore and kidnaped them ourselves. When we did this we were a handful set against a host of savages. But what a handful! There was no man among us who was not expert with musket, cutlass and pistol. Time and again we fought our way to the coast with our quarry through thirty times our number of black cannibals.

"I made six voyages in that hell-ship—three years of fighting, man-stealing and murder. Then civil war broke out in Argentina while we lay in the Rio de la Plata and all hands from the captain to the cabin boy joined the Buenas Aires forces. I went into the cavalry, not because I was a skillful horseman, but because I did not wish to march with a knapsack strapped to my back. There I learned to ride like a Gaucho, to use the bolas and lassoo and

the dreadful *azote*—the bull-whip—and throw a knife so it would cut an inch of ash from a *cagarro* twenty feet away yet do no harm to him who smoked it. *Ay!* I was an accomplished killer—and master of no other trade—when we were mustered out of the army, each with a hundred pesos in gold as a bonus, and nowhere to sell our services.

"The British had declared slave-trading to be piracy, and I had no wish to hang from a yardarm, so the sea was closed to me as a business, for I would not work for such a beggar's-dole as honest seamen drew. So north I went to join Don Augustino Iturbide in his grasp for his phantom crown. You know the result of that venture, Holy Mother. Don Augustino died before a firing squad, and those of us who did not share his fate found ourselves fugitives with prices on our heads and the police upon our trails. I fled across the Isthmus of Tehuantepec and took ship at Salina Cruz for Yerba Buena, but on my way across the Isthmus I learned something, Reverend Mother.

"They say the tiger when he once tastes human blood will stalk no other prey. I found that I had but to point my pistol at a man to receive everything of value he had on him. I was already branded as a *renegado.* I had been with Iturbide in his unsuccessful revolution. My life was forfeit if they took me. The penalty for highway robbery was no greater. *Pues,* why not be a highwayman?

"I have never robbed the poor, never taken more from any man than he could easily regain, never killed except in self-defense. I have done wrong to no woman."

"Not killed except in self-defense?" The abbess' calm brows rose questioningly. "Nor done a woman injury? What of Captain Felipe Climaco—and Doña Francisca Gutierrez? Was the first killed in thy own defense, and the second done no wrong?"

Now it was his turn to look puzzled. "Your pardon, Holy Mother. I have been far to the south these past four months,

at Los Angeles and San Tomás. I have not heard of these people."

She searched his face with serious dark eyes. "This is the truth? You swear it?"

"Upon my soul, yes. Tell me of them."

BRIEFLY she told the story of the murdered bridegroom and the bereft bride, of how The Black Wolf had passed through Don Guzman's armed guards to serenade Doña Francisca, and his face grew bleak as a frost-bitten landscape as he listened.

"This Don Guzman Miramon," he asked as she concluded her recital, "who is he, where does he live; what does he look like?"

"Most of the time he lives on his *rancho,* but he has a great town house, also. He is about thy height and size, my son, but older, much older. He has had three wives already. Señorita Gutierrez would have been his fourth had she bestowed her hand on him."

He nodded almost absent-mindedly. "I think that I should like to see this *caballero,* Holy Mother. It may be he could tell me many wonderful and lovely things —*Carramba! Que es—*"

The still night had become alive with movement. A hoarse shouting, the sharp *spang* of a rifle followed by the duller roar of a pistol, a man's agonized cry of *"Tengo muerte* — I am killed!" and a woman's wild, despairing scream that rose to piercing sharpness then stopped abruptly as if she who uttered it had been throttled.

"Wait here, I shall return instantly!" the abbess ran from the room, the rosary of ebony and silver she wore at her girdle clicking musically.

In a few moments she was back and her face was a study in mixed emotions. There was terror there, and anger, and a deal of sorrow, but most of all there was bewilderment. *"Ay! Ay!"* she exclaimed tremulously. "Woe me, *me miserable!* They have violated our cloister, shot and

killed one of our gardeners, and abducted the novice Maria de la Luz!"

"They?" he leaped up, hands already fumbling with his pistols. "Who, Holy Mother?"

Now her bewilderment was greater. "*El Lobo Negro*—The Black Wolf, my son. Carlos, our head gardener, saw him in his black-and-silver costume, with the velvet mask upon his face, and his four accomplices were also dressed in black and masked—"

"*Por la congoja de Cristo,* this is unbearable!" His voice was hard and sharp. "Must every wandering cut-purse in California call himself The Black Wolf? Is a man to have no privacy—no right and title to the name that he has won?"

"But Maria de la Luz—"

"And who in Satan's name is this Maria de la Luz, Good Mother?"

"She was Señorita Gutierrez — she whom a broken heart had turned from worldly things to God, my son. *O Señor* Barlo—good, kind powerful *Señor Lobo Negro*—if you indeed be he, for I am so confused I know not who is The Black Wolf and who is not—I pray you, bring her back to us!" She wrung her hands in entreaty, then, "But how can you, or any of us, know where they have taken her? We cannot know, we cannot even suspect—"

"I can!" he cut in sharply. "Have my horse saddled, if you please, and tell me which is nearer, Don Guzman's *rancho* or his town house?"

"Why, his house, of course, my son. His *rancho* is at least ten leagues away, his town house but a scant four miles. But why—"

"Because, Good Mother, after tonight there will be but one Black Wolf. Perhaps, indeed, there will be none at all, but certainly there will not be two."

YERBA BUENA, the small sleepy city that was later to become the fabled San Francisco, lay white as the ghost of a dead

town in the moonlight. It was so quiet that the hoofbeats of a black horse treading warily along the street that edged the bay were echoed hollowly, like small sounds in an empty auditorium. Barlow dropped his bridle and slipped from the saddle noiselessly. "Wait here, sweetheart," he told his mare. "I go to reconnoiter their position—"

He crept along the shadowed street, keeping in the shade of the pepper trees, till he reached the corner of a high blank wall of sun-baked brick against which he pressed closely as he advanced step by cautious step. This was the town house of Don Guzman Miramar. If he could only find some way to force an entrance—Something moved in the moonlight down the street, a furtive little shape that slipped as soundlessly as a shadow across the roadway. It was a cat that looked for prey or romance in the darkness, but even as he descried it he saw it halt and crouch. It could see something he could not, hear steps that were inaudible to him. Then from the cross-street he saw them emerge, four black-garbed men with masks upon their faces, two of whom dragged a draped figure between them, and behind them, treading daintily as a dancer, a fifth man whose costume was the duplicate of his own, save that his face was masked in black velvet.

Barlow threw himself prone, drawing a derringer from his belt as he dropped. They were fifty feet or more away, but had huddled in a knot before the great door of the house while the man who resembled him took an iron key from his girdle and fumbled at the lock. The crack of his pistol was like the flick of a whip, and one of the masked figures at the gateway stumbled, swaying against the man nearest him, hiccoughed once, and fell sprawling.

The others whirled as if they had been puppets actuated by a single string. Guns blazed, bullets struck the adobe wall with dull *pungs* and buried themselves in it. But Barlow was not where he had been

when he fired his first shot. Even as his pistol flashed he had begun to roll, not from his enemies, but toward them. Now, a dozen feet nearer, he raised his derringer and fired its second barrel. A second man went down, his mouth squared in mute agony, both hands pressed against his stomach.

Now the bullets whistled in a perfect fusillade above him and dust and chips of plaster from the wall fell rattling to the tiled roadway, but suddenly there was a cry of anger and amazement which deadened to a muffled roar of profanity as a pistol blazed against the sky, then clattered to the pavement. The woman whom the men had held by the elbows had twisted loose and jerked the shrouding wrappings from her face, then, as she saw what transpired, had snatched the silken cape that covered her from throat to feet and flung it like a net over their heads so that it blinded them and for a moment held them helpless as flies in a spider-web.

That momentary respite was enough, for Barlow had his second pistol out and at almost pointblank range and with the ruffians bound together by the folds of the cape it was hardly possible for him to miss. His double-barreled pistol roared two shots like one, and the forms that struggled underneath the mantle fell apart, slumped to the earth and lay there kicking, their struggles growing fainter with each convulsion.

"Now, Señor Liar"—the curved sword rasped against its scabbard as the blade leaped out into the moonlight, flickering like a flash of cold lightning—"let us see which one of us is The Black Wolf! *Guarda te*—on guard!"

The masked man jerked his basket-hilted rapier from its sheath and flung himself into position of defense. The blades clinked musically as they met, and for an instant both men stood as still as statues, each feeling out the other's strength and mettle. Then the swords disengaged and they were at it.

The masked man's rapier was longer by a hand's length than the curved saber, and at the first clash of the steel Barlow knew that he had found a foeman worthy of his skill, for down-slash, up-thrust, stab, cut, parry, the other flew at him, the straight blade rattling on the curved one like hail upon a housetop in a summer storm, and the needle-point and keen edge menacing his face and breast at every turn.

But their techniques differed. Skilled in sword-play as he was, the masked man had been taught by an orthodox *maitre de'armes* who had used masks and breast-plates in his teaching, while Barlow had been trained on a ship's heaving deck with murderous semi-pirates for teachers, no masks, no gauntlets or breastplates for protection, a heavy cutlass for a foil and death or crippling the penalty for a false stroke or laggard move. So he fought with his head well back while his opponent, rendered over-confident and under-cautious by his rage, thrust his face forward.

Beneath a lunging, high-armed stroke Barlow drove his curved blade and slashed the cord that held the velvet mask in place, then, drawing down his point in a quick zigzag, split the flesh of the bared cheek so that it showed the bone beneath as a torn garment bares its wearer's body.

"Hola," he mocked as he danced away. "And so we see your ugly face at last? *Por Dios,* you do well to hide it, for you are little better-favored than an ape, *old man!"* He flung the insult bitterly, deliberately, deriding his opponent's age.

And as the velvet mask fell off the girl gave a shrill scream. "Don Guzman! Don Guzman Miramar *á el mismo*—it is Don Guzman Miramar himself!"

The man shot a vindictive glance at her, and it was his undoing, for in the instant that his eyes were diverted Barlow lunged swiftly as a striking snake, driving the point of his saber into his adversary's throat between the bearded chin and collar of fine lace-trimmed linen.

The man dropped back a step, his face a

mask of torment unendurable, blood trickling from his mouth and down his chin until it soaked great blotches on his frilled and ruffled shirt. He tried to curse. A choking gurgle sounded. He tried to pray. A seethe of blood boiled in his mouth, and as he toppled backwards the girl's shrill accusation sounded: 'Twas you who masqueraded as The Black Wolf when I thought he serenaded me; 'twas you who killed my dearest, my lover, my bridegroom! Oh, thou accursed among men, thou wolf in sheep's clothing—"

"Nay, *Señorita,* say not so," her rescuer broke in as he wiped his sword on his handkerchief. "He was no wolf in sheep's fleece, that one, but a sheep who dared to wear the vestments of a wolf."

The girl turned to him, starry-eyed, a little frightened, but more curious. "I am beholden to thee, *caballero,*" she dropped him a deep curtsey. "Thou has done me a great service, though I do not know thy name—"

He doffed his wide-brimmed sombrero and held it over his heart as he made her a profound bow. "*Señorita,* I—and I alone —am The Black Wolf."

THE stars were paling in the light of coming day and birds were cheeping their matins as they rode back to the Convent of the Incarnation. "Here is thy birdling, safe and sound, and very little the worse for last night's adventuring, Holy Mother," he told the abbess when he stood once more in the large reception room.

"Thanks be to the good God and thee, my son," she answered with a smile of real affection. "We have little to requite thee with, but if the prayers of fifty grateful women are availing, thou shalt always have success in all thy worthy enterprises."

He smiled back at her, frankly, boyishly.

"Thy prayers, and those of thy brood, will be gratefully received, Good Mother, but there is more that thou canst do for me."

"Oha?" She did not quite know whether to laugh or be offended.

"In truth, there is. The lady whom I rescued yesternight saw the face of her kidnaper. She knows who masqueraded as The Black Wolf and did foul murder in his name and semblance. Let it be spread broadcast that The Black Wolf is no murderer, no killer of bridegrooms or kidnaper of women. A robber he may be, but—"

"A very true and knightly gentleman, for all that," the abbess finished his sentence. "Come, then, my son, thy breakfast waits."

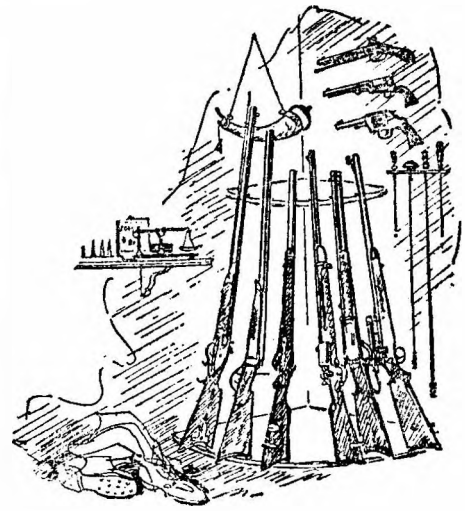
"Nay, Holy Mother, I may not tarry."

"Not stay and break bread with us—"

"Alas, no. Till you have cleared my name my reputation is still tarnished, and a thousand soldiers and *rurales* seek me for a crime I did not commit. I must change my clothing quickly if I would remain alive. There is a little inn not far from here where breakfast and fresh raiment—and perhaps a pair of eager arms and lips—await me. *Adios,* Good Mother."

"Go with God, my son," the abbess answered with another smile, and as the ever-widening crimson glow of morning heralded the coming of another day she heard the clicking of his horse's hoofs against the highway and his full tenor voice raised in song:

"O ask of the stars above you
If these my tears do not flow all night;
O ask if I do not love you,
Who of you dreamt till dawn was bright . . ."



THE SHOOTER'S CORNER

Conducted by
PETE KUHLHOFF

A Mighty Handy General-Purpose Rifle

WE KNOW that practically every American hunter has at least two and many instances three or more rifles in his gun cabinet. First he has his big game or deer gun which is generally anything from a .30-30 on up, and next he has a gun to take the .22-caliber Long Rifle cartridge which is our one indispensable caliber. The low cost of the .22 L. R. cartridge permits its use in quantities sufficient to keep the rifleman in perfect form, and its accuracy is tops!

Now for the third rifle—what should it be? I nominate the .22 Hornet as being the best general-purpose gun we have today. First of all it is wonderfully accurate.

The report is mild and there is practically no recoil. The little 45 or 46 grain bullet is safe to shoot in farming communities as it "breaks up" on contact and very seldom ricochets. Even at that a good rule to remember is—never shoot at anything unless there is a backstop for your bullet in case you miss. Never take shots along the skyline or toward a road with any gun.

The Hornet is supposed to be a poor wind-bucker, but I think this point has been somewhat overemphasized. I know for a fact that I have been able to anchor crows and other small vermin at as far as 185 yards in a fairly strong wind without holding off. And again it has been said that the Hornet has a tendency to change its center of impact. I have never had this trouble in but one rifle and in this instance the action and barrel was improperly bedded in the stock.

It may be well to say here that all rifles no matter what caliber, are apt to change their zero from day to day. Heavy barreled guns are less apt to change, but the tendency is present — so all super-accurate guns should be equipped with sights that have accurate adjustments for both elevation and windage, in fact to get the full benefit of the Hornet's fine accuracy the rifle should be scope sighted. And a few sighting shots should be fired before starting on a day's hunt.

In normal times the Hornet cartridges sell for less than two for a nickel and the reloader by using the cases over and over can operate for much less or at about a cent and a half per shot.

And another thing—single shot rifles using this nifty little cartridge could be bought for less than $15 before the war. Of course a fancy repeater ran up into as much folding money as a sportsman wanted to lay out.

I have experimented with several Hornet rifles including three of the under $15 single shots. With one of these guns I made my all-time small five shot Hornet group at 100 yards from rest.This group

measured a little less than 5/8 of an inch, and I might add that generally speaking, I got just as small 10 shot groups with these inexpensive guns as I did with the better-grade jobs. Mechanically speaking these little guns are okay, but the trigger pulls in most cases seem to be a little heavy —but can be easily lightened.

My only objection to using a single shot rifle is that once in a while a chance at a double on woodchucks or other vermin

will be missed due to the fact that it takes a little longer to reload.

For shooting small edible game I have used the commercial Hornet load having the full metal patch bullet. Once in a while (due to the sharp-pointed bullet) I have had this bullet keyhole and tear up a little meat. The hand loader can get around this by using a lead gas check bullet at a slower speed.

The factory soft point load moves the 45 grain bullet at around 2,600 feet per second at muzzle and it is still going at over 2,200 feet a second out at 100 yards. The 100 yard mid-range trajectory is .8 of an inch. If sighted in to strike at point of aim at 200 yards the bullet is 3.5 inches high at 100 yards, which is certainly flat enough for up to 200 yard shooting.

My Hornet rifles are sighted in to strike 1 inch high at 100 yards. Then I know that the bullet will strike the point of aim at 25 yards, will hit .8 inch high at 50 yards, 1 inch high at 75 yards, 1 inch high at 150 yards, not quite an inch low at 175 yards and almost 3 inches low at 200 yards, which means that the Hornet is certain to hit without under or over holding up to and a little beyond 150 yards at which

range it is an excellent killer on most all small game.

Hornet barrels are easy to clean due to modern primers and powder. When using a rifle every day I just soak a .22 caliber cleaning patch with Rig and push it through the fouled barrel. This saves the barrel a lot of cleaning punishment and is considered safe for several weeks. Of course when the gun is to be put away for an indefinite period it is given a thorough cleaning.

Now for a little information about the development of the Hornet cartridge. It is the old .22 Winchester Center Fire modernized. Captain Grosvenor L. Wotkyns did the preliminary experimenting using the 45 grain Velo Dog bullet. This cartridge of excellent accuracy and velocity was tried out at long range on jack rabbits and proved very fine for this work.

Shortly after these experiments were made, Colonel Whelen, Al Woodworth and Captain Moody of Springfield Armory got the bug and did a lot of experimenting, using .22 caliber MI Springfield rifles altered to take this new cartridge. This combination became very popular with other shooting enthusiasts and eventually the big arms companies brought out rifles of the Hornet caliber. Thanks to Captain Wotkyns!

My favorite rifle in this caliber is the Winchester Model 70. It's *some* gun!

UNSUSPECTED POWER

The Mysterious Influence In The Air You Breathe!

THE SOUL OF THE UNIVERSE is in the air you breathe. Deposited in your blood—with each inhalation you take—is *the intelligence* that directs the course of the planets through the misty reaches of space, and the strange phenomenon of life itself.

What is it that causes your heart to beat, your lungs to expand and contract? What mind directs *the cells* of your being, each in their purpose—some to create bone, others tissue and hair? What *consciousness* pervades these vibratory *globules of life* and gives them awareness of their Cosmic function?

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Would you seriously like to know how to draw upon this Intelligence of the Cosmic, with which the air is permeated? You can use it to awaken the creative powers of your mind, and for making life an experience of *achievement.* Use the coupon below for a free copy of the book, "The Mastery of Life." It tells how in the privacy of your home *you may learn* to use these simple, useful, *natural laws.*

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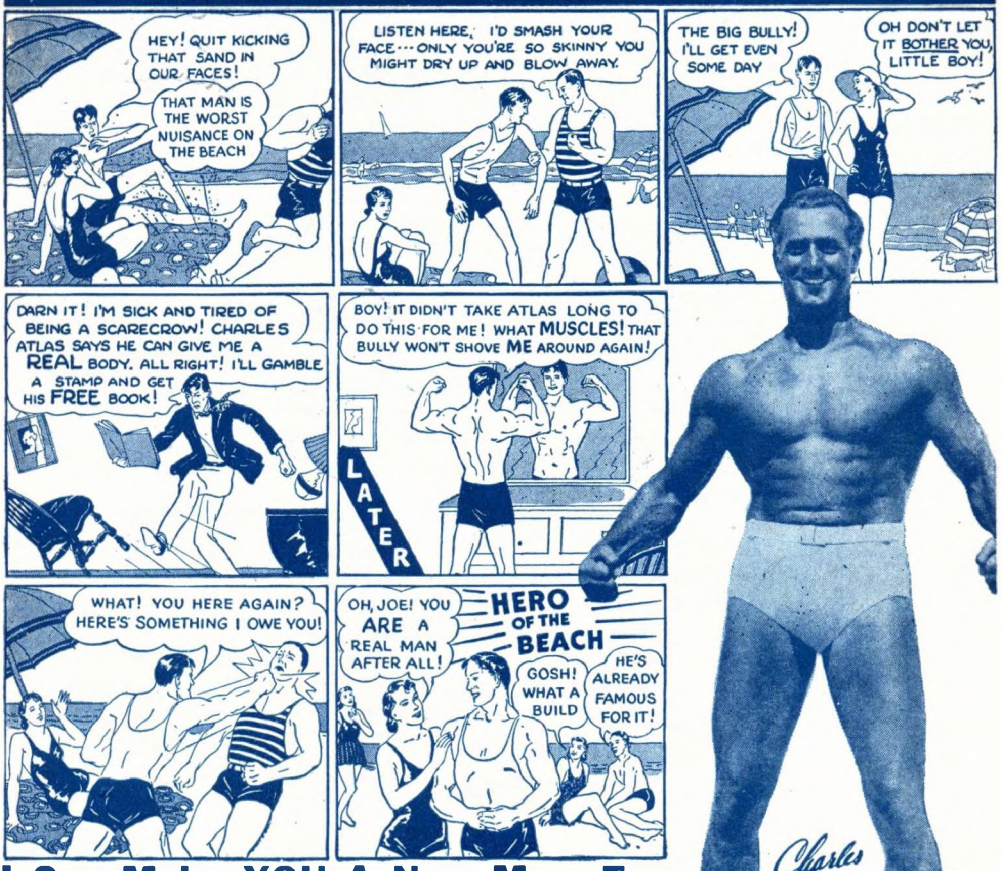
HOW JOE'S BODY BROUGHT HIM FAME INSTEAD OF SHAME



Charles Atlas

—actual photo of the man who holds the title, "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man."

I Can Make YOU A New Man, Too in Only 15 Minutes A Day!

If YOU, like Joe, have a body that others can "push around"—if you're ashamed to strip for sports or a swim—then give me just 15 minutes a day! I'll PROVE you can have a body you'll be proud of, packed with red-blooded vitality! *"Dynamic Tension."* That's the secret! That's how I changed myself from a spindle-shanked, scrawny weakling to winner of the title, "World's Most Perfectly Developed Man."

"Dynamic Tension" Does It!

Using *"Dynamic Tension"* only 15 minutes a day, in the privacy of your own room, you quickly begin to put on muscle, increase your chest measurements, broaden your back, fill out your arms and legs. Before you know it, this easy, NATURAL method will make you a finer specimen of REAL MANHOOD than you ever dreamed you could be! You'll be a New Man!

FREE BOOK

Thousands of fellows have used my marvelous system. Read what they say—see how they looked before and after—in my book, "Everlasting Health And Strength."

Send NOW for this book—*FREE*. It tells all about *"Dynamic Tension,"* shows you actual photos of men I've turned from puny weaklings into Atlas Champions. It tells how I can do the same for YOU. Don't put it off! Address me personally: Charles Atlas, Dept. 9B, 115 East 23rd Street, New York 10, N. Y.

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I want the proof that your system of *"Dynamic Tension"* will help make a New Man of me—give me a healthy, husky body and big muscular development. Send me your free book, "Everlasting Health and Strength."

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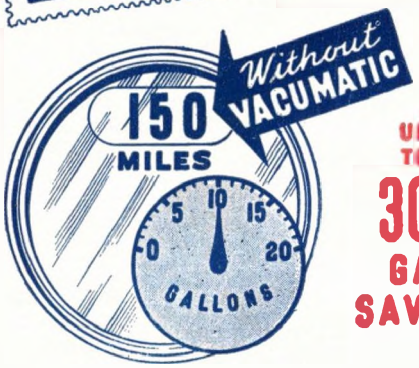
TO MAKE THIS *UNIQUE TEST...*

of GAS SAVINGS



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Car Owners: You are invited to make a gas saving road test with the Vacu-matic on your own car, with the absolute understanding that unless it proves to you that it will save you up to 30% on gas and improve your car performance, the test will cost you nothing. Investigate this remarkable discovery that trims dollars off gasoline bills—gives you worthwhile gas savings—more power—quicker starting—more miles on less gas.

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Signed

Notary Public

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