U. S. special agents act to stop - - - - -

BACK DOOR INVASION—FREDERICK C. PAINTON

Short Stories

Twice A[illegible] September 25th

25c

30c in Canada

An American looks into a War Lord's treasure chest

"The Old Buddha's Bed"

by CHARLES GILSON

"Boys, in 1 minute through that door will come our new star salesman–"

JUST when we had got to thinking our sales were doing extra all right, J. P., the sales manager, whammed home the old body punch at the first-of-the-month meeting.

"Boys," he said, "in just one minute, through that door will come our new star salesman . . . and I expect every man to cooperate with him to the fullest."

No kiddin', a pin dropping would have sounded like an exploding bombshell. Jim Smith looked at me, I stared at Ed Johnson. What was going on? Who was this newcomer? What kind of a bird would he be? Who was going to be "fired"? J. P. sure had us in a dither —and I mean dither!

And then, through the door staggered the office boy carrying a tray as big as a cart wheel. On top of it stood twelve big, gleaming bottles of Listerine Antiseptic.

J. P. grabbed the nearest one off the tray and slammed it down on the desk.

"Here he is," he bellowed, "and none of you guys had better laugh, either. For a long time I've noticed that some of you men—and I'm not mentioning any names, all too frequently have a breath that would knock a cow down. It all adds up to this: *If I've noticed it, customers must have noticed it, too.* And that's bound to be bad for business. After coming up against a case of halitosis a couple of times, a customer is entitled to close the door on you—*for keeps.*"

We all stirred uneasily.

"From now on," J. P. continued, "this is an order; take a swig of Listerine Antiseptic every morning before you hit the street. Get that? Not now and then after a big night . . . but *every* morning. Step up, gentlemen, and get your bottle."

Maybe J. P. was right, and maybe it's only coincidence, but I'm doggoned if the sales for the next six months weren't better, in spite of a lot of tricky stuff from our competitors.

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In business, it's just common sense to take precautions that your breath doesn't offend. Odor seldom gets an order . . . often loses one.

More and more smart salesmen recognize this and start the business day with Listerine. Notable for its antiseptic and deodorant power, Listerine renders the breath sweeter, fresher, purer.

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Keep Listerine Antiseptic handy at home and in the office, and tuck a bottle in your bag when you travel. Rinse the mouth with it before every business and social engagement. It really pays! Lambert Pharmacal Co., *St. Louis, Mo.*

LISTERINE CHECKS HALITOSIS (*Bad Breath*)

DEATH

Comes Back to

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WINE OF THE SABBAT—

IN HIS light, very easy to read, very realistic style, Robert Bloch spins a yarn of indescribable horror. As you read his "WINE OF THE SABBAT," you smell the perfume of warm blood on obscene altars — feel the anguish of men and women changed into braying, cackling beasts — hear a tortured organ sobbing out its anthem of the damned, as the worshippers of Voodoo bow low under yellow candlelight in the rites of the Black Mass.

These are only two grand tales in this really fine—thrill-crammed issue. THE MOUND, a novelette by Z. B. Bishop, tells of a world so devilish and old that men refuse even to speak of it. Bedford-Jones has contributed one of his Professional Corpse stories. It's titled THE WIFE OF THE HUMOROUS GANGSTER. There's good money in dying — once you know how!

August W. Derleth, Dorothy Quick and other crack horror and fantasy writers have combined to make this issue one that you will very definitely *not* want to read in bed!

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The Magazine of the Mysterious

The November Issue Is On Sale At All Newsstands September 1st

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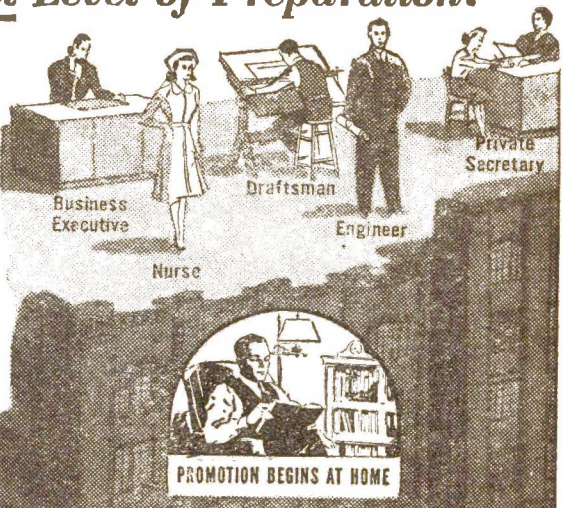

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BIGGEST AND BEST—TWICE A MONTH

Stories

latest stories—no reprints

SEPTEMBER 25th, 1940

COVER—Ray Quigley

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.

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"It Strikes Me That the U. S. Has Been Busy as Hell Locking the Front Door of Invasion and Left the Back Door Wide Open"

BACK DOOR INVASION

By FREDERICK C. PAINTON

Author of "Unfinished Business," "Cold Facts," etc.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *You who have read "Unfinished Business" and "Cold Facts" need no introduction to Louis J. Rourke of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Also you will know much of the Nazi* Nachrientendienst—*secret service—activities in this country. But in the remarkable narrative that follows you will learn of the incredible Nazi "Fifth Column" activities in South America; and for that you are indebted to Lou Rourke and the odd fact that he got married just when he did.*

Lou Rourke has turned over to me a complete file of this San Rico case. It includes exhaustive reports by German leaders, intercepted messages, translation of San Rican documents—in short, a complete dossier *that shows as nothing else in this world could, just how internal demoralization and collapse in countries coveted by the Nazis is brought about.*

Lou and I had some discussion as to just how to present this amazing revelation. After much thought I have chosen, once again, to tell it from the viewpoint of the chief German leader, and for this reason: in no other form could you, as the reader, gain such a complete picture of German activities against the United States —and the cold-blooded planning for the future.

This has meant telescoping, rearranging, dramatizing and making use of fiction devices. But nonetheless, I say to you, on what reputation as a writer I possess, that the essential facts in this narrative are not imagined. Names are changed, countries disguised, a narrative woven, but the incidents themselves happened—and may happen again before this sees print. So swiftly do the Nazis move.

This story will, I hope, explain to you why the back door to invasion of America

is now frantically being barricaded by the Army and Navy chiefs in Washington; and explains the diplomatic war being waged by the State Department to oppose Nazism in South America.

As usual, to keep the narrative at an interesting pace, I am appending additional details of Gestapo methods in footnotes. And once again I leave to your judgment the verdict of the story's inherent accuracy.

CHAPTER I

FEVER SPOT IN SAN RICO

FROM: Otto Brant, Hotel Bolivar, Boca Vista, Republic of San Rico.

To: Korvettenkapitan Jan Von Lieter, *sekretariat fur Sud Amerika, Geheime-Staats-Polizei.**

Subject: Report of special *Nid*† at Boca Vista.

June 12 (8:20 P.M.) Exzellenz: I break off the general account of our activities here to explain in detail the crisis that has arisen.

American secret agents have become active again, and I have been forced to take drastic measures. As you will see, our fever spot‡ must be erupted quickly.

The situation until yesterday was this: The President of San Rico, Phillipo Y Bara, though friendly to the United States, had practically agreed to permit the establishment of an air line between Boca Vista and Callao, Peru. I had, as you know, incorporated the air line as a San Rican business, and appealed to his national pride. He had no way of knowing that German funds and planes were to be used. He did not know the commercial airdrome would be a German air base for eventual air attack on the Panama Canal. He did know that the commercial planes could be quickly converted to bombers but I told him this was necessary for the defense of San Rico.

This morning I was summoned to the presidential palace. This was not unusual; as a supposed refugee from the Spanish Loyalist Army, I had, under the name of Juan Matista, become colonel-instructor of artillery in the San Rican army. I had cultivated the president, tried to gain his utter confidence.

But as I entered his presence I saw something was amiss. Ordinarily, he is a chubby, fat, laughing man; jealous of his power but susceptible to flattery. Now he scowled and looked furious.

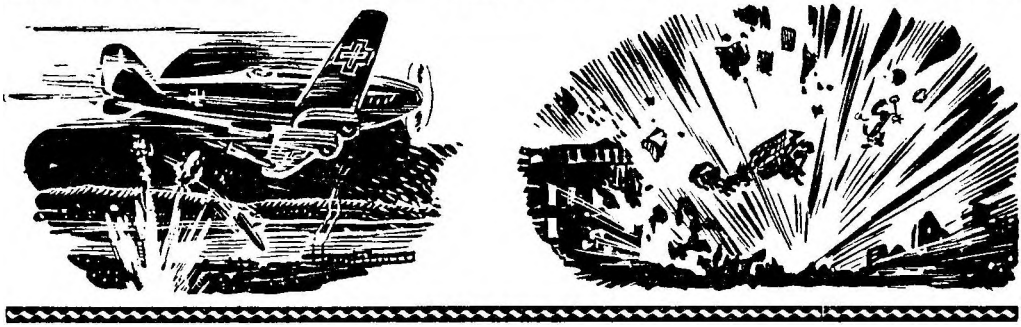
"Are you certain your name is Juan Matista?" he said coldly.

It was not difficult to act the astonish-

* *Geheime-Staats-Polizei* (German State Police) has been shortened to Gestapo. Until recently the *Nachrichtendienst*, or foreign espionage, under command of Colonel Nicolai, was a separate branch of intelligence. But the desire for power of Heinrich Himmler has grouped all espionage and "Fifth-Column" activity under the one head, so that all branches are now loosely called Gestapo.

† *Nid.* A unit or cell of Nazi activity within a foreign state. The German-American Bund is denoted a *Nid* in Nazi parlance.

‡ Fever Spot. Nazi slang for any place or nation where secret boring is likely to burst out into internal revolt or war in from twelve to twenty-four months' time.



ment I felt. Who had been talking to him?

"But you know I am, Your Excellency," I said, bewildered.

He ignored this. "Is it true," he went on, "that German capital promotes this air line you wish? That German planes will be used? German equipment on the airdrome?"

He *had* been talked to.

"True, Your Excellency," I nodded. "But only because of most favorable terms. Not a centimo of money do we put up. They take coffee and cotton in trade.* The Yanquis ask four million *pesos* in cash—and you have said the treasury is low."

His anger faded. He got up from his desk. Suddenly he was no longer subtle.

"I have reason to believe you are a German agent," he suddenly shot at me.

How could he have learned this? And when?

"Your Excellency," I cried, "this is monstrous. A man who has shed his blood for democracy and freedom to be so accused—who has told you such lies?"

"Are they lies?" he muttered.

"Senor President," I said, "you have a complete record of my life. Cable to General Franco—and learn what price he has placed on my head. I led the Tarronga Wing of the Loyalist Air Force. It is only natural I wish to fly again. I have taken out citizenship papers in San Rico. You have no more loyal citizen than I. Refuse permission to establish the air line if you will—but do not malign my honor. You are too great a gentleman for that."

He smiled, moved by the compliment.

"It is, perhaps, that they are wrong," he finally said. "But with German activity on this continent so persistent, one must not take risks."

"Who has told you this?" I asked.

He shook his head. "That does not matter. Only I say this, *amigo*. For the time being, we will say no more about the air line. After this affair in Europe has righted itself—then we shall see."

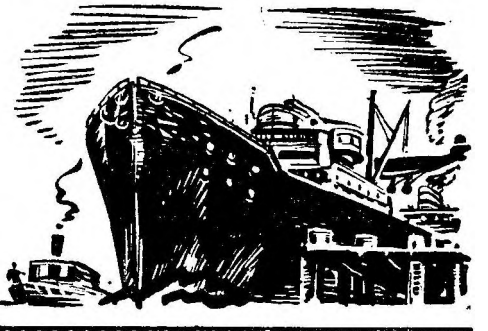
He smiled and held out his hand. "My Coronel, if I have suspected you falsely, believe me I shall be the first to make amends."

I shook his hand. "If you remain my friend, nothing else matters," I told him.

ON THE way out I encountered General Miguel Callimayo and signaled him I wished to see him immediately. Instant action is imperative. With matters in Europe as they are, and your memorandum to me from the General Staff* control of San Rico is vital to our whole South American project.

* The chief hold Germany has on Latin-American countries is her need for their products and their tremendous surpluses. The United States does not want wheat, cotton, beef, raising its own. Hence, Germany by swapping manufactured products for foodstuffs by trade agreements, economically penetrates Latin American states as she tries to gain political control as well.

* Officials in Washington are well aware that for the past five years one whole section of the great German General Staff has devoted its attention entirely to planning military operations against the United States—by invasion from the South.



General Callimayo came to the Plaza Obregon and we sat down in the Nationale for coffee. He is a thin, dark, restless man, eaten with ambition for power. He is our man because I promised he shall be the next president.

"What has happened to *El Presidente?*" I asked.

"The cursed Americanos," he rejoined. "Last night, in his bedroom, he received an American agent. His name is Paul Bolton. He is presumably a tourist staying at the Hotel Bolivar. The Americanos intend to keep in power a regime friendly to them."

He paused, looked at me with slitted eyes. "You got rid of five other American agents. Waste no time in getting rid of this one. He knows much. And there may be three more with him."

I frowned. This was annoying and dangerous.

"Who?" I asked.

"A man and his wife named Louis J. Rourke, and an American air pilot named Michael Malone but called Red."

(Exzellenz: I have sent a radio via the Italian submarine *Foggia* for information concerning these three).*

I frowned thoughtfully. Knowing that San Rico is only 760 air miles from the Panama Canal, it was obvious that the Americans were coming alive to their peril.

"I will attend to Senor Bolton," I said.

General Callimayo scowled. "You waste time," he declared vigorously. "You know *El Presidente* is entirely influenced by *los Americanos.* Yet you delay the revolution that is to make me president. Why?"

Callimayo is a valuable adherent but I could not explain to him that our *bohrmaschine*† must have time to function thoroughly before the *sturmtruppen* are brought in, and the final climax arranged.

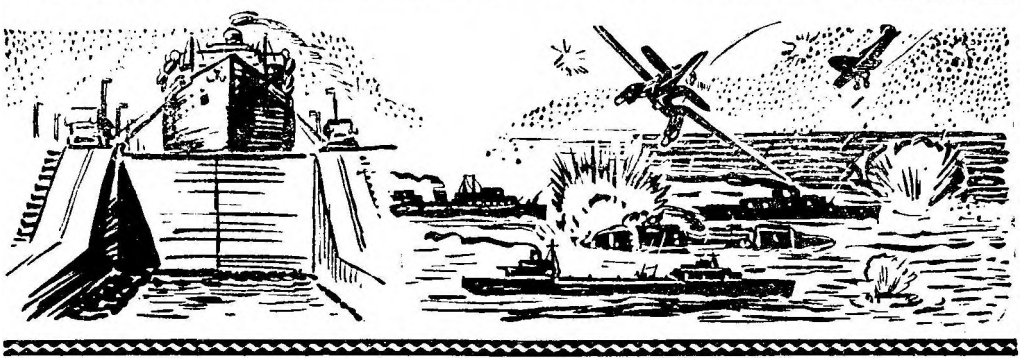
AS USUAL I smoothed him down. "An abrupt change of administration here," I said, "without making it appear to spring from the discontent of the *peons* and *mestizos,* would bring American naval intervention, and point suspicion at outside influences. We must make this appear a real upheaval of the people." I smiled at him. "You are young, you are popular with the army. Have patience, *amigo,* it will not be long."

Presently I left him to give my attention to this Paul Bolton.

I had a look at him in the Bolivar bar. He was drinking a sherry with this Mr. and Mrs. Louis J. Rourke, and with them

* The file of names and information about persons all over the world kept in the Tiergarten Gestapo files is unbelievably enormous. It is said to fill a state building of nearly 150 rooms. These files include the names of German emigrants living abroad, *"Ausland-Deutschen,"* who number millions, thousands of friends and supporters such as members of the American Silver Shirts; and enemies, particularly leaders who may need "attention" later. I have no doubt but that my own name, with all available information, appears in the extensive files of "P."

† *Bohrmaschine.* Nazi Fifth-Column activity is divided into two parts; first, the boring or inward perforating by bribing, cajoling, corrupting and creating discontent; then the *sturmtruppen* (storm troops) come in and either lead or aid a revolt or join with parachute troops or air infantry in seizing strategic points and demoralizing resistance. Numbered in thousands, they have army organization and staff work.



was a huge, red-haired man who, I presume, is this Red Malone.

I shall say nothing about these last three until I have your radio. But Bolton is a tall, gray-haired man of forty or so—wears pince-nez glasses and looks mild and a typical tourist. However, General Callimayo's spies in the palace cannot be mistaken. So tonight we shall examine Senor Bolton thoroughly. Heil Hitler!

June 12 (11:40 P.M.) from Von Lieter to Oberst-Leutnant Brant, via the Imperial Italian Submarine Foggia* (Code 3):

RE ROURKE LOUIS J ROURKE IS MOST DANGEROUS AGENT OF AMERICAN FEDERAL BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION AND HIS WIFE IS FORMER MEMBER OF SAME SHEILA McLARIN PERIOD THEY WERE MARRIED IN NEW YORK JUNE 9 AND THIS MAY BE LEGITIMATE HOLIDAY PERIOD BUT THIS MAN CAUGHT AND HAD EXECUTED NICOLAS WORTH AND ERICH VON SCHLIEFFEN TWO OF OUR BEST MEN IN UNITED STATES PERIOD IS DANGEROUS CLEVER AND RUTHLESS AND IF THIS IS MOVE AGAINST US THEN SUGGEST YOU ACT INSTANTLY PERIOD MICHAEL MALONE IS FORMER TEST PILOT FOR BARING BOMBERS AND CAPTAIN IN U S ARMY AIR RESERVE AND IS PRESUMED TO FLY EXPLORATION TRIP INTERIOR SAN RICO TAKE NO RISKS AND STRIKE FIRST HEIL HITLER!

CHAPTER II

MAN MUST DIE

JUNE 13 (11:58 P.M.). Exzellenz: I have news of the greatest import, which may change all our plans. Let me explain from the beginning.

Following receipt of your radio message I formed a little plan that would not only attend to Senor Bolton but enable me to find out just what has brought Louis Rourke and his wife to San Rico. I summoned Fritz Stauer, leader of the forty *bohrmaschine* men who came here as Spanish Loyalist refugees, and told him what was to be done. He agreed.

So early tonight as Bolton entered the rear entrance to the police, Fritz and two men and I waited in the shadow of the palms across the street. This second visit to *El Presidente* had convinced me that Bolton carried messages to Y Bara and would, possibly, carry information back. If we could examine this it would help formulate a timetable of our further movements.

Bolton came out at the expiration of a half-hour. I signaled Stauer.

The man apparently intended to walk to the Plaza. He did not go far. Fritz and one of his men pounced upon him. Bolton fought with exceptional bravery and skill, and it was finally I who struck him across the skull with the muzzle of my Luger pistol. We had a car waiting on the Calle Ascuncion.

"Put him in the back, Fritz," I said, "and feed him some brandy. He must be well enough to talk freely."

"He's in good shape, Herr Hauptmann," Fritz told me. "Where do we take him?"

"To the banana plantation on the road to Las Vegas," I said.

We drove there in less than a half-hour. Aside from two drunken banana cowboys,

* An *oberst-leutnant* is equivalent to a lieutenant colonel; such titles are vested in Fifth-Column workers and espionage to insure obedience to all orders.

we saw no one. The place was lonely and secluded, ideal for our purpose.

By now Bolton had regained consciousness. We removed him from the car and took him to an abandoned hut on the edge of the jungle.

"What is the meaning of this?" he demanded. There was no fear in his eyes.

"You talked with *El Presidente* tonight—just now," I said. "What did you say to him? What message did he give you for America?"

Oh, Bolton was cool. He laughed in my face.

"I'll tell you nothing," he said. "I am a tourist in San Rico and, by God, you'll hear from this night's work."

Fritz Stauer is a hot-headed fanatic, which is why it was necessary for me to relieve him here in command. He will never know the difference between being hard and ruthless and cool, and being hard and hot with rage. He smashed Bolton across the face.

"You dirty Yankee dog," he growled. "You'll speak and quickly—or by Heaven, I'll make you crawl."

Bolton laughed at those tactics—just as I knew he would.

"Wait, Fritz," I said. "This can be attended to. But first search him. There may be a written message."

FRITZ searched him. Stripped Bolton of his clothes until he stood naked in the cool dampness of the night. Even examined his body. But the man's white skin was without a blemish except for a bad jagged scar on the right forearm.

The clothing yielded nothing.

"Whatever message he is carrying," Fritz growled, "it's verbal."

I smiled. As a leader in the *Schutzstaffel** and later in the Gestapo school, one of the chief courses of training was how to make unwilling men talk. It was increasingly apparent that this man possessed vital information of new American activities against us. Matters with us were now so close to a climax that we *had* to know his secrets.

It serves no purpose, Exzellenz, to tell *you*, of all persons, what we did next. You are as familiar with our methods of persuasion as I. It was interesting to me in an abstract way because I have made a study of different nationalities and their ability to withstand this kind of treatment. I have seen a Spaniard take everything but a kick in the groin, the least painful.*

Bolton was tough, and he was stubborn. Time after time when he had paused, he would gasp through clenched teeth, "Nothing—I'll tell nothing."

There is, however, as you should know, Exzellenz, a limit to a man's endurance, no matter how brave. Bolton had fainted three times from shock and agony. Now, as one of Fritz's men went to work on the soles of his feet† he suddenly sobbed and cracked.

"I'll talk," he panted, "only for God's sake no more—please—I can't stand it."

I nodded to Fritz to stop.

"Talk, then," I said. "And if you lie—it will all be worse."

Bit by bit he gave up his information, and it was this: The State Department of the United States suspected that we wished to establish an air base in San Rico. They suspected that the so-called Spanish Loyalist refugees were, in truth, German *bohrmaschine* men. They were urging *El Presidente* Y Bara to order the deportation of the alleged refugees. (Exzellenz: The Americans learn too much; our counter-espionage organization at home

* Schutz-staffel, sometimes called S. S. troops. The original Hitler Brown Shirts who wear black uniforms, and formed the foundation of the reign of terror in Germany and occupied territories. These men were taught how to beat and torture and not leave a mark on the victim.

* I have heard a young Nazi storm trooper declare in justification of cruelty, "a few must suffer that many may be spared. German domination and world peace must be born in pain; but of the millions to benefit only a fraction of a percent really suffer."

† Usually matches passed over soles and heels of bare feet. But can also be done by wrenching off nails and burning exposed flesh with matches. Excruciating pain. Men who perform this sort of thing for the Nazis seem to suspend all human emotions; they are, as many have testified, fanatics. Heinrich Himmler, head of the Gestapo, has said, "I want young men, hardened by adversity, to further harden them and make them ruthless."

should wipe out their agents.) He finally gasped out, too, the most important point: the United States wants to establish a small base here for a south Caribbean air patrol.*

"And what did *El Presidente* say?" I demanded.

"He is weighing the request."

"Did he seem favorably inclined?"

"He wants to be friendly."

Exzellenz: I realized instantly that *El Presidente* Y Bara must be ousted. An American air base here would be fatal to our plans. And, knowing Americans, they would hesitate to enforce their desire against a hostile administration — like General Callimayo's, for example.

I decided, then, my next moves, but now wished to learn something of Rourke, his wife and Malone.

"Do they work under cover on your missions?" I asked.

He shook his head vigorously.

"I know nothing of them," he panted. "They merely came on the same plane."

I remembered your statement of what Rourke had done to Worth and Von Schlieffen. "You are lying," I said. "Tell it all or, *bei Gott,* the matches again."

"I swear I do not know them," he cried.

Fritz had been standing silently, watching. "He's lying," he muttered savagely. "I saw it in his eyes." He sprang forward. "Speak, you *schwein,*" and he swung a blow to Bolton's face.

Ordinarily, perhaps, the blow would only have inflicted pain. But Bolton was weak. He staggered back, saw the small fire we had built, tried to avoid it. He crashed against the hut and fell. His skull struck the stone corner foundation with a sickening sound. He sprawled his length.

"You fool!" I said to Fritz. "What have you done?"

I sprang forward, knelt by Bolton. Blood was seeping from a jagged hole where the corner of the stone had smashed his skull. His heart beat but only feebly. He was, if I knew anything, dying.

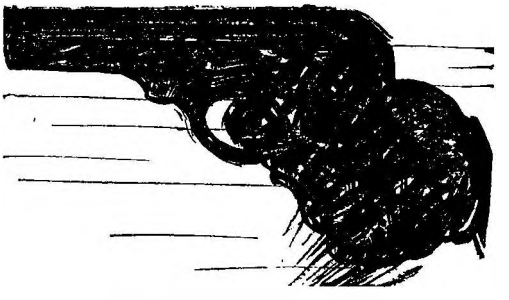
"How did I know his skull was made of paste?" muttered Fritz.

I shrugged. One cannot cry over a broken egg. There was still a way to find out Rourke's connection—if any—with this American plot.

"Get him into the car," I said. "Take him to the rear door of the Bolivar and get him up to his room. If you are questioned, he is drunk. Spill some brandy on him. Hurry! We must be rid of him before he turns stiff."

HASTILY we got the body into the back seat of the car and drove by side streets through Boca Vista to the Bolivar Hotel. At least five of our *bohrmaschine* men worked here as bus-boys, cooks, waiters and bell-boys. I was not worried particularly about the discovery of Bolton—or the consequences.

As it happened, by using the freight elevator we got him to his room unseen, and put him on the bed. I made certain the microphone of the dictaphone was well hidden behind a picture.



"Into the next room," I said to Fritz. "The rest of you go to the headquarters. We shall be along shortly."

Fritz and I went into the next room, which I had engaged earlier that day when the dictaphone had been placed in Bolton's room. I took down the telephone receiver and called Rourke's room.

* A statement recently made in the Congress by the House Military Affairs Committee, acting jointly with the Naval Affairs members, looks to the establishment of American air bases in Nova Scotia and some Caribbean island, perhaps Jamaica or Trinidad; and on the mainland in Brazil. These last are vital to guard the Panama Canal approaches.

A low, not unpleasant voice said, "Hello?"

I disguised my voice. "Come to me—at once—Bolton—" I whispered. "Oh, God, come at once."

I hung up the receiver, put on the dictaphone earphones and waited.

CHAPTER III

THE PLAN IS FORMED

JUNE 14 (7 P.M.). Exzellenz: I continue with the report of the Bolton incident.

As we waited Fritz whispered, "What do you expect to get from this?"

"The truth about Rourke," I replied. "If he is an American agent he will reveal it now. Then we shall know what to do." I grinned. "He is not in the United States now. And I can do as I please in this country."

Fritz smiled, for it was true, and he knew it.

I heard the door in the next room open wider—I had left it on the latch—and then Rourke's voice said, "Hello, Bolton, what was it you——Sheila—get back—don't look."

The woman's voice said, horrified, "Oh, Lou—oh, dear God—look at him."

"Don't," said Rourke's voice. "The poor devil—what could have happened to him?"

His wife Sheila said, "Probably set upon and robbed. Lou, we've got to get a doctor quick."

"How did he ever get back here?" Rourke said musingly. "He couldn't have walked."

I listened in great satisfaction. Rourke, then, had no connection with Bolton and his plans. Else he would have known what occurred.

I knew that I had nothing to fear from Rourke's activities and settled to hear the rest.

Then to my amazement I heard Bolton's voice. I would have sworn he was dead by now, yet this croak could have come from no one else.

"You—Rourke—quick—I'm going—listen to me!"

"Quiet, old man," Rourke said, "I'll call a doctor."

"Never mind—that—no good now—going fast. Listen—scar on my left arm—cut it open—quick!"

Fritz cursed softly under his breath. I was filled with fury. One of my lessons in the *Nachrichten* school had taught of gold or aluminum capsules shoved into cicatrices. Why had we not thought to slit open that ugly scar of his? But it was too late now.

Bolton was gasping—the death rattle already in his throat.

"Listen—inside capsule is message from—*El Presidente*—get it—to Washington. I don't know you—only you are—American—this for your country—pledge your word—dying man—do this—"

Rourke said, "Sure, I'll get this stuff off. Now, be quiet, fellah, and I'll get a doctor."

"Doctor can't keep me—from where—I'm going—going—ah-h-h!"

The punctured sound of a dying man's last breath is unmistakable. I hung on yet a few seconds more, heard Rourke say, "The poor, poor guy. I wonder who did this to him?"

There was a moment's silence. I heard something moved scrapingly. Then footsteps entered, a deep voice said, "Hello, Lou, what goes on?"

"Take a look for yourself, Red," said Rourke. "Somebody murdered the guy to get this gold capsule. It had papers."

"You mean he was a spy or something?" asked the voice I knew was that of Red Malone, the test pilot.

"Maybe," said Rourke. "I don't know. But he was acting for the United States."

Red's voice was queerly pitched. "The U.S.A., huh?"

"Listen, Red," came Rourke's voice, "I don't know what was up. But Bolton—if that was his real name—gave me this cap-

sule—said it had to reach Washington."

"I get you," said Red. "You want me to fly it there?"

"Maybe only to Miami, Red. Bolton could have used the local post office and the Pan-American Airways. He didn't, so he had a reason."

"Gimme," said Red. "She starts for Miami—now—tonight. I'll be there by noon."

Their voices retreated, left the room. I took off the headphones and sat in thought.

"That capsule, Fritz," I said, "is a summary of the situation here for the American State Department."

"I and my men can attend to this Malone," Fritz growled.

I SHOOK my head. "*El Presidente* is bound to hear what has happened to Bolton. If Malone also is attacked, he will perhaps make inconvenient moves."

"We must have the capsule," said Fritz. "Not only to know what America is planning but to stop them from getting the truth until it is too late to matter."

"Perfectly true," I smiled, "but there is a better way—with no suspicion of us. So that when we deny knowledge of Bolton's face, *El Presidente* will believe us."

I rose, glanced at my watch. It would take Malone an hour or so to take on petrol and supplies. That was time enough.

"Come," I said, "we'll see *El Capitan* Burgoya."

Fritz grinned comprehension of the scheme. "Excellent," he said.

We went out into the night, and climbed into the car.

"The military airport," I said to Fritz. "Young Vincente Burgoya is officer of the day."

During the ride out I made my decision to strike immediately. So, Exzellenz, I am radioing you, via the *Foggia*, to ship in haste five thousand Mauser rifles and a half-million rounds of ammunition. We shall need also three trench mortars and perhaps a dozen of the knock-down .77 calibre mountain guns. Ten thousand rounds for these will be ample. One hundred machine guns and five hundred thousand rounds will complete the armament need. The light Spandau for either tripod or shoulder action will be ideal. Send by submarine and we will transship them.

I suggest also that fifty picked *sturmtruppen* be shipped at once, for these will be the key men in the attack. It will be technically a palace revolution—control of that gives us the country. We have done sufficient spade work that a good *putsch* now can succeed.

Callimayo won't betray his hatred of the United States until we are well intrenched.

Ship also at once three Dornier heavy bombers and thirty-six of the special bombs. Put them on pontoons in case we must fly them in by night. The regular crews for them can be sent by submarine with the munitions. This also goes to you by radio.

We arrived at the airport. San Rico's air force is not big; seven chaser planes and two medium bombers bought second-hand from the United States. But the chasers are American Curtiss Falcons and in excellent condition.

I had one of these in mind when I found Vincente Burgoya in the guardroom. He is only a *capitan*, but is thoroughly a Nazi with ambitions to be air marshal of San Rico. He adores Air Marshal Goering.

So he listened intently while I explained the danger to our great plan. He is young, dark, nervously alive, an excellent pilot.

"If this information from *El Presidente* arrives in the United States," I concluded, "they may send battleships—keep the tyrant Y Bara in power indefinitely."

He followed me, his black eyes snapping in sudden fury.

"You wish this plane not to reach Miami," he said.

"If it does," I lied, "then we abandon everything here—your extra pay that

keeps Dolores so beautiful must stop—I return to the Reich."

He nodded silently, left the room. I heard his voice bark to the night sergeant. "Live ammunition, one tracer in five for Number SR six. I go up at once for night practice."

I smiled at Fritz. When Vincente Burgoya returned I described the plane of Malone. "It is at the South American Airways port. We shall have men there to inform you when it takes off."

He looked at me earnestly. "The plane of Malone will suffer engine trouble and fall into the jungle. We will look for it—but fail to find it," he said.

"But mark the spot," I said. "We must have that little capsule."

He nodded. We shook hands and he muttered, "Heil Callimayo," and we went out.

I was well content. The Falcon was faster, with four machine guns against a slower twin-motored plane, unarmed.

On the way back I decided to call a staff meeting to plan our little *coup d'etat.* Of that and the result of Vincente Burgoya's night flight I shall write later. Heil Hitler!

From Von Licter to Oberst-Leutnant Brant. (Code 3) via Italian U-Boat Foggia (June 14). VERY CONFIDENTIAL. DESTROY AFTER READING.

Re radio. Machinery shipped and new salesmen recruited and are leaving. You will be notified further concerning both.

This communication has to do with developments here and their immediate concern with you and your project.

The outlook for peace in Europe on our terms is favorable; and one fact is certain —we shall emerge with continental hegemony and immediate need to have raw materials, especially beef, cotton, wheat and coffee. The crops have been poor and the danger of famine exists—not for us alone, but for all of Europe.

The South American countries, particularly Argentina, Brazil, Chile and Uruguay, possess these export materials in great quantities. But we are told by American agents that in its effort to oppose National Socialism the United States is calling a conference to be held in Havana some time next month* in which South American be bonded together to follow American and Central American representatives will leadership in opposition to us.

This cannot be tolerated.

The United States is not prepared to undertake military operations. Our secret ally, the Japanese, can, as the Italians did against England in the Mediterranean, conduct themselves so as to prevent the American fleet from leaving the Pacific. They have no fleet in the Atlantic, none that can oppose the combined German and Italian fleets.

They have no trained army to oppose a landing.

These facts, however, will be hidden by the Americans from the representatives of the South and Central American republics.

It is necessary that we make a demonstration to show how helpless the United States is to oppose us. This and proper propaganda will throw these South American countries into our hands, especially as we are willing to undersell American exporters† and guarantee delivery of our machinery in the bi-lateral trading.

You will therefore delay no longer in carrying out your operation against the Panama Canal.

Men, machinery and planes will reach you within twelve days. You will, during the interval, make your preparations so as not to delay operations longer than forty-eight hours after arrival of equipment. The United States will not declare war, as our propaganda is opposing such action,

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* Inter-American conference called for Havana Cuba, Saturday, July 20. Opening address delivered by Secretary of State Hull. See current newspapers for Nazi reaction and threats to South and Central American countries following American lead.

† American exporters declare Nazi machinery salesmen underselling them fifty per cent (i. e., offering to sell cement for less than American cost of freighting) and posting a forfeit for non-delivery by September 15, 1940.

and the authorities know it will be three years before they can adequately undertake police work in the western hemisphere. We incur no liability in this action. The United States will not make war. Report daily progress this date onward. Heil Hitler!

June 15, (11:20 P.M.) Exzellenz: I have just had a most frightful experience. In explaining it, I can also explain the new difficulties blocking the carrying out of the orders relayed in your radio of June 14.

I have narrowly escaped death and disaster threatens.

Chapter IV

COUNTER-PUNCH

IT WAS early this evening that I received a telephone call from Vincente Burgoya. I had been in conference with General Callimayo and arrangements had been made to enlist certain members of my *Nid* in the army to prevent resistance to our *putsch.*

"Hello, *El Capitan,*" I said, "you are back—good news, I trust?"

Vincente said, "I am at the Black Cat, Senor Coronel. It is necessary that I see you at once."

This was strange—unusual.

"You have, then, attended to the matter of last night?" I frowned.

"*Si, si,*" he responded hurriedly. "It is about that I call. Come, I am waiting."

Fritz was with me. I turned to him and said, "Vincente is at the Black Cat Cafe. A strange place for him. It is probably all right. But have me trailed, and be ready for any eventuality."

"*Zu Befehl!*" he nodded.

With that I took myself to the outskirts of Boca Vista where this imitation American night club caters to tourists. As I entered, the dingy room was empty. But a waiter said, "You are Senor Coronel Matista?"

I said that I was. He beckoned. "*El Capitan* Burgoya is inside. He does not wish it to be known that he is seeing you."

I frowned. More and more queer. But I followed him into a rear room, smelling vilely of cooking peppers.

Vincente was seated on a chair. He sprang up as I entered and I saw that all had not gone well with him. His uniform was in shreds; his eye was blackened; and he had several bruises on his face.

"Well, Vincente," I said, "what in the world has happened? Did you, too, crack up?"

His eyes were wild with fear; he tried to speak and his tongue seemed paralyzed. He licked his lips.

"*El Coronel,*" he muttered, "I was forced—"

"Never mind telling him, Burgoya," said a new voice. "We'll tell him what there is to know."

I whirled; my hand leaped to my gun holster.

"No," said this Senor Lou Rourke, "keep your mitts away from that gun, and raise them up. It would be a real pleasure to put the slug on you."

As he spoke, behind him appeared—of all persons—this tall, red-haired man known as Red Malone.

"That's a job I'm bidding for, Lou," he said grimly.

I took a few seconds to clear my mind, grasp the situation.

"What does this mean?" I asked.

Rourke regarded me closely, his eyes staring at my close-cropped hair and going down all six feet of me to my feet. His eyes, Exzellenz, are a cold, deep-set gray. They remind you of twin machine guns set in the cowling of a Stuka dive bomber. He is not unusually large, yet somehow you get the impression of bigness and strength. He had the faculty of chilling me, making me tense, aware that I faced a deadly enemy.

"I wanted a good look at you," he said quietly. "I wanted to see what a Nazi termite looks like—also a torturer and a murderer."

I forced a smile. "This is ridiculous. I am Colonel Matista, late of the Spanish Loyalist—"

"*Achtung!*" * he roared.

Ah, Exzellenz, the trick is old; I myself have used it in uncovering a guise. Had the treachery of Vincente not upset me, perhaps I might have been ready for it. But our discipline of the party—it had me then. I stiffened, my hands went to the seams of my breeches before I had time to think. Then I sensed the trick and relaxed.

Rourke was smiling grimly.

"All right, Squarehead," he said. "You've betrayed yourself."

I WAS wild with fury. I swung on Vincente. "You shall pay for this," I said. "Treachery receives ample payment at our hands."

"No, no," he cried. "I could not help it. I swear by *Dios—*"

"Cut it, Burgoya," said Red Malone. He had a deep voice and killer eyes. He looked at me now and I saw no mercy. "We massaged him until he agreed to call you." He paused. Then, "He tried to shoot me down. Got in three bursts, too, and if he hadn't been a lousy shot I wouldn't be here. But he missed—and I didn't."

Curiosity overcame me. "Your plane, then, was armed?"

"He—he out-maneuvered me," muttered Vincente, shuddering. "He came up behind—his one propeller sawed off my tail assembly. He wing-slapped me down. It—I nearly was killed. He is a flying *diavolo!*"

"A little persuasion made him mention you," said Malone.

"He spoke of the little package of Bolton's that you wanted," said Rourke. "I want to tell you about it—and some other things."

Again I was surprised. Cautiously I said, "How interesting!"

ROURKE smiled coldly. "It was a stupid move, bringing poor Bolton back to his room. The dirt and leaves told he had been brutally tortured elsewhere."

I kept silence.

"Realizing that," he went on in his chill, deadly way. "I wondered at the motive. I saw that he himself could never have telephoned me. Someone else did. Why? I didn't know, then, but I suspected to hear what I would say.

"So I found your dictaphone behind the picture."

I cursed inwardly. So! That was the scraping sound I had heard.

"When poor Bolton told about the capsule," said Rourke, "I saw the motive—knew somebody wanted it bad. So Red and I set a little trap. We pretended he was to take it, to draw a new attempt."

He fell silent momentarily. Then, "The capsule, Matista, or whatever your name is, went to Washington via Pan-American Airlines."

Exzellenz, it was a crushing blow. Not that I had failed, but that I had been outwitted by this stupid American. I summoned my wits, pulled myself together

"This is all very interesting," I said, "but since it does not concern me I think I shall go."

Rourke was on me in an instant. His fingers closed on my shoulder; and there are black and blue marks there to prove the strength of his grip.

"You dished out plenty to poor Bolton," he said. "I wonder if you can take it as well."

"What do you mean?" I cried.

"Listen." the mask was off his face now which was pale with anger, "I came down here on a honeymoon to get away from chasing such rats as you. I never knew poor Bolton was a secret agent until you called me to that room."

He took a big breath, let it go.

"But he showed me enough to know what you swine are up to—and I'm telling you now I'm taking a hand in this game—

* German military command, "Attention!"

I'm playing my cards to the finish. And the first job is to find out what *you* know."

He gave a sudden twist and the fulcrum forced me to my knees. An instant later he had my gun.

"Red," he said, "this guy is the big shot of the Nazi set-up here. Can we make him talk?"

"It will be a delightful job," said Malone. He advanced on me, his big bony hands spread wide. "Even if we have to kill him a piece at a time."

A second before I had known chagrin that my own action had brought Rourke into this game. Now I knew a real fear. Not of speaking; they could have torn my tongue out. But at the instant of crisis my experience, my months of preparation were priceless. I was needed.

In desperation I sprang back. I seized a chair. I yelled, *"Fritz, zu mich!"*

Rourke pounced on me. He used no weapon save his fists. He said, "Let me massage him first, Red."

His hands flew through my guard. They carried crushing impact. I knocked him sideways with a blow of the chair. He came back, swung to my stomach and bent me forward to bring a blow up to my jaw that seemed to tear my head off. I closed with him and struggled to choke him to death.

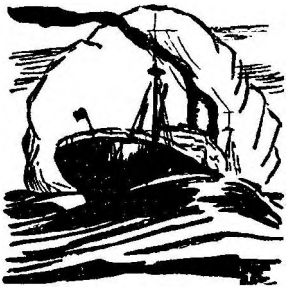
What else would have happened I cannot say, because suddenly the room was filled with men. I saw Fritz's round, scarred face. I saw his blue gun barrel, heard the smash of its explosion. A terrible joy went through me. I redoubled my efforts.

"Take them alive—all of them, Fritz," I yelled.

But that did not happen. Rourke had out his gun in one snaky movement of his hand. I expected the shot at me but it went to the light bulb instead. There was utter blackness, and a room filled with struggling, cursing men. The intense darkness prevented any further use of guns. It was struggle with hands and feet.

How long it lasted I cannot say. But finally I got the door open to the adjacent room. Yellow light flooded in.

I took one look and my heart sank. Rourke was not there; neither was Malone. And they had taken Vincente with them. Some of Fritz's men had been struggling with each other and looked ashamed now.



So, at the moment, Exzellenz, the situation is this: We are rid of Bolton, but Rourke stands in his place. So does this Malone. I am taking active and immediate measures to dispose of them—permanently. But I am afraid *El Presidente* has had his suspicions fully aroused. He will plan to block us. We must strike quickly—finally—at *El Presidente* without waiting for the revolution.

*JUNE 24 (8:30 P.M.)** via radio. Exzellenz: I am writing this from the *calabozo*, the jail of Boca Vista where I have been imprisoned by request of the American consul on the charge of murdering Paul Bolton.

Two of the jailers are men of ours, so I may leave any moment I desire. But I am remaining because it is good cover for my next move. *El Presidente* has struck.

The information gained by Paul Bolton found its way to Washington successfully. American pressure has forced *El Presidente* Y Bara to suspend the constitutional privilege of political asylum. Attempts—so far haphazard—are being made to

*Brant's reports continued daily but I have jumped the uninteresting ones to keep narrative unity.

round up members of our *Nid.* Heil Hitler!

From Von Lieter to Oberst-Leutnant Brant, via Foggia, June 25. URGENT AND CONFIDENTIAL DESTROY. CONFIRMED INFORMATION HERE TODAY UNITED STATES HAS DISPATCHED CRUISER PORTSMOUTH OF ATLANTIC SCOUTING SQUADRON TO PAY GOOD-WILL VISIT TO SAN RICO PERIOD EXPECTED BOCA VISTA JULY 5 PERIOD LOSE NO TIME PERIOD CRUISER'S ARRIVAL WILL PREVENT SUBSEQUENT ACTION PERIOD MOVE IMMEDIATELY HEIL HITLER!

June 26, (8:10 P.M.) via radio Foggia. Exzellenz: Your radio news is of immense importance. I am wasting not a moment and new president will be installed in forty-eight hours. Heil Hitler!

CHAPTER V

MEN FOR SACRIFICE

JUNE 27, (9:20 P.M.) Exzellenz: Amplifying my radio report of my new plan, I continue as follows:

Immediately after the escape of Lou Rourke, agents of the police came to the Hotel Bolivar, and placed me under arrest, charged with murder. There was—and is—no evidence against me save for Rourke's charge, and the move only shows inherent American stupidity.

As I have said, I could immediately have escaped through the jailer members of our *Nid.* But with the arrival of the U-68 with our guns and ammunition aboard only two days away, I decided to remain in jail, as an alibi.

Here is what I have done.

Last night, under the leadership of Fritz, the American consulate was broken into. Fritz himself, who understands such things, managed the safe. Two harmless official documents of such a nature as not to be missed, were taken. Also some of the official American State Department paper. The task was perfectly accomplished and no traces of the entrance left.

Herman Ley entered Lou Rourke's suite in the Hotel Bolivar and secured a sample of Rourke's handwriting. Fortunately for my plan, we have in our *Nid,* Anton Velder who is a graduate of the Gestapo school in Berlin in special documents.* It was he who carefully wrote the letters and documents which will guarantee their authenticity to anything except scientific inquiry.

I made arrangements to see General Callimayo on the outskirts of Boca Vista, and through the night jailer left the *calabozo* unseen. If anything untoward occurs the jailer will swear I never left my cell.

Callimayo was waiting and in no gentle mood.

"The affair has been intolerably bungled, Senor," he growled. *"El Presidente* is in a devilish mood—and surveillance has been tightened dangerously."

I laughed. "What if I should tell you that the revolution to make you president is fewer than twenty-four hours away?"

He gave me a quick glance. There is Indian in Callimayo; and in that flash of white eyeball you can see it. Indian and insatiable, driving ambition for power. (Note: After he is president he will go along with us for awhile. But he may turn dangerous later and need permanent attention.)

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"Tell me," I countered, "is it true that the Americans asked for a commercial air base that could become a south Caribbean naval air patrol base—and were finally refused?"

Callimayo nodded.

"We—in the Council—worked on *El Presidente* to oppose it," he rejoined. "We told him it was just another trick of the Yanquis to penetrate—that there would then be Marines landed—and he would be less than a figurehead. We would all be slaves of the Colossus of the north."

"Splendid!" I muttered. "And he knows that the battle cruiser *Portsmouth* of the

* The Gestapo trains in forging documents such as passports and birth certificates.

Scouting Squadron has sailed to pay a friendly visit here?"

Callimayo's black eyebrows went up in supreme astonishment. "Good God, no," he half-yelled. "That is the finish of all our plans."

"Gently, *amigo,*" I grinned. "It will take the cruiser nine days to reach here. That will be much too late—much."

Callimayo then sensed the pressure of time upon us. "What have you in mind? Speak, in the name of *Dios.*"

"See *El Presidente* tonight—now—if possible," I said. "Tell him of the approaching arrival of the *Portsmouth.* Tell him you have wind that the dirty Yanqui pigs intend to raise some trouble and Marines will be landed to establish order. And in return for the Marines getting out, the air base permit will have to be issued."

"*Si, si,* that I comprehend," he said, "but what goes with it?"

"You will know all presently," I said. "Meanwhile, have you two men—any men—who have such a hatred for *El Presidente* that they would risk almost certain death to assassinate him?"

His dark Indian face cleared. He even chuckled. "I have two soldiers from my own province under sentence of death. I could permit them to escape."

"Do so," I said. "Send them to Fritz—you know the place."

He nodded. "Do we then rise? If so, I shall have to warn my leaders."

"Twenty-four hours later," I said, "while there is still confusion. Because under cover of the disorder following his death, we shall land the arms. They are arriving in forty-eight hours off Point Conception. Your faction here will arise—and those inland. I will take all my men and the best of the others to Point Conception, arm and march on the capital."

"*Por Dios!*" he grinned delightedly. "Nothing could be better planned. But when the American cruiser arrives, what do we do?"

"You do not know the Yanquis," I smiled. "You will be mobilized. You will not permit a landing. If they try to make one you will declare a state of war. You will send off dispatches to American newspapers, hundreds of them. Protesting this illegal, brutal conquest of a small, helpless country. You will say you will defend San Rico independence and liberty to the last man."

He looked at me almost with awe. Callimayo is not a bad soldier, but he is no strategist.

"And what will that do, Senor Coronel?"

"The American public will make such a protest that the politicians in Washington will disclaim any attempt at conquest, force the *Portsmouth* to withdraw, and perhaps publicly reprimand the captain for overstepping his authority."

Callimayo thought this over. Finally he took a big breath, let it go.

"By the mother of the good God," he muttered, "can they be such fools as that."

"We have spent years studying America. We know," I said.

His big white teeth clicked. "The two men shall come to your secret headquarters tonight," he said.

"Remember," I warned, "they must die. They must not live to reveal the scheme behind their actions."

"They will not tell anything," he said. He clicked his heels, touched my hand. "When I sit in the palace," he said, "you will find me grateful, *El Coronel.*"

I RETURNED to the *calabozo,* most of my project complete. Tomorrow is the Festival of San Miguel. It is *El Presidente's* custom to ride to the great plaza in his carriage and make a speech. We shall see what comes of that. Heil Hitler!

June 28 (4:00 P.M.) Exzellenz: I report as an eyewitness of what took place today in the Plaza de la Libertad. It being a festival day and I being liberal with *pesos,* all the *calabozo* staff save my own men were well drunk. So I darkened my

skin, donned old *mestizo* clothing, and stood at the curb opposite the big statue of San Miguel when *El Presidente* came along in his open barouche.

Oh, Exzellenz, I tell you it was a fine sight. Six horses decorated with the national colors, postilions in gay colors, and out-riders and footmen behind. The carriage was old-fashioned save in one respect:

El Presidente had had the precaution to install bullet-proof glass around the four sides. Thick, heavily-leaded glass that distorted his own image within.

And, it might be added, offered no protection against desperate men who could mount the front seat and shoot down inside the glass.

I was not in command of the operation, but I had given explicit, detailed orders to Fritz, and he knew I was a witness to see them carried out. So at three minutes to twelve, as the horses carocoled under the stern reins of the driver, I leaned forward expectantly. In another instant *El Presidente* would rise, bow to the roaring cheers.

Soldiers lined the curbing to keep back the festival-makers. But I saw a movement in one sector, not forty feet removed from where the horses now poised. I saw General Callimayo draw up on his white horse, tense, his eyes flicking around expectantly.

A soldier, evidently one of our men or bribed, moved, and two *mestizos*, their arms filled with flowers* slid out to scatter them apparently near *El Presidente's* barouche or give them to him.

I grinned. The supreme moment had come.

The two poor devils about to die ran with their flowers toward the barouche, yelling, *"Viva el Presidente! Viva!"*

Chapter VI

GUN TO GUN

EL PRESIDENTE had started to rise. His fat foolish face, dim and distorted by the bullet-proof glass, was wreathed in smiles. He beckoned toward the *mestizos*. The roar of the crowd was thunderous, deafening.

As they came forward, these two, they suddenly came to life. No longer grovelling, they sprang with a sudden ferocity that betrayed trained soldiers, and acid hatred. The two postilions never knew what was toward. The next instant they were tumbled to the street. From beneath the flowers came two American Thompson sub-machine guns (our Luger with detachable butt is a superior weapon, but I had my reasons for choosing this one).

"Down with the tyrant!" they yelled, "death to the murderer!"

With that they opened fire. The *rat-tat-tat* of the gunfire rose above the acclamation of the crowd. And as the spitting explosions cut like a scythe of death, the onlookers' voices choked in their throats. The roars died to a terrible silence through which the gunfire cut with vivid sound.

I had seen *El Presidente* fall back, blood spouting from a dozen bullet-holes. He was done for, and I knew it. And my eyes traversed to General Callimayo. He had done a clever trick. At the instant of gunfire he had pricked his horse with his spurs and jerked cruelly on the reins. The horse reared, seemed for an instant unmanageable. An instant that permitted the sub-machine guns to fire thirty rounds into a helpless body.†

* To those who think, perhaps, this is a figment of my imagination, I refer to two attempts on the life of, first, Indalecio Prieto, Minister of Defense of the Loyalist Spanish Republic, in which hand grenades were used. Second, the attempt with machine-gun fire on General Walter, able and popular commander in the Spanish Loyalist Army. Both attempts made in the heart of Madrid, Loyalist stronghold. This I learned in reading reports dealing with the blowing up of bridges over the Ebro, the intrigue to get removed the able commander of the Spanish 45th Division, General Kleber, and reports of location of Loyalist air fields and artillery emplacements.

† Readers who recall the assassination of King Alexander of Jugo-Slavia a few years ago in Marseilles will notice a distinct similarity in the methods used, the failure of the guards due to rearing horses to strike the assassin down in time. The same scheme was used in Shanghai, also in Bucharest. Like all schemes that work more often than they fail, it has been used repeatedly as has the incident that follows.

But he, too, had seen *El Presidente* fall to the bottom of the barouche. Now he regained control of his animal and spurred to the side of the carriage. The two *mestizos,* following orders, had hurled their weapons onto the prostrate body of the dead man. They turned to spring into the crowd to disappear.

They had been told that in the confusion they were safe. They even smiled—one of them did—at General Callimayo as he came toward them. They were of his province. He had evidently promised help, and they looked for it now.

General Callimayo dragged his gun from his holster. As they started to jump down he opened fire. The distance was less than five feet. He could not miss. I saw the first bullet split the leading *mestizo's* head open. But two more bullets sent him kicking across the pavement to lie in the gutter. The second *mestizo* screamed, *"Non, mia general!"*

A bullet struck him in the mouth and lifted the top of his skull. The other two hit him in the throat. He fell, dead before he struck the ground.

General Callimayo turned, yelled hoarsely, "I have killed the dirty assassins of our beloved president. Return to your homes and mourn. Soldiers have orders to maintain order. Return to your homes."

In the deathly silence I had to grin, turned and walked back to the jail. Ramon, the jailer, admitted me to the cell.

"All goes well, Coronel?" he whispered.

"Si," I said. "Soon you will be chief warden, and the new regime will make San Rico a heaven on earth."

"And you will stay here—now—in the *calabozo?"* he asked unbelievingly.

"Only until the final phase of the scheme has been played," I said.

I was, in fact, waiting for Callimayo to rush forth and give to the San Rico *Tribuna* and the other newspapers, the documents which would prove this assassination to have been organized and accomplished by the Americans.

But within an hour Fritz Stauer himself came to the *calabozo.* I frowned in mounting anger.

"You *dumpkopf!"* I muttered. "Why do you risk everything by coming to me here?"

He was agitated, pale beneath his tan.

"Herr Oberst—" his voice stuttered, *"El Presidente*—he is not dead."

"You fool," I rasped, "what do you mean? I myself saw him fall, riddled."

He licked his lips. "It was not *El Presidente.* I saw him on the balcony of the palace not five minutes ago, showing himself to the people, quieting them."

I WAS stunned. What had happened? What had gone amiss? This could not be possible, yet Fritz was not one given to hallucinations. But whatever had happened, the situation was critical. There was not an instant to be lost.

"Get out of here," I whispered. "I'll meet you near the palace. Wait for me."

I raised my voice and yelled for Ramon.

June 28 (9:00 P.M.) Exzellenz: I continue with the remarkable situation that exists in San Rico.

If *El Presidente's* suspicions fall elsewhere than where I wish them, then our whole plan is utterly ruined. It was vital for me to see him at once. I had Ramon summon the chief jailer* and after informing him I had vital information as to the attempted assassination of the president, asked to be taken to the palace at once.

He consented and under strong guard I arrived there within two hours after the attack.

Exzellenz, it was true. In some manner, which I intend to find out, *El Presidente* had not been killed. And the moment I was ushered into his presence I knew I was in bad odor.

He said immediately, "If I had not known you were in prison, I should suspect

* In the documents examined, when not referred to as a *calabozo,* the Spanish for jail, the word was spelled gaol, the English spelling. I have changed it here to the American form for reasons of clarity.

you. Perhaps as it is, these newcomers from Spain are behind it."

"Your Excellency," I cried, "I swear before the good God, you are wrong. In fact, it was my men who suspected a conspiracy against your life, and sent warning to the palace. Surely you got it?"

"I was warned," he said dryly. "And the warning saved my life and cost me the services of the best valet I ever had."

It took every atom of will-power to keep my face impassive at that. So! It had been that fat, goose-faced valet, Fernando, who had taken the bullets. Thinking back I could see how this could happen. Fernando was fat, almost of a size with the president. And the clouded bullet-proof glass would hide his features sufficiently to fool all but the closest observer. But how had *El Presidente* been warned? No one knew of this plan but my closest followers.

Aware now that *El Presidente's* little eyes were watching me keenly, I forced a smile.

"Thank God for that," I said. "But you have no evidence against us, and if my comrades from Spain spoke truly in word they sent me, they had come upon evidence that the swinish Yanquis were behind this attempted assassination."

Y Bara gestured to his desk. I saw a neatly clipped dossier.

"This evidence was given me by General Callimayo," he said. "It is said to have been stolen from the American, Rourke. It purports to be messages exchanged with Washington, urging my er—forcible removal because I refuse to permit the establishment of an air base. It would seem that my death would cause revolt and Marines and sailors from the arriving *Portsmouth* would land to keep order—and stay landed."

I hid a smile. All was not yet lost.

"Your Excellency, that is exactly what I heard. After I was falsely accused of killing this *gringo,* Bolton, I had some of my friends watch Rourke. They have told me this story—and here are documents to verify it."

HE COULD not know they had been carefully forged by Anton Velder. If I could convince him, and tie up Rourke's movements for the next few hours, what happened afterwards did not matter.

Exzellenz, you should have heard my impassioned pleading. I could have moved a saint in her niche. I swore the evidence was true, told him to examine the paper, look at the signature, to wonder why Rourke continued on here through the hot weather. I could see his face slowly change.

"Enough," he said finally. "Perhaps you are right. North America fears southern invasion and might take unusual steps to prevent it. In any case I shall order Rourke's arrest."

I lidded my eyes to hide my triumph. "Spoken like the patriot you are," I said, "and if Your Excellency wills, I shall go along with the squad to make certain that Rourke is safely lodged in the *calabozo.*"

He looked at me curiously. "Why do you hate him that much?"

"He falsely accuses me of murder," I said, "and represents big business in America. We Communists hate him and all his kind."

He shrugged. "Go with Lieutenant Tiapa. For the moment we shall er—forget your arrest in the Bolton affair."

"And I shall resume my rank as colonel-instructor of artillery?"

He nodded. "If what you have told me about American conspiracy proves to be true, you shall have nothing to fear from me, *mi Coronel!*"

Ten minutes later I left with Lieutenant Tiapa and two men to make the arrest at the Bolivar Hotel. I had my reasons for going, Exzellenz—also my gun.

Just why Lieutenant Tiapa was chosen for this mission I do not know. Twice we had indirectly approached him for membership in our *Nid.* He had refused, even

angrily. Yet he was known to be politically opposed to *El Presidente.* However, it was nothing then to concern myself about. We entered the hotel, went to Rourke's suite.

To my surprise he was there alone. Neither his wife nor Malone was in the room when he opened the door. Lieutenant Tiapa bowed formally.

"I have the disagreeable duty, Senor, of placing you under close arrest," he said.

The slim little fool! That is no way to talk. I had made my preparations; now I drew my gun and drew it slowly and with ostentation so that Rourke could watch me with those cold gray eyes of his.

"Traitors to the nation, Lieutenant, always accidentally get shot as they are trying to escape," I said.

With that I leveled the gun at Rourke, and my finger tightened on the trigger.

Chapter VII

I MAKE ANOTHER MOVE

I WAS trying to give Rourke a chance to draw his gun, make the attempt, so the killing would have no smell. But he made no move at all. He merely stared at me, his gray eyes, thinned, his mouth half-smiling.

Just as I pulled the trigger, the stupid Lieutenant Tiapa knocked up the muzzle. The bullet tore into the ceiling.

"This man, Senor Coronel," he yelled hotly, "is to be brought in alive. I am in command here."

His two men moved in to prevent me shooting again. Tiapa himself tried to take away my gun. All attention was on me.

Not until then did Rourke move. It was a small movement, scarcely seen, so swift it was. Yet into his hand jumped a huge blue gun that covered us all.

"Everybody stand still," he said in that quiet chilled tone. "I'm going out—and I don't want anybody to stop me."

Tiapa's face grew red, then pale. I had no chance to level my gun. The two native soldiers merely gaped.

Rourke looked at me, and again his lips became half-smiling. "You and I have been doing a lot of long distance sparring, Matista, or whatever your kraut name is. I think we'll start a little in-fighting and

see how you can take some body punches from now on."

He backed alertly to the door. "Anybody who comes out there in the next sixty seconds gets lead poisoning," he said softly.

He backed out the door.

I turned to Lieutenant Tiapa. The officer's color had returned. He even looked blithe. He made no move to try and recapture his prisoner.

"Listen here," I cried, "are you going to let him escape?"

"One does not chase a dangerous man with a gun—until he has no gun," he said coldly.

I am no fool, Exzellenz, and I was puzzled. In this secret game we play each man defends his own life—unless someone else is going to do it for him. Rourke had not tried to defend himself. Tiapa had saved him by knocking up the muzzle. Why?

And why was not Tiapa pursuing? In Boca Vista, filled with soldiers, Rourke could not escape. Had, then, Rourke bought up Tiapa?

I glared at him angrily. "I go to the palace to report your strange actions. You may face trial for treason for this."

He did not reply and I tore out of the room.

But before leaving for the palace I stopped in my suite, chiefly to see if there was new word from you.

The instant I entered I knew something was wrong.

Someone had been in this room—and searched it.

I had carefully spilled the floor-colored powder in front of the desk with the secret drawers. Turning on the light and standing to one side, I could see footprints.

Had they found my secret files? Hastily I pressed the button. The drawers opened. A quick search showed all papers there. They were in code—dictionary code*—and I was relieved. No one could solve the code who did not know the dictionary used—and this was an archaic one.

Yet if the code hadn't been broken, how did *El Presidente* know of the plot to take his life?

Exzellenz, I was puzzled, worried—even fearful. I felt as if a net were closing in. I must struggle fast, hard, to avoid it.

I closed the secret drawers and hastened to the palace. Forewarned, I could, in protesting Rourke's escape, learn just how much *El Presidente* knew. It could not be much; else why was I still at liberty—and alive?

As I walked across the palace grounds Fritz slid out of the shadows and stopped me. He was pale and worried.

"Listen," he said hoarsely, "that Amerikaner *schwein,* Lou Rourke, just went in the private entrance to the president's suite."

Der Teufel! I stood for the instant paralyzed. All was clear in an instant. With Rourke's aid *El Presidente* was plotting to learn the extent of our scheme, the men concerned—and round us up *en masse.*

That was why he had been permitted to escape. That was why I was free. They knew little, but suspected much.

I finally summoned my wits. Every minute now became a precious jewel. But the arms, the airplanes were at hand—even at this instant—and I must strike in a few hours.

I did not fear *El Presidente's* bungling movements. But Rourke—he was as dangerous as a tiger. Then came the idea to render him helpless.

"Fritz," I said, "get all the men—the *Nid,* the members together. Save for a few at the hiding place, take all to Point Conception. We arm tonight and tomorrow. And then we march on Boca Vista. Get word to Callimayo."

He nodded. "And you, *Herr Oberst?*"

I smiled grimly. "I will take Sebastian and attend to this swine, Rourke."

He asked no more but left. I went directly to the Hotel Bolivar.

June 28 (11:52 P.M.) Exzellenz: To continue; it is well we moved carefully to the Bolivar. Soldiers marched; extra police patrolled. The city was tense and quiet. At the hotel, Sebastian and I met Francisco, in charge of that group. He looked aghast. "The police just arrested Conrado."

"He will have freedom in twenty-four hours," I said. "Take us up to Rourke's room. Stand by to see we are not interrupted."

He sensed the moment had come. We entered the elevator and ascended. A cruise ship had docked that day and we had to be careful of turmoil.

I rapped at Rourke's door.

His wife's voice answered.

I smiled grimly. "An urgent message,

* The dictionary code is the simplest and best for quick communication. Each party has a dictionary—in this case the International—and the words are indicated by page, column and number of words from the top. Thus: 1373-1-3 means page 1373, column 1, 3rd word—or "opaline."

Senora," I replied. "From your *caballero.*"

The door unlocked, and as it opened a fraction I flung my weight against it. She started to scream, but my hand clapped over her mouth. I drove her back and Sebastian seized her from behind. I drew my gun, struck her with it.

"Now, Senora, quickly," I said. "Where does your husband keep his papers?"

Her eyes blazed at me. I removed my hand. "Scream and I shall shoot you. Answer properly and you will not be harmed."

"I do not know where Lou's papers are," she said contemptuously, "and if I did I would not tell you."

"No?" I smiled. "Let the papers go, then. Tell me what this Senor Rourke's plans are."

She smiled defiantly. "Ask him. *Oberstleutnant* Brant," she said.

Exzellenz! She knew my name. It meant Rourke had solved the dictionary code, knew most of my plans. The need for haste was like a nightmare haunting me. But it also meant he had told her much—and she should tell me. *Bei Gott,* she should.

"Very well, *Frau* Rourke," I said thinly, "I can make you talk—and I can stop him."

With a sudden swing I drove my fist crashing against her jaw. She sank senseless and limp in Sebastian's arms.

"Take her outside, put her in the car," I ordered. "She goes with us—and she will talk later."

"She'll be a lovely plaything," grinned Sebastian and carried her out.

Quickly now I took pen and paper and wrote the note. It read: *"Herr Rourke: Your wife is in my hands. She is well now; whether she remains that way depends entirely on you. A cablegram from you in Miami could aid her release. Stay here and move against me and you will be a widower on your honeymoon."*

I grinned savagely, left it where he could see it and hastened out. Sebastian had her in the car. We already had your radio that the submarine with the guns was off Point Conception, so we headed for that destination instantly.

June 29 (1:10 A.M.) Exzellenz: My best men, three hundred of them, are here at Point Conception. The U-68 is less than two hundred meters off shore. Many of the precious rifles are unloaded—the task proceeds at feverish haste.

We had no lighters, unfortunately, and only two small dories, but these, with the submarine's boat, have sufficed. This is a protected point from the prevailing northeast winds, and beyond the dunes of the shore is thick jungle that makes an ideal hiding place. Here the men are cleaning the rifles of cosmoline, mounting the heavier arms, distributing ammunition and making ready for our advance.

I have not questioned the Rourke woman yet—no time. I want to be ready to march no later than noon.

June 29 (10:15 A.M.) Exzellenz: We did more than man's work this night Shortly after dawn every last cartridge was on the beach, and much of it was already concealed in the jungle.

The U-boat skipper, *Korvetten Kapitan* Uriech, came ashore following the last load, to watch us prepare to march. He was a young man who told me he already had eighty thousand tons to his credit and hoped for more.

We shook hands cordially. "Have you men to handle those little 77's?" he asked. "They are marvellously accurate—if well laid."

"I have the gunners," I replied, and told him of the approaching arrival of the American cruiser *Portsmouth,* and the imbroglio in the capital. He looked momentarily wistful.

"What a target the *Portsmouth* would make," he murmured. "But then, we are not ready for that." He paused. Then, "I came to tell you that the raider *Munschen* with the three Dornier bombers will be off Santos Bay below here by four this afternoon. The pilots and crews are aboard."

"Kolossal!" I cried, overjoyed. "Just on time. We shall use them shortly, perhaps day after tomorrow."

"Three hundred barrels of highest octane gasoline," he said. "Will you fly on the adventure to Panama?"

"Yes," I said. "I would not miss it."

"Nor I," he muttered wistfully. "You fellows have all the luck. Fighting—bombing." He looked at my revolutionary troops enviously.

"Your turn will come," I grinned.

We shook hands again. "You shall hear from me—through the front pages of the newspapers," I said. "Within sixty hours."

"It is not a long flight," he murmured, "and the bombs being sent ashore are tested liquid air and trinitrotoluol. I will be off shore here to protect the *Munschen,"* he added.

"If you need help, signal." He saluted, said, "Heil Hitler!"

"Heil Hitler!" I returned his salute.

Waving, he seated himself in the stern sheets and was rowed out to his U-boat. So staunch, so much the victor of the seas she looked, her conning tower clear. He waved once again before entering the hatch. Then, presently, the U-boat began to move.

I was still watching when behind me an excited voice cried, *"Herr Oberst-leutnant,* look—I have news—much—and a prisoner!"

I whirled, my gun leaping into my hand.

Coming toward me was Anton Velder. He had his gun in the back of Lou Rourke. Rourke had his hands up—and he was walking toward me.

CHAPTER VIII

MYSTERIOUS BLOW

AH, EXZELLENZ, to hate is human and no man, not even we of the Gestapo School* can always act like a machine. I raced toward them, my eyes glowing.

Velder seemed still amazed at his luck.

"Herr Oberst," he cried, "this one—this Rourke—he came to me. He surrendered himself, but only on condition that I take him to you—and you are to release his wife."

Rourke had stopped and was staring with his cold gray eyes.

"She's had nothing to do with this from the beginning," he said curtly, "and she has nothing to do with it now. Let her go."

I studied him. He wore a white linen suit, a reddish shirt, and in his pale cream-colored necktie was a huge turquoise tiepin, the stone as big or bigger than my thumbnail. Typically vulgar American dress.

I burst out laughing, half with joy, half with amusement.

"You appear dressed for the sacrifice," I said. "What is that tiepin piece of jewelry—the headstone for your grave?"

He fingered the large turquoise, big as a *peso.*

"Do you intend to steal it," he asked quietly, as your people did in Europe?"

How that swine could stir my fury! I clinched my teeth.

"We are not thieves," I said. "You may keep your jewel—to wear in the grave."

"Then let my wife go—and the rest comes later," he said.

It occurred to me then, how had he found our secret hiding place to surrender to Anton?

"Then," I suddenly said, "you did break the dictionary code—you know all of my plans?"

"Yes, enough to know you'll fail."

I smiled. "Possibly. But the revolution is now begun and my first official act is to condemn you to death for treason to the new regime."

"Let Sheila go—the rest is between us two."

"Where is Malone?" I asked.

* The Gestapo espionage school was begun early in 1934, its young students carefully selected. The embryo spy is trained in foreign languages, idioms and slang; taught the weakness and vices of the country he will be assigned to; the use of disguise, codes, ciphers, secret inks, cameras, how to break codes, and wily means to gain ends.

"What business is it of yours?" he countered coldly. "He was in this only as a favor to me—and because he got sore at your attempt to murder him."

"You mean he is not an American secret agent?"

Rourke shook his head. "Neither am I. You roped us in—but never mind that—I'm here. Are you going to let my wife go?"

"You take a high-handed manner for a prisoner," I said angrily.

His lips curled. "You left a message. You said if I didn't make a move against you she was free. I did better than leave the country—I came to you. Do you keep your word or don't you?"

Somehow I sensed something strange about this. Every man loves life; Rourke knew he could expect no mercy from me. Yet he had surrendered. Why?

He perhaps felt my perplexity. "I happen to love my wife," he said quietly, "and rather than have harm come to her—I swap places."

I laughed. "I do not kill senselessly. She is safe enough—safer here than in Boca Vista. When affairs arrange themselves, she will return to the United States."

He stared around. Men were still taking case after case of cartridges to the ammunition dump in the jungle.

"Let her go," he insisted again.

I shrugged impatiently. "Bind him, Velder, and put him under that palm. Put a guard over him, and if he makes one false move, shoot him. Later, some of the men can use him for target practice with their new rifles."

Well satisfied, I returned to supervise the disposal of the munitions. I had with me here on this Point all of my own Germans, and the bigger number of the *Nid* converts we had made. Three hundred in all. A small number as such things go in Europe, Exzellenz, but splendid for here. Three hundred determined, well-armed men, equipped with heavy ordnance to knock down adobe walls, can perform miracles.

And they would not have to do quite that. Once we started our march on Boca Vista, General Callimayo would rise. I dispatched a messenger to him to say that I would attack the south wall of Boca Vista at dawn.

After that I took my gun crews and began to give them a hasty drilling to familiarize them with these mountain pieces.

June 29 (11:49 P.M.) Exzellenz: Already you have received my radio digest through the U-68. I now amplify the catastrophe and explain in detail my desperate decision for the next move.

Exzellenz, how this has happened is still a mystery to me.

It was late afternoon, just before four o'clock and I was drilling loaders and layers on the mountain 77s. We were preparing to march in an hour. I heard the airplane motor. A moment later Fritz came running.

"An airplane headed this way," he cried excitedly. "It's too high up to see the insignia—but it's probably a government reconnaissance ship."

I swore softly. Of course! Rourke had left warning, and *El Presidente* had dispatched all his airplanes to make reconnaissance to locate our troops. This one had flown this way. But all the munitions save those with the men were in the jungle.

"Get the men under cover at once," I ordered. "No movement of any kind. If any one tries to signal, shoot him."

I myself ran to the edge of the jungle and with my Zeiss glasses studied the plane. It was flying at about twelve thousand feet. I could not see the insignia. It was still quite a way off. I glanced around the open land leading from the beach to the jungle. Nothing was in sight. Our boats were hidden. The country looked as desolate as when I had first chosen it. The U-68 had submerged or gone over the horizon. There was no clue to our presence.

I heard the motor shut off, then the moaning sound as the plane spiraled down-

ward. Now I could see the San Rico cocarde on the underside of the flashing wings. No one of my men moved. The jungle hid the munitions as securely as a steel safe.

At two hundred feet, at three-quarters throttle, the plane hedge-hopped over the jungle headed for Point Conception. I saw heads leaning out, sunlight on goggles. I grinned. They could see nothing.

The plane made a circle of Point Conception, coming down as close as a hundred feet. But the men under the palms were securely out of sight. I knew that Velder would shoot Rourke if the man made an outcry or a signal.

Twice now the plane went back and forth, once as low as fifty feet.

Then it abruptly zoomed and with open throttle headed back toward Boca Vista. I waited until the din of its motor was no longer heard. Then I sped across the clearing to where Rourke lay under the palm.

Velder saw the expression on my face.

"Rourke made no move at all, *Herr Oberst,*" he cried. "I swear it."

I ignored this and bent over Rourke. With one blow I struck his cheek so hard the blood ran where a ring of mine cut the flesh. His eyes flashed bright fire but he did not flinch.

"Now, *Schwein,*" I said softly, "you will start talking—at the beginning. What moves has *El Presidente* made for defense? How many soldiers? How disposed? Speak! *Schr schnell!*"

He stared up at me calmly. "Nuts to you, Brant. You'd doublecross your own mother. You didn't let my wife go. I'll tell you nothing."

"You dumbkopf!" I said. "I don't make war on women. She is safer here, I tell you, than in Boca Vista. I attack there at dawn."

"Still," he said, "I want her to go. Give her that car and a half hour start. Then I'll talk."

I shrugged. "If you want her killed in the Sack it is your affair." I called, "Fritz!" When he came I said, "Turn *Frau* Rourke loose. Give her my car. No one is to molest or pursue her."

Zu befehl!" he said.

"Now, Rourke," I growled, "talk."

"When I see her well away," he replied grimly.

I would not let her come to him, so presently she departed. Rourke waited a half hour.

"Now, Rourke," I said thickly, "speak!"

"El Presidente knows that every one of your so-called Spanish Loyalists is a German agent," he said quietly. "He knows that you have corrupted certain officers in the army, and other government officials. He does not know who all these are. But he has arrested hundreds and will get the rest."

I was boiling with rage. With difficulty I contained myself.

"He acts too late," I snarled.

"No," said Rourke. "He is right on time."

As he spoke I heard the far-off heterodyne of many airplane motors. Softly now, but growing louder by the instant.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"He listened to an idea of mine," said Rourke. "I have a theory that if given enough rope you arrogant kraut agents hang yourselves. I told him the best thing was to let you gather all your spies and disloyal San Ricans in one place. Along with your German agents. Then destroy them in one batch."

He grinned at me. "They're coming to do just that now."

THE airplane motor drone had become a roar. I stepped out from under the palm tree. I saw seven planes, the total San Rican air force, flying in a wedge-shaped formation. My men leaped to cover.

The planes came down to a thousand feet, headed directly for Point Conception. How had they known where to come? There had not been a clue to our presence

when the reconnaissance plane went over. Yet they had returned.

My gun leaped into my hand, and on the pressure of my finger hung Rourke's life. He stared back calmly into the muzzle.

"Go ahead," he said. "A guy can only die once. And it's worth it to stop your plan of crippling the United States. And the *Portsmouth* will be here before you can strike again."

I still did not understand what seven planes could do. But I fought down my fury. For two reasons: Rourke had said he could only die once. In that he was mistaken; I could make him die a hundred deaths—and wanted to. Furthermore, I needed more information later and intended to get it.

Now, however, as I stood poised between two minds, a sullen roar came out of the jungles. A cloud of smoke rose. I heard the half-human howls of airplanes diving in power dives.

I looked out again.

The flight of planes had re-formed into single file. They were diving like striking eagles on the jungle edge. They were dropping incendiary small bombs.

The need for secrecy had vanished. The necessity of protecting our arms for revolution was vital. There was no time for Rourke now. I yelled for Fritz, for Kahler, for Messich.

"Small arms into the open," I yelled. "Fire at them. Wheel out a batter of the 77's. Give those gunners some exercises on real targets. Shoot down those planes."*

Our revolution had begun, but not in the way I had planned it.

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* Readers who may think this incident incredible, or a figment of imagination, are requested to read the details of the Nazi abortive revolt in Brazil in 1939. Starting in Minnaes Gueres where Nazi penetration is intense, there were pitched battles between Nazi and Brazilian troops, an attempt to seize the capital at Rio de Janeiro, and only the prompt and merciless action of the Brazilian Air Force in bombing Nazi concentrations, munitions dumps and communications prevented a successful *coup d'etat*. Recent government actions against Nazis in Uruguay, Chile and Argentina are also recommended reading. The destruction of secret munitions dumps destroyed sufficient rifles, cartridges, mortars, light artillery to equip an army of ten thousand.

Chapter IX

DESPERATE RISK

EXZELLENZ, it was a perfectly sprung trap—aided by nature. The northwest wind fanned the flames in the jungle. The bombs had been illy dropped, perhaps, but the sun-baked jungle ignited, became an orange-colored inferno that blazed a hundred feet high and swept across the munitions dump, actually cutting off our retreat on two sides.

And as we were firing at the airplanes—we brought down two—Fritz came rushing up to me. He was handling the group on the right.

"Soldiers," he croaked, "on the road; they're deploying and advancing."

I understood the situation at a glance. The fire held us on two sides of the triangle made by Point Conception. The arrival of San Rican soldiery on the third side effectually cut off retreat save by the sea.

I hastily climbed the trunk of a palm tree. The smoke and heat was intense. But nightfall was less than an hour away. We might still have a chance of fighting our way out, if we could hold these troops.

Exzellenz, probably every motor vehicle in Boca Vista had been commandeered, busses and otherwise. They lined the road toward Corumbi, still spilling out soldiers who were forming on the side of the road and advancing at the double-quick to deploy into a skirmish line. I made a hasty estimate of six hundred—with possibly more behind, hidden in the clouds of smoke.

Rourke! He had done this; no man in San Rico was capable of planning such a perfect strategic trap. My fury reached an intolerable blackness. He would pay. *Bei Gott,* he would!

"Fritz," I said thickly, "form the men. They know it is a firing squad if they are captured. Forget the planes. Pivot the 77's. There is only one way off this point

and we've got to shoot our way through."

He nodded, his eyes queerly twisted as if he already saw the squad with the eight black pellets.*

I myself raced to turn the light field guns. Fritz was rallying the men. Of the courage of our own *Nid* I had no doubt; of the mixed blood adherents there was cause to worry. But Fritz stormed at them, mocked at them.

I finished swivelling the guns as the first hail of bullets swept over our position.

"You have two ways of dying," I forced a laugh as I yelled. "Against a wall like a dog, or glorious like a man in battle. And there is hope—*caballeros*—on the road is transportation to Boca Vista. Many cars. All we have to do is take them. *Hoch!*"

We had no cover at all except a few crooked palms and holes in the sand. But neither did the advancing troops, and the smoke favored us as much as them.

I laid the guns myself, using shrapnel, and cut the fuses myself. It was point-blank range at seven hundred yards or less. And, by God, we cut a swath in them.

"If we can't break through," I yelled to Fritz, "we'll hold them until nightfall, and swim around the point and escape into the jungle."

Behind us the wall of flame in the jungle made a heat that seared the skin. It was touch and go. We either shot our way through now, or retreated to the sand dunes to escape the blistering heat. For, Exzellenz, there is no fire like a jungle fire. It looks a polished green, that jungle; there seems nothing in sight to burn; yet beneath, soaked in hot sun, are the dead plants of yesterday. They burn not with a yellow flame, but a torrent of orange-red that roars like a monster, explodes like powder. Once when the wind blew the smoke to the left I had a glimpse of the flames, and they were nearly two hundred feet high.

By now, of course, the munitions dump, what we had not moved, had been set off. Cartridges were popping, high explosive shells thudded and made pyrotechnics.

But we had outfitted each of our men with bandoleers holding two hundred rounds. An additional three hundred rounds per man had been dragged out for our expedition to Boca Vista. So that was all right. We were short on shells for the guns. The caisson held a hundred rounds each, and we had a spare fifty for three of the guns. I had my best gunners and myself handling them. Twice the San Ricans formed for the charge, and twice we broke them with beautifully aimed salvos. We finally forced them to the cover of the cabbage palms. They started creeping forward, and I had our men, under careful direction, begin sniping.

Matters looked better, particularly as the fire could not reach across the sand. We had even advanced three patrols of thirty men each to enfilade the enemy's position with cross-fire.

But I had forgotten those accursed planes.

The flames had kept them away; and I am certain that they had not the wit of themselves to figure out their move. Yet now, risking sparks, they came diving through the smoke. As if ordered by signal. I turned rifle fire on them. But a rifle, as you should know, Exzellenz, is nothing to stop a diving plane making three hundred an hour.

They carried small fragmentation bombs besides the incendiaries with which they had fired the jungle. We in the battery position now got the benefit of these. They were bold, those flyers. They came down to fifty meters before releasing, and risked zooming toward the thundering fire.

We lost three men, one Tiesel, my best gunner, on that first dive. The men were scattered enough to keep casualties down save at the guns. The third dive achieved a direct hit on my number one gun. It was no longer fit for use.

* Espionage slang for being shot against the wall for espionage.

Under cover of these dive operations the soldiery began rising in skirmish rushes to flank our position. Our men were bewildered, made panic-stricken by the dive-bombing.

I had no recourse but to retreat to the dunes along the shore.

As I gave the order I remembered Rourke, forgotten in these mad moments of battle. Gun in hand, face blackened, I raced to where he had been hidden under the palm tree. Those planes, I suddenly realized, had been signaled. That first reconnaissance plane had been signaled by Rourke? But how?

"He'll tell me, *bei Gott,*" I snarled, "and then—"

I saw Velder, bound, gagged, his face all bloody.

Rourke was not there!

Harshly I untied Velder. "Where is he?" I demanded. "*Bei Gott,* tell me. You have failed—let Rourke escape." I kicked him brutally.

He winced with pain. "*Oberst,*" he gasped, "I could not help it. I swear. A big man—with red hair—he called Malone —surprised me—"

"Surprised you!" I roared. "Where did he come from?"

Anton shook his head. "From off there," he pointed toward the beach. And as he did so I saw a plane just taking off. I understood then. Red Malone was flying one of those San Rican planes. He had risked the dangerous attempt to land on the beach below the point His act was protected from view by the high dunes. He had crawled here and, under cover of smoke and confusion, had rescued Rourke. There they went—Rourke had escaped me again!

While I digested this bitter realization Anton said, "Rourke left a message. Here it is."

Out of his shirt he pulled a piece of torn paper. In perfect German was written on it:

"Brant: Your men are trapped hopelessly and so are you. In case you want to know how, I will tell you. The big so-called turquoise in my tiepin was an infra-red reflector. The batteries were in a thin leather belt next my skin. When the reconnaissance plane flew over I gave him the location of the munitions dump, the number of your men, and the order to return immediately with planes and soldiers and attack. Do not blame your men for this. Infra-red like ultra-violet rays, as you know, are at the end of the spectrum, invisible to the human eye, and only seen through a special filter. The pilot carried the filter, because this had all been prepared to bag your men and the traitors in one group, so as not to leave a nucleus for a new attempt.

"This explained, here is my proposition. Surrender your men and they will receive long prison sentences. Surrender yourself, and tell me just what the German plans are for Latin America and you will get exactly ten years in Boca Vista prison. Refuse, and you will end where you should end—with your back against a wall, blindfolded before a firing squad."

In savage rage I tore the missive to pieces. Many moves hitherto puzzling were only too clear now. Rourke had struck in the only way that would completely paralyze our efforts. Had I been captured, Fritz could have carried on; or if he and I, there were others. But now, trapped between fire and gun — we were all doomed.

Yet I will not have it so. Night is falling and still they cannot force the San Rican soldiers to the final bayonet charge. I have made my plans. I shall still succeed in the major plan for which I was sent here twenty months ago. This I swear to you by *der Fuhrer* himself. Heil Hitler!

Aboard U-boat 68, off San Rican Coast, June 30. Exzellenz: I make a brief report to complete the last details of our fight on Point Conception, and then get on to my final plan which I begin within an hour.

I was forced to desert my comrades and the *Nid*. Under cover of nightfall, knowing the U-68 was to return as escort for the *Munschen,* Fritz and I risked sharks and swam out to the rendezvous near Santos Bay. We were pursued by bullets for some distance, for the night was ablaze with the fire. But we escaped, and at nine o'clock, when the U-68 emerged off Santos Bay, we climbed aboard. *Korvetten-kapitain* Uriech was horrified at the news.

We were standing on the conning tower deck and, as he looked ashore, his face was furious. "Had I only known," he muttered, "that gun could have handled them nicely." He gestured to the three-inch mounted on the submarine's forward deck.

I SHOOK my head. "Those planes would make your position untenable at dawn," I told him. "Besides, revolution in San Rico is no longer feasible. But the major point of the program is."

He looked at me. "Come below," he suggested, "I have excellent *schnapps.*"*

In his tiny cabin over a glass I told him, "My orders were to establish an air base that would threaten the Panama Canal. Later orders amended this to raid the Canal locks as a demonstration of our power to frighten the Latin American countries and reveal American helplessness to defend them when we move militarily as well as economically into South America."

Uriech and his kind are gamblers with death. And he knew what I meant.

"You intend anyway to take those bombers on the journey to the Canal Zone and bomb the locks," he muttered.

"I intend to do that—tonight—if you will give me men to aid."

He jumped to his feet. *"Durch Gott!* It is an exploit of daring and cleverness. They think they have defeated you—and at the last moment you play the real trump."

"Exactly!" I said. "That Inter-American conference must not fall under the sway of the United States, and none of these fools will believe anything short of force."

His jaws clicked in decision. "You can have the men—all of them." He paused. "And yet, with heavy pontoons, how can you manage the long distance on your patrol capacity with a big bomb load?"

I had calculated that. "After we are in the air," I said, "one of the men in each plane will go down and rid us of the pontoons."

"But how will you land?"

"Back here in eighteen hours off Santos —in the water—and swim for it," I said. "You will stand by to pick us up—you or the *Munschen.*"

He figured rapidly—your submarine commander weighs every chance. "It can be done!" he cried. "Come with me!"

CHAPTER X

WINGS UNDER THE MOON

ABOARD Dornier Bomber 14, somewhere north of San Rico, July 1 (12:36 A.M.) Excellenz: I am writing this in the lonely forward gunner's seat of this bomber as we lead the flight north to bomb the Panama Canal. God willing, these notes will be sent to you from the U-68 eighteen hours from now. If not, then the newspaper will tell you what we have done and how we have died. Every man aboard is a German; we have sworn the pledge to prepare the way for the great stride north. We will explode the bombs on the locks and Culebra Cut* even if we have to come so low as to be destroyed by their explosion.

There is little to add to my last report. The weather favored us, the sea was calm with a slight ground swell. The planes

* Potato whiskey, much favored in Germany.

* Even in ordinary conditions the Panama Canal is sometimes rendered temporarily impassable by slides in the Culebra Cut, midway through the Canal. Locks might be temporarily or hastily repaired. Landslides at Culebra caused by bomb hits or even terrific concussions might block it for weeks or months, as the earth must be dredged out, a new firm embankment made.

were assembled, checked on the *Munschen's* deck, then lowered by booms to the lee of the vessel, and here loaded with petrol, the Mercedes motors tested, and the bomb racks filled.

The U-68 stood guard, guns shotted, to protect us in this operation. But the single San Rican plane flying against the moon stood well off beyond range. If they spotted our lights—necessary in view of the detailed work—it does not matter. There is no San Rican pilot who can down one of our bombers, with machine guns fore and aft and slots in the bottom of the fuselage to repel attack from below.

I am sitting in a clear glass ball. The two Spandau guns on tourelle are ready to swivel. Above the yellow moon hangs like a polished platter against the velvet of the night.

And so, in view of complete victory awaiting this night, I project to the future briefly, Exzellenz. My usefulness in San Rico and neighboring republics is ended by this misadventure. Yet all my training is for Spanish-speaking countries, so I suggest that I be sent on a complete tour of the Caribbean islands.

THE General Staff plan, as I understand from what little you have said, envisages a complete base on the South American mainland. From this point we jump-off along the Windward Islands, seizing them one by one, establishing secure bases and advancing finally to Cuba.†

A complete mapping of possible airdromes, defense points and a testing of the public would seem invaluable, particularly after this night's exploit, and I am not known among those islands. Or I might prove useful in Mexico ‡ or Buenos Aires. However, that is—

I break off, Exzellenz! We are attacked!

I saw a shadow against the moon. Spitting exhaust stack flames against the night. San Ricans, of course, warned by their reconnaissance—led, perhaps, by that pilot Malone.

There are ten of them. *Der Teufel!* Today they had only seven planes, and two were shot down. Now they have ten! This I do not understand. I cannot take time to wonder. Against the moon above they are wedge-shaped, and peeling off § to dive.

Even with the removal of pontoons we are too heavily loaded to maneuver. We shall hold formation and fight them off. Their old Browning guns are .30 calibre, and they do not know chaser methods well enough to down us.

Here they come, one after the other sliding down a thousand meters of sky on our rear bomber. I have no chance of a shot; I can only sit and watch.

I can see Fritz's guns (he is rear gunner on the top protection plane) begin to sparkle. The tracers are shooting like fireflies across the night. He has not scored a hit but the accuracy of the tracer stream will keep those San Ricans off.

But it does not! Exzellenz, they come one after the other. They open fire. And, *bei Gott,* they are not using machine guns. These are small cannon—one-pounders—firing an explosion contact shell.* They dive straight on the bomber's tail, go under, and leave the range open to the chaser plane pursuing. I see their stubby wings, Exzellenz. What is this? These are not old Falcon chaser planes. They are new type—with liquid-cooled motors.

† Information in Washington leads to the opinion that the Great German General Staff's plan of military operations against the United States begins with the gaining of colonies on the East American coast at its closest proximity to the so-called Brazilian bulge—i. e., Sierra Leone, Senegal—and islands between this point and Brazil. The German South American air service to Pernambuco these past three years have carefully gathered data in this direction. After this mainland base, a movement north through the Caribbean islands to an invasion jump-off base is logical.

‡ Recent newspaper headlines have pointed to the unusual influx of German "tourists" in Mexico City since the outbreak of the spring blitzkrieg.

§ Peeling off. Aviation expression meaning outside plane falls off on one wing and rolls into a nose-power dive, followed by the next plane in the V-line.

* The fact that a modern airplane, partly armored, can be pierced by hundreds of bullets and still fly has emphasized the truth that unless pilot or motor is hit, the plane is still a weapon. Consequently, one-pounder small cannon are now mounted in the latest type pursuit ships, along with .50 calibre machine guns.

Whose airplanes are they?

Ah, *Gott mit uns*, now! The rear bomber is aflame and falling. An explosive shell must have struck the gasoline supply.

The second bomber is attacked. My pilot—Mueller who arrived on the *Munschen*—is maneuvering rapidly to give us a chance with our weapons. But, *durch Gott*, the methodical way of destroying us is maddening. We had expected no such plane resistance as this. We need Messerschmidts to protect us—and there are none.

I am firing rapidly at a target as dark and as faint as a diving bat. My tracer fire spears across the night. The attacking flight has split, three ships to the second bomber, three to us. This may help.

The sky is lighted by the burning bomber falling. Fritz and the crew have no parachutes—and below must be only jungle or savannahs. God rest them!

Here come the chasers! We are being squeezed, two from in front, one behind. And—God help us—the other bomber is down—with Anton and all the rest, and the remaining three chasers are zooming at us from below. All our guns blaze now. I am firing straight at the oncoming target. The bright flash from the front betokens the one-pounders, it is so much bigger than the machine gun flash.

A shell has torn in and exploded in the fuselage. The radio operator is dead—half cut in two. The pilot yells at me, "Otto, we cannot stand them off. And we cannot outrun them. I intend to go down and land."

Another shell tears into the stern. It struck the rear gunner. He is holding his bowels—dead.

WE ARE diving now. In loosing the pontoons I had planned on alighting on water. Land only below, and nothing to land with. But Mueller is a clever pilot. He may pancake her on her stomach. We are diving fast and they are diving after us. I cannot get in a shot, can only sit here, surrounded by glass, and see the tracers flash past.

Another shell has hit the central fuselage. If one hits the bomb racks we are finished.

Mueller is wounded by a fragment. The same shell burst the glass around me. I ride against the cold of the night, my face bloody. We have dropped two thousand meters in less than a minute. They are circling and diving around us like porpoises. Our speed of fall, however, makes their aim not too good. Only two more shells struck us. One went through the left wing. Another struck the tail assembly, but Mueller yells to say the controls are still sensitive.

The earth below my watering eyes is dark where the jungle is. But here, east of the mountains, are savannahs, and these are whiter under the moon glow. It is there we must land, somehow.

Mueller has just yelled, "Ostroleich is dead—run back and release all the bomb toggles. We cannot land with a load."

We are less than two thousand meters up as I leave my station and crawl through the wrecked fuselage. Wind whistles around me. But I reach the toggles, and one by one pull them. What bitter savage thoughts! They were to have blown the locks of Panama into gravel—made it impassable for months. And as I look below I see their flashing flames thunder in empty land.

But the point is to escape now. Our time will come again. And the bombs no longer menace our landing.

We are so low that the chaser planes are grouped behind us, firing like mad now, not with one-pound shells (they apparently carry only a limited supply) but with .50 calibre machine guns on wing and nose.

We are riddled. I am wounded in the arm. Mueller has two holes in his legs. But the earth is only sixty meters or so below, and we are levelling out to try a landing. To the right is jungle of some

sort. Into it—if we survive this landing—we can flee and hide.

One thing I am certain of. We are far beyond San Rico. And since political offenses are not extraditable, we are safe from the vengeance of *El Presidente*.

Mueller has levelled off, even has the nose quite high. The motors are undamaged and he can maneuver on them. He yells to hang onto something and brace myself in case we turn turtle.

I am watching the land now and not the chaser planes. It is coming up, a smooth silver torrent under the moon. Mueller has tripped his magnesium flares and this spreads light for him to land by.

Centimeters only separate us from the earth's crust. It is a savannah with high stalky grass. For wheels it would be a simple landing, smooth and an effortless run. For us—we shall see.

Now, tail down, motors off, nose very high, the tail assembly strikes first. A slight bump. Then a heavier one. Then a violent smashing bump that dips the nose. But Mueller fights his control wheel. We are flat now, skidding like a sled without steel runners. The bottom is tearing away under the smash of the earth. I am braced, hands and legs clutching, wedged near the bomb toggles, not to be thrown.

Violently the huge two-ton bomber rocks. More and more the nose tilts. Mueller has cut his motors.

"She's going over," he yells.

And scarcely had he screamed the words than the nose strikes some slight hummock, wedges there. The wings crumple, the tail rises like a stick going end over end. The tail comes over and hits the ground a tremendous blow.

I am half-stunned. But I am alive. And the plane has at last stopped on her back.

Mueller arouses me from my semi-senseless condition. "Petrol on the hot engines," he screams. "She's going to burn. Can you get loose?"

I have really only to wedge through the great holes in the fuselage. I stagger out, trip and fall down. Behind me with a whoof of sound the hot petrol ignites, many kilograms of it. It blazes like the sun at dawn.

I stagger away; anything to be rid of the heat. Mueller is beside me now. He is weak from loss of blood, hangs to me.

"The woods," he whispers. "They'll be down—they want us, Otto—they want us badly."

We can scarcely see anything in the tall grass. But we know it will burn from the gasoline, so we go on.

We do not get far.

Within perhaps a half-kilometer of the blackness of the jungle, figures rise before us. A flashlight beam dazzles our eyes.

A voice—what a voice—the voice of Lou Rourke, says, "This is the end of the line, Brant. Throw up your hands."

Chapter XI

THE DEVIL MUST PAY

EAST cell block, Boca Vista Prison, Republic of San Rico, July 3, 4:00 P.M.

Exzellenz: This is probably the last report I shall ever write. I am to be shot at dawn.

You may wonder how this strange eventuality came about, even as I have, and if this bribed jailer will mail the letter, then you will learn the perfidy, the brutal attack by the United States on German airplanes.

Let me return briefly to that instant when, blinded by wounds and smoke, and exhausted, I came face to face with Lou Rourke in the savannah of Parania. You were doubtless startled, even as was I. How had he got here?

I tried to raise my hands, nearly fell. Mueller took one look, croaked, "Heil Hitler!" and fell forward senseless.

To resist was madness. Rourke had with him three men dressed in pilots' uniforms, and they were all armed, even as was he.

"Tie him up," ordered Rourke in a cold voice. Then to me, as a man fastened my wrists, "We've got a transport plane over there, Brant. We're flying you back to San Rico."

This roused me to the new peril. I could expect no mercy from *El Presidente*.

"But you can't do that," I cried. "This is Republic of Parania territory. I claim my rights as a German citizen. There is no extradition for political activity."

"We aren't extraditing you, Brant," said Rourke, "we're taking you."

"But—but that's illegal," I yelled.

He seemed to crack then. His face grew dark. He stepped forward until his deep gray eyes blazed into mine.

"Since when, you dirty rat," he growled, "have you ever considered laws or the legality of anything? Was it legal to bring your German spy machine into San Rico and try to bribe, corrupt, lie and cajole poor ignorant people into attacking a legitimate government? Was it legal to bring in arms to create a revolution? Was it legal to torture and finally murder a fine guy like Paul Bolton?"

His teeth ground in suppressed fury.

"That's what eats me about you swine," he snarled. "You violate all the laws, then appeal to them to save your own hides. You use our laws to carry on your own filthy enterprises."

He seemed to catch himself. "What the hell, I sound like a preacher! Well, you're going back—because that's the way it's got to be. I can't convict you of the murder of Paul Bolton, but the dawn when you face the firing squad I'm going to look up and say, "Bolton, if you can see anything, take a look at this."

SOMEHOW they dragged me to the transport plane. A flare still burned. And near it I saw a stubby-winged plane. Tail down, its wings cocked up, I could see the insignia. Red, white and blue circles with a star superimposed. The insignia of the United States Air Service.

"Why," I croaked, "that was an act of war. These are American military planes. They attacked and shot down German planes."

Rourke was staring at me.

"Why, Brant, your wounds have made you delirious. You've got things confused. It was you making an act of war against the United States by trying to blow up the Panama Canal locks. You got the facts twisted."

"Cannot I see that insignia?" I yelled, tried to wrest loose.

"That's the San Rican insignia," he grinned. "These are all San Rican pilots, aren't you?" He turned to the silent, helmeted men. They smiled.

"Sure," said one.

"The right answer, you sap, is *si, si,*" said another. "I spent a leave in Cuba once and I know"

"This—this—oh, I shall tell the world of this brutal act," I yelled

"You won't," said Rourke, suddenly grim. "You so-called hard guys have always taken the initiative, struck when *you* wanted to strike. You did pretty well against Norway, Holland, Belgium and France. But we don't wait—get it?"

He gestured to the man holding me. "Stuff him inside."

Inside the plane, I wondered where these modern chasers had come from. Not Panama. Their range is not enough. I overheard that the aircraft carrier *Bonneville* was assigned to accompany the *Portsmouth* on the good-will tour. She would be just off the Paranian coast. And Rourke, with Malone flying a borrowed transport plane, apparently had flown to a rendezvous with planes from the carrier over Parania and guided them to us. It was simple, I suppose, knowing where we started from and what our objective was.

He told me later himself, "The one thing that always licks you krauts is arrogance and over-confidence. You figured there wasn't anything to stop your bombers, once they got in the air. You set a straight

course and flew it—just as I knew you would. If you had allowed that maybe *I* might figure what you would do, you could have taken a roundabout course and reached your objective. That's why you'll always fail just when victory is in sight. You can win all the battles but the *last* one."*

So, Exzellenz, you have the reason why I am writing this last missive. The United States made an act of war against us. Proclaim it to the world; strike them down—and my life will not have been taken in vain. Heil Hitler!

NEWSPAPERS DISPATCH FROM BOCA VISTA, REPUBLIC OF SAN RICO: July 2. Led by President Y Bara himself, government forces today successfully quelled a Fifth Column revolt, aimed at establishing a new Fascist government. Scores were arrested, and at least two hundred are believed to have been killed in the fighting that lasted most of the afternoon. With soldiers and airplanes the government forces attacked the rebels at Point Conception and those not killed were captured.

Among those to be tried by court-martial is General Miguel Callimayo who, it is believed, was to be raised to power if the revolt had succeeded.

NEWSPAPERS DISPATCH FROM BOCA VISTA, REPUBLIC OF SAN RICO: July 4. Otto Brant, German secret agent, known here as Colonel Juan Matista, was executed at dawn today by a firing squad for his share in the recent abortive Fifth Column revolt. This day, celebrated in the United States to commemorate independence and democracy, also saw the execution following a drum-head court-marshal of General Miguel Callimayo, known to have been one of the ring-leaders. Other executions are expected to follow the present trials.

BOCA VISTA, REPUBLIC OF SAN RICO: July 5. The American cruiser *Portsmouth*, and the aircraft carrier *Bonneville* of the Atlantic Scouting Squadron, arrived here today on a good-will visit to Latin American ports. The vessels will remain for several days.

EXCERPT FROM REPORT OF LOUIS J. ROURKE, SPECIAL AGENT FEDERAL BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION, WASHINGTON, D. C.: Far be it from me to take my nose out of my own affairs, but as you know, I was pitchforked into this San Rican mess, and if Bolton hadn't been killed, I would have had a swell time on a honeymoon. Instead, I was so busy that Sheila says she will get a divorce—no fun being married to a shadow husband.

Anyway, the point of this report is to indicate that all this bushwah we hear about invasion of America in the north is silly. But invasion of the south is very possible, no matter what happens in this European mess. I don't mean Hitler wants war with the United States. But he wants South American markets, he wants a liberal colonizing scheme there for his excess population. And if we try to block him he will use force. He will bring the war to us down there. The country down there is lousy with Nazi agents, stirring up Fifth Column business.

San Rico was only a sample.

It strikes me that we've been busy as hell locking the front door of invasion, and left the back door wide open for the krauts to walk through. I'm going back to my regular job. But I'm sending under separate cover all the files I picked up from Brant's hide-out—and you look through them and you'll see just how this Nazi system works in every Latin American country at this minute.

With that off my chest I am hereby announcing my intention of taking a new two weeks vacation and honeymoon, and this time we're going into the Maine woods where nobody can reach us unless he can swim.

LOU ROURKE.

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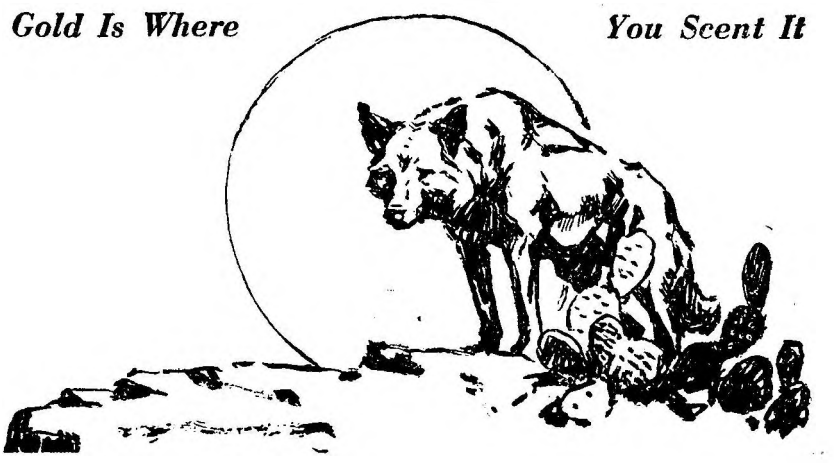
* Rourke is paraphrasing the saying about the English, "They lose all the battles but the last one."

Gold Is Where *You Scent It*



COYOTE GOLD

By O. A. ROBERTSON

Author of "Burlap Bandits," "Six-Guns Beats Jacks," etc.

HAP GOODWIN reached the appointed meeting place ahead of his fellow riders, but he had caught sight of them only a few minutes before and knew he wouldn't have long to wait. He unslung his field glasses and surveyed the parched, desolate country below him. He certainly hoped he would see nothing. This time of year, with the sun pouring out heat like a furnace, it was nothing but a hell-hole of hot rocks and desolation.

Even on horseback and in the scanty shade of a clump of cedars Hap was continually mopping the sweat out of his face. His horse kept wringing its jaws to rid itself of the taste of dusty dryness. The smell of dried sweat on the horse's hide carried unpleasantly to Hap's nostrils.

There was small chance they would find any cows this far down on the desert. Usually they took themselves northward as the springs dried up, but the late May heat wave had come so suddenly and virulently that some of them might yet be lingering at the muddy water holes.

Two miles below him was a little creek which usually held up longer than most. If there was still water, there would in all probability still be cattle.

He was squatting in the shade of his horse when his two associates arrived. They were slightly younger men than Hap; hard-faced young hellions whose company Hap could well get along without. They looked down at him as though he were to blame for them having been sent along to help gather the stragglers.

"Did you fellows, by any chance see what I saw?" he asked in the tone of one bearing surprising news.

"I ain't seen nothin'," Sid Hoffman retorted testily. "If there's cattle down there, I don't see a damned thing funny about it. If there is you can go git 'em. I've had about all I want for one day."

"What's the matter, Sid, can't you take it?" Orn Weens, a pugnacious, brutal-jawed youngster of twenty asked. "A good and faithful servant can take anything."

"Sure, a good and faithful servant wouldn't know any better."

Hap knew the slam was directed at his well known loyalty to the job at hand, but he grinned and let it pass. Some time he would be compelled to show these two self-

esteemed bad men whose cow ate the cabbage, but when he did he wanted to be mad enough to assure himself of a thorough job.

"I don't know about cows. I haven't seen any," Hap said. "But there's a camp down there."

"A camp? What the hell do you mean?" both men ejaculated in unison. "Who the hell would have a camp out here this time of year?"

"There's one down there," Hap said, and asked, "How strong are your stomachs?"

"Strong enough, I reckon," Orn said with a truculence that betrayed he was half expecting a challenge. "Why?"

"My idea is that it's old 'Coyote' Jones. Whoever it is has got a couple of mules, an' I don't know of any other mules in the country.

My notion is that we might camp with him tonight, an' have the whole day ahead of us tomorrow. He's not a very clean cook. I can warn you about that."

"To hell with that. We can do our own cookin'." Sid Hoffman reached for and focused the glasses. "There's a couple of mules there all right, an' a tent. But what the hell is he doin'? Furs ain't no good this time o' year. He can't be trappin'."

"Search me," Hap shrugged. "He brought his traps in to the ranch two months ago, so he ain't trappin'. Prospectin' probably, but I sure never heard of any mineral in this section of the country. Anyway, he'll have some grub. We can neck a couple of our horses to his mules, an' the other one won't leave alone."

"Let's go," Sid said, but delayed a moment longer to squint through the glasses. "I can see him down there now. He seems to have the creek dammed off, and there's something that looks like a sluice box. The crazy old galoot. Sluicin' for gold in a lava country."

"It looks bad," Hap admitted. "These old desert rats do go off their nuts sometimes. But he won't be dangerous."

"He'd better not be," Orn Weens said viciously. "I'd plunk him just as quick as I would a coyote."

"You let him alone. I'll take care of him," Hap warned. "An' you, too," he added as an afterthought.

"Sounds like we're bein' kinda called to order, don't it, Orn?" Sid queried in a slurring aside, but his youthful satellite only glowered and refused the bait. Hap sensed that they were both stinking for trouble, but each was content to let the other start the hostilities, and then come in when conditions were more to his individual advantage.

HOWEVER, Coyote Jones greeted them with all the hospitality of a lonely man's thirst for company, beaming like a benevolent old badger. It was plain that he was wildly excited and bursting with news. For a minute, Hap had difficulty talking him down long enough to make known their wants.

"Sure, sure. Help yourselves. I ain't no kind of a cook, but there's flour, bacon an' spuds. When that's gone I've got plenty money to buy more. Neck yore nags to the mules, if yo're afraid they'll run out on you."

"We can keep an eye on 'em for awhile, I guess," Hap said. "An' neck 'em up when it gits dark." Dismounting he slipped the bit from his horse's mouth, but left the headstall in place and the reins dragging. "What the hell are you doin' with that sluice box, Coyote?"

"Washin' gold." The old man giggled like a school girl. "What d'ye reckon I'm doin' with it?"

"Gold, hell!" Hap laughed skeptically, while his companions exchanged knowing grins, with total lack of sympathy for the old desert rat's delusions. "There ain't no gold in this country."

"Never was an' never will be," the old man concurred happily. "Don't you reckon I know that? I was borned in this country. The first white child, by gosh. Borned in this corner of the state. My mother came

with the first gold rush into the Boise Basin."

"I know you've been around long enough to know that gold ain't found in a lava country," Hap said, and tried to judge the degree of his old friend's mental decay. He observed again that a dam had been shoveled across the outlet of the spring, and a small pond of water had formed above it. But the only sign of mining operations was a small mound of clay and gravel at the lower end of the sluice box.

"Gold is where you find it," the old man quoted triumphantly. He led the way into the tent, and from beneath his tangle of blankets drew forth a stout denim bag. Chuckling in eager, excited glee, he untied the top and displayed its contents.

"Gold, by Gawd," Sid Hoffman breathed in something that sounded like pious awe.

Hap had been told there was a thing about the sight of raw gold that did things to a man's inner self. With himself, surprise and bewilderment drowned every other emotion, but he observed the face muscles of his companions and was conscious of an uncomfortable chill along his spine. He wished the old man had been more discreet.

"That's only half of it or thereabouts," Coyote announced, glorying in the effect he had achieved, and, burrowing deeper under the blankets, brought forth another bag.

"How much do you suppose there is?" Sid Hoffman asked huskily.

"I reckon nigh around five hundred ounces," Coyote beamed.

"An' more where that comes from?" Orn Weens breathed deeply.

"Nope. She's all washed up," Coyote announced complacently. "But why should I worry? I figure that right there is ten thousand dollars. That's all the money I'll ever have time to spend."

"I could do with half of it for a while," Orn Weens said with a crooked grin directed at Sid Hoffman. "But what do you mean it's all washed up? Where all that dust come from there's got to be more."

"If there is I reckon you'll have to go to Boise Basin after it," Coyote chuckled. "I know dust, an' just as sure as shootin' that's where this comes from."

"Listen, Coyote, that's gittin' kinda thin," Hoffman's voice was little less than a snarl, and his face was black with unreasoned anger. "Don't try to hold out on us. You washed this dust out in that sluice box right here. Don't tell us that it come from two hundred miles away."

"Sure I washed it here, but that's where she come from original."

Weens and Hoffman sneered.

"Let's git this straight, Coyote," Hap prompted.

"Well, sir, she's a long story, an' begins away back yonder in the sixties." Coyote seated himself and spread his hands on his knees. He was in high good humor. A man totally without guile himself, he failed to notice the greedy, hostile attitude of the two men he supposed were Hap's friends. He knew Hap was all right.

"My mother was here then," he went on, "an' I remember hearin' her tell about the Chinaman who walked in from San Francisco an' got rich workin' over the placer diggin's that the white men had left. Some of 'em had a claim right next to my Dad's, an' we got to know 'em right good.

"Well, sir, a bunch of about twenty of 'em pulled out one time, but they only got as far as Chinaman's Gulch, which is about five miles from here. A few weeks later a bunch of vigilantes wiped out a bunch o' Injuns with a lot of scalps, an' among them was some tol'able fresh 'uns with long black pig-tails.

"It was several years later before their skeletons was found, an' nobody ever bothered to bury 'em. Their skulls was kicked around there fer years. Mother allus figgered they belonged to her Chinamen, an' if they did they had gold on 'em.

"Injuns didn't care about gold them days, an' there wasn't any on 'em when

the vigilantes rounded 'em up. Road agents mighta killed 'em, an' the Injuns got the scalps off the corpses, but I never figgered that way. Anyway, every time I happened to be down this way I kinda projected around, figgerin' I might stumble onto their gold. Then, one winter, when I was scoopin' out a hole to set a trap danged if I didn't dig up a little iron god like them Chinks usta carry around with 'em."

"An' you found the gold?" Orn Weens breathed excitedly.

"Not fer a long time. I never did find any color there, but finally, further up the wash, I found plenty. There'd been a lot o' high waters run down the gully in the last fifty years, an' what gold I found was plenty mixed with clay and gravel, but I brought some over an' washed it out in a pan.

"The next day I took my traps into the settlement, an' come back with enough boards to make me a sluice box. I've had to pack every bit of gravel over here on my mules, but I've got her worked out now."

"You lucky old stiff," Hap commented. "An' after all these years. But what if somebody had happened along who thought they needed it worse than you do?"

"Road agents, you mean?" Coyote queried. "Hell there ain't no road agents in this country no more. The vigilantes cleaned 'em out years ago."

"Just the same, that spells an awful lot of easy livin' fer somebody, and somebody might have happened along that—"

"Just what makes you think somebody ain't happened along, Happy?" It was the harsh, rasping voice of young Orn Weens directly behind him.

HAP started to turn, then froze into rigid immobility. Out of the corner of his eye he caught sight of Hoffman's gun trained squarely on the old trapper. At the same time he felt Ween's six-shooter prodding him between the shoulders and his own weapon being dragged from its holster. For a moment no one spoke nor moved, then Hap turned slowly on his heels until he could see what was going on behind him. Weens had stepped back to a safe distance and holstered his gun, but he retained Hap's in his hand.

"Have you fellows gone crazy?" Hap demanded.

"Like a fox," Hoffman stated ironically. Stooping he picked up a rope and tossed it to the old trapper. "Here, Coyote, tie this hombre's hands. Do a good job of it, because it'll be tough on you an' him both if we have to do it over after you."

"You fellows can't git away with this," Hap argued desperately. But there was something in the men's wolfish manner that warned him not to go further than verbal protest. Surely, he thought, the men would not long remain so completely divorced from their senses.

"We can try, can't we?" Weens mocked. "Git busy, gran'pap."

As one in complete mental eclipse, Coyote did as requested. Weens stepped forward and inspected the job. "Shall we hobble his legs?" he asked his companion.

"We'll have to git some more rope first. I'll see he don't go anywhere," Hoffman told him. "You tie up the old man."

Hap felt himself going dizzy at the rapid fire of events. He had been alarmed when the old man had flashed his gold in the presence of the two reprobates, but it had not occurred to him they would act so promptly.

"You fellows make up your minds fast, don't you?" He tried to be calmly reasonable. "Now I think you'd better take a

little more time an' figure out what comes next."

"Thanks. We'll do just that," Hoffman said. "Orn, you'd better git busy an' cook us up somethin' to eat. After that, we'll figure our next move."

"Hadn't we better tie their legs?" Orn reminded again.

"Not just yet, I guess. We may want 'em to take a walk. I ain't decided yet what to do with 'em."

"I know what—" Weens started, then fell into an abrupt silence. He immediately busied himself starting a small fire.

"You know what?" Hoffman asked harshly.

"Nothin', I was just thinkin'," Weens said and turned his back.

"So was I," Hoffman said, and his voice burred like the rattles on a snake's tail. "Don't turn around, Orn. Just keep where you are."

"What?" Weens was down on one knee bending over the smoking blaze he had just kindled. He did not turn or rise, but bent slightly lower, as though attempting to peer out from under his arm from an upside down position.

"That one of us is enough to watch this pair. An' that too many shootin' irons around might be kind of a nuisance. Don't git up. I'll gather 'em." Suiting the action to the word, Hoffman stepped forward and relieved the younger outlaw of his weapons.

"What do you mean by that, Sid?" Weens spoke from the same rigid position, and his voice quavered.

"Nothin' hostile," Hoffman assured him tersely. "Just makin' myself safe. You play square with me an' I'll play square with you, but I ain't takin' no chances."

In silence Weens went on with the preparations for supper.

Coyote Jones seated himself on the ground with his back to the open grub-box. Later he was routed away from there and told to sit on the tangle of blankets. Since his first startled protest he had said nothing, but his eyes were bright and darting. Hap thought he looked more like a badger than ever: no longer benevolent, but angry and vindictive.

Neither did the outlaws air their suspicion of each other in words. What anger and alarm Weens felt he kept masked under a rigid, expressionless silence. Hoffman kept command of the situation with as little ostentation as possible.

The prisoners were allowed to eat but not before their feet were securely tied. Their hands were refastened as soon as they finished eating.

It had grown dusk, and the horses had grazed away out of sight and hearing. As darkness settled the atmosphere became more and more tense. Hap had the feeling that one or both of the outlaws realized that they had overplayed their hand. But he knew, too, that their fear and desperation, only increased his own danger. Of the two, Weens showed the less strain. Furious and frightened as he must feel at being disarmed, he was wise enough to know that for the present his was the passive role. Whatever Hoffman's apprehensions were they were manifesting themselves in black, silent rage.

"What are we goin' to do with these hombres, Sid?" Weens asked.

"I don't know yet. That's your question as much as it is mine," Hoffman retorted. "Mebbe you can figure it out while I get the horses back here before they stray clear out of the country."

"I'll get the horses," Weens volunteered.

"No, you won't. You'll stay here an' watch the prisoners an' see that they don't untie each other." Hoffman waited a minute to make sure the impact of his warning had sunk in, then picked up a bridle and vanished into the darkness.

"Well, Orn, old fox, it looks like you were in just about the fix we're in," Hap commented with sardonic satisfaction. "Mebbe the best thing for you to do, would be to turn us loose, an' all of us take to the brush."

"On foot!" Weens said. "An' have Sid huntin' us down an' shootin' us like rabbits? If you think Hoffman can pull his whizzers on me, you're a bad guesser."

"It looks like he already has, an' there ain't much you can do about it. You don't think he's goin' to donate that gold to you, do you?"

"What's it to you?" Weens asked. "I don't see you holdin' any high cards, whichever way the deal goes."

"It could mean quite a lot." Hap continued to play upon the young ingrate's fears. "If he shoots you an' just leaves us tied up, you might git to smellin' pretty bad."

Weens had stepped to the door of the tent. He turned quickly, and his face showed white but determined in the light of the fire.

"I'll be a long time dead," he said nastily, "before I smell as bad as that old reprobate does alive. I'll bet he never took a bath in his life. No wonder they call him 'Coyote.' That's what he smells like." He jerked the tent flap down and disappeared inside.

COYOTE chuckled, but for many minutes there was no other sound.

After awhile there came the sound of two shots from a quarter of a mile up the draw.

"There goes my mules," Coyote said.

"I suspect so," Hap concurred laconically. "They're probably savin' my horse to pack the loot."

The old man chuckled as though highly pleased at some secret joke.

"What's the matter, Coyote? You ain't losin' your nerve, are you?" Hap asked.

"I ain't goin' loco, if that's what you mean," Coyote retorted. "I'm just wonderin' if there's any loot to pack. Roll over, will you an' see if that young jack-anape is still inside."

Puzzled at the old man's request, Hap listened a moment, but as no sound came, he straightened out on the ground and then rolled like a log to the tent and pulled back the flap. The strong animal odor of the interior assailed his nostrils, but the tent was empty.

"He's gone. Crawled out under the back," Hap ejaculated. "An' so is the gold."

"I figgered it would be," Coyote commented complacently.

"He—he's worse scared than I thought he was," Hap said. "An' a bigger hog. What that spells for us, I don't know. What do you figger all that gold weighs?"

"Right nigh about forty pounds. I don't reckon he'll tote it far."

"Not so far but what Sid will ride him down in an hour after daylight. That spells his finish. I only hope ours ain't as certain." Hap was interrupted in further speech by the sound of Hoffman returning with the horses.

The man glanced around before dismounting. As he replenished the fire he kept a firm grip on the reins of the three horses.

There was an inquiring look on his face, but not until he had stepped to the tent, gun in hand, did he voice a question.

"Where's Orn?"

"He went in the tent, right after you left," Hap answered. "I ain't seen him since."

"I'm right here," Ween's voice spoke from the darkness outside the circle of fire light.

"Where's the gold?" Hoffman asked.

"Toss me a gun, an' we'll talk about it then."

"I'll toss you somethin', but it won't be a gun," Hoffman threatened.

"You'll toss away five thousand dollars, if you toss anything," Ween's voice came out of the darkness. "I'm comin' in now, Sid, so don't do anything rash. Because, I'm tellin' you right now, if you do you'll never git a cent." Weens stepped into the edge of the fire light and stood defiant.

"So you've pulled a fast one, have you?" Hoffman's hand rested on his half drawn

gun. "For five cents, I'd drop you right there in your tracks."

"For five thousand dollars you would. I savvy that," Weens returned stolidly. "But not if it costs you that. Toss me one of them guns before I come an' take it away from you."

"Stop where you're at," Hoffman commanded sharply, and his gun came all the way out of its holster. He moved backwards to the other edge of the firelight, backing the horses ahead of him. "I don't want to kill you, but so help me I will if I have to. I'm willin' to be square with you. But first I'm goin' to be damned sure you play square with me."

"Yeah, that goes for me too, an' the only way I can be sure of you is to have a gun in my hand."

"Well, you ain't got one."

"No, but I've got the gold. I reckon that's just as good."

"That's what you think. Mebbe you can hold me here till daylight, but I'll find it then," said Hoffman.

"Not in one daylight, you won't, nor in a thousand. Give me my gun an' we'll be on our way. Otherwise nobody gits it. You can be damned sure of that."

There was truth in what the man said. Weens had had over a half hour in which to hide the gold. He couldn't have gone far—but he didn't need to. It was lava country. There were thousands of holes and fissures in every direction. All the man had to do was drop the bags into one of them and cover them with a few loose rocks. As he had said, a man might search for years and not find it.

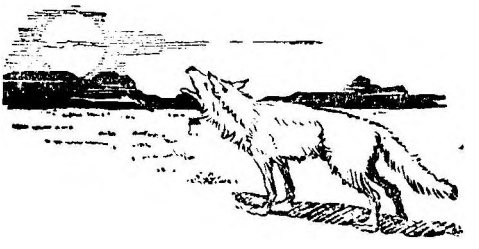
The outlaws had reached a deadlock. For Weens to reveal the hiding place of the loot, before he had rearmed himself, would be fatal. But for Hoffman to surrender the advantage he now held would be almost equally dangerous to him. Nor could the situation continue indefinitely as it was.

Weens was the stronger of the two. Hoffman could not and would not risk a hand to hand encounter. He would have to keep Weens at a distance. Would have to keep constantly awake. Weens was in no more danger relaxed than he would be any other way. Hoffman, too, was compelled to keep the horses constantly under his hand. For, once mounted and out of the firelight, the younger outlaw could easily afford to do without a weapon.

"Listen, Orn." Hoffman had faded from the edge of the firelight, and now broke a long silence. "You've called the showdown. You can't have hid that gold where I can't find it sometime—"

"That's what you think," Weens mocked.

"That's what I think, but I'm willin' to bargain with you just to save time. You



bring in half of it an' leave it here in the firelight. Then I'll give you your horse an' gun and let you go."

"Can't trust you, Sid. Give me the gun first."

"You win," Hoffman surrendered. A bright, metallic object arched shortly through the air and dropped a few feet from the fire. Hap recognized it as his own weapon. The thought occurred to him that it had probably been emptied of shells.

Weens seemed to have the same thought For a long time he stood irresolute. From a short distance away two or three coyotes sent up a sudden yapping crescendo which lasted for a full minute, then ceased as abruptly as it had begun. The old trapper, prompted perhaps, by the life long habits, sat up quickly, and strained his eyes into the darkness. He continued in a searching, listening attitude long after the racket had died down.

Weens stared too, but he had a thing

on his mind of more importance than a few yapping coyotes. He took one experimental step forward, still peering in the direction of the man who had tossed the gun. As nothing happened he took another and another. Within reach of the weapon he squatted on his heels before reaching for it.

"Is this on the square, Sid?" he asked.

"It's your own proposition. You ought to know. You asked for it, an' I give it to you."

Still staring, Weens groped for and found the gun. But before he could draw it to him a spurt of flame stabbed from the encircling darkness, followed by the crash of a .45.

WEENS came to his feet so smoothly that Hap momentarily thought that Hoffman had missed. The young outlaw was turning slowly as though to walk away. His hand still retained the weapon, but it hung limply at arm's length in front of him.

He took three or four faltering steps. Hap sought to roll out of his way, but in his roped-up condition, he was unable to move quickly enough. Weens tripped over him, and sprawling full length on his face lay still. His hands still clutched at his stomach, but the gun had dropped from them. Hap rolled over on his back and concealed it with his own body.

"Well, he asked for it, didn't he?" Hoffman stepped out into the circle of light and prodded the prostrate form with his foot.

"I reckon he did." Hap forced himself to speak calmly. "But I don't see where you gained by it."

"You don't, eh?" Hoffman queried callously. "I reckon I saved myself from a slug in the back. Where's that gun?"

"He's layin' on it," Hap told him.

"Huh," Hoffman grunted and sought to roll the body over with his foot, but failing, gave it up with an indifferent shrug. The gun had been empty after all, and was of no consequence. The outlaw's mind was upon something more important. "What did he do with that swag?"

"Ask him," Hap answered sardonically. "He hid it."

"I'll find it," Hoffman stated with real or assumed confidence. "He can't make tracks that I can't follow." He took a brand from the fire and went off into the darkness. Hap seized the opportunity to work the gun down inside his chaps' leg. Unless he could work himself loose it would be absolutely worthless. But in the front pocket of his overalls was a single loaded cartridge.

For several minutes the torch bobbed about, but Hap knew how futile it would be to search for tracks of any kind by its feeble light. Presently Hoffman returned and revived the now dying fire. In turn he examined the bonds of the prisoners. For a moment he stood thinking, then moved around the tent, testing the corner stakes as he went.

"I reckon those tent pegs'll hold you," he said. "Just roll over there an' I'll anchor you down for the night. It might simplify matters if I stopped your clocks altogether, but I'm not takin' any chances of you untyin' each other."

A few minutes later the prisoners found themselves securely staked to opposite corners of the tent. Then taking Coyote's blankets Hoffman retired from their range of vision.

For more than an hour Hap tugged silently at his bonds, but without success. The iron peg to which he had been fastened was driven too deeply into the ground to even budge. At last he gave up the futile effort and tried to relax. Not until daylight came again and their captor, after giving their bonds another thorough inspection, had gone away in search of the missing gold, did Hap venture to communicate with his companion in misfortune.

"How you makin' out, Coyote?" he asked.

"No good," Coyote replied from behind

the tent. "The more I fuss with these damned ropes the tighter they git. What do you reckon he figgers to do with us?"

"I don't know. I don't suppose he's figgered much on that yet."

"What he's thinkin' most about now is the gold. He'll make up his mind what to do with us when, and if, he finds that."

The sun was little more than two hours high, when Hoffman came in and prepared himself a belated breakfast, but already its heat was giving promise of the terrific suffering it could inflict during the day. Once Hap's bare hand came into contact with the iron stake, and caused him to jerk away as though he had been burned with a lighted match.

Hoffman ate in silence, and except for another examination of their bonds, seemed not to want to look at his prisoners, nor at the now bloating body of the man he had killed. As quickly as possible he went out to continue his search.

"Damn him, he never even offered us a drink," Coyote complained bitterly.

"I'm glad he didn't," Hap said.

"Why?" Coyote asked. "A drink wouldn't hurt nobody, an' you must be scorchin' to death out there in the sun. I'm still in the shade but I won't be long."

"I'm scorchin' all right," Hap said. "But this iron peg I'm staked to is gettin' hotter than blazes. Given time I believe I can burn this rope in two."

Hap worked into a position where he could loop his wrists over the peg, then sawed the rope up and down industriously. The iron peg presented a comparatively smooth surface, but he knew the extreme heat would aid the friction in weakening the rope. Alternately he worked and rested. His wrists became raw and blistered. It was well past noon when the first strand parted.

"How you comin'?" Coyote asked for the twentieth time.

"I'm comin' along," Hap told him. "One strand is gone an' the rest is gittin' awful brittle."

"If you do git loose, what then?" Coyote asked. "We ain't got a chance to keep away from him till it gits dark, an' if he finds us loose, he ain't goin' to take the trouble of tyin' us up again. That gun he tossed to Weens was empty, just as sure as hell."

"We'll have to risk that," Hap told him. "That or somethin' else. I think I've got one cartridge in my pocket, if I ain't lost it since day before yesterday."

At each rasp on the iron, Hap could feel the now scorched and brittle rope giving way fiber by fiber. In desperate determination he struggled until sweat blinded his vision and ran down his neck in streams.

If the outlaw returned now he would know that he had been struggling to free himself, and investigate.

"Lay low an' quit foolin'," Coyote warned from the other side of the tent. "He's headin' this way. If he's give it up, it's now or never with us."

ABOVE his own labored breathing Hap heard the click of a high-heeled boot against rock, but Hoffman was approaching from the other side of the tent. Disregarding pain and caution alike, Hap threw the last of his remaining strength into one supreme effort, and one hand came free, but he had only succeeded in severing the rope that connected his hands. The one that actually bound him to the stake was still intact. He clutched frantically for the gun inside his chaps' leg. Working with only one hand, and in frantic haste he found it a difficult job to break open and inspect the cylinder. As he had suspected it was empty. With his right hand he clawed awkwardly into his left hand front pocket for the cartridge he hoped to find there, just as the top of Hoffman's tall hat appeared above the top of the tent.

"Can't find it, hey?" Coyote asked, and either his voice was quavering, or Hap's pounding heart made it seem so. "What

kind of a deal will you make us if I tell you where it is?"

Hoffman laughed harshly, but with the top of his hat still visible he became stationary. "If I thought you knew where it was, I'd wring it out of you if I had to burn your feet off up to the knees."

Hap's fingers touched the smooth surface of the cartridge and drew it forth. With the gun in his lap he slipped it into a chamber and the cylinder clicked into place, just as Hoffman's vicious, haggard visage came into view.

Hoffman recoiled and a startled look came over his face. This was instantly replaced by a snarl of savage confidence. For a second Hap's finger hesitated on the trigger as he waited for the man to come more fully into view. There was a possibility that the single cartridge was not directly under the hammer. It might have to rise and fall a second time. Without haste or hesitation Hoffman's hand slid to his gun.

"So you're loose are you? Well that kinda makes it easier for me. I kinda hate to shoot a man unarmed and tied up," he said with a leer. "Why don't you click that hammer around an' git it over with. Or do you figure you can bluff me with an empty gun?" With a quick motion he flipped his own weapon up to a level with his shoulder.

Hap sensed that it was now or never. And everything depended on his one uncertain shot. If he missed, or if the cartridge was not under the falling hammer— As the muzzle of the outlaw's gun tipped downward he pressed the trigger.

The report of the two guns sounded as one continuous roar. Hap felt his face and eyes stung by sand and gravel blasted upward by a ricocheting bullet. But Hoffman was plunging head first to the ground. He rolled over and got to his hands and knees, then flopped over into a sitting position, one hand clamped to his shoulder, while a look of pain and stunned incredulity passed over his face.

"Don't shoot again. You got me," he said, but neither pain nor hatred, could quite mask his fury and disappointment. His gun had dropped from his hand, and lay now within inches of his grasp. If he only knew, he had only to reach for it and continue the fray to his own satisfaction, but he did not know, and even when Hap laid his own weapon down to wholly liberate himself with his free hand he remained passive. With sweat standing out on his forehead in great beads, Hap finished freeing himself and picked up the outlaw's fallen weapon. Then he liberated the old trapper.

"Why did you wait so long in lettin' him have it?" Coyote demanded garrulously. Now that the suspense was over he was on the verge of collapse.

"I just had one bullet, and had to wait for a good shot," Hap explained for the benefit of the wounded, but still strong outlaw. "I almost missed at that, it looks like."

Hoffman swore savagely but a further disappointment still awaited him.

WHILE Hap prepared a much needed meal old Coyote disappeared. But before the meal was ready he was back with a bag of gold in each hand. Hap squatted back on his heels and looked at the trapper with amazement.

"Hell," Sid Hoffman said, "he knew where it was all the time."

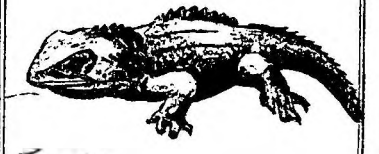
"Well, not exactly," old Coyote said complacently. "But purty close." He turned to Hap, and added in justifiably proud explanation, "A pack o' coyotes was yapping over it all night, so all I had to do was go where they was, an' the scent would tell me the rest."

"The scent?"

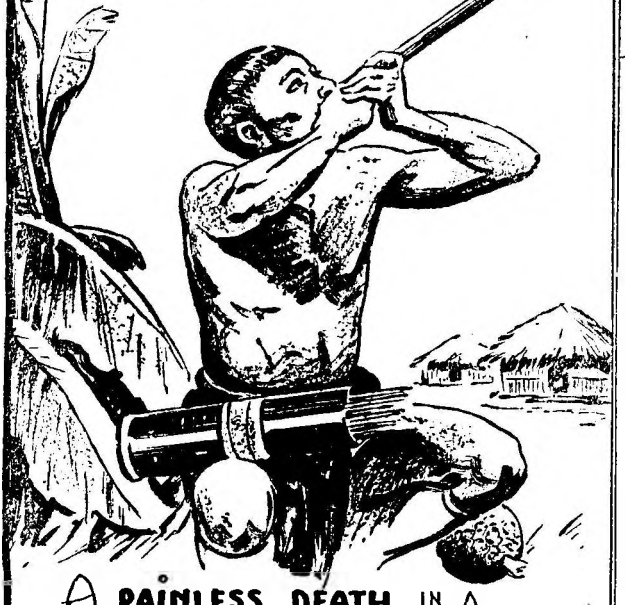
"Wal, I figgered somethin' like this might happen when I see these two wallopers fallin' out, so when I was settin' in there on the bed I emptied a bottle o' coyote scent over the gold bags. It shore does draw 'em."

Curioddities By Weill

THE **BLACK DEATH** PLAGUE *LASTED SIX CENTURIES* DURING THE MIDDLE AGES AND DESTROYED 1/4 OF THE WORLD'S POPULATION — **25,000,000** PEOPLE...



THE **SPHENODON**, IN THE ISLANDS OF NEW ZEALAND, BECAUSE OF HIS ISOLATION FROM ENEMIES, IS THE **SOLE SURVIVOR** OF ONE OF THE MOST ANCIENT AND PRIMITIVE ORDERS OF REPTILES OF **200,000,000 YEARS AGO** — *A PRIMITIVE ORDER EVEN OLDER THAN THE DINOSAURS!*



A **PAINLESS DEATH** IN A MATTER OF SECONDS IS PRODUCED BY **CURARI**, THE POISON USED ON THE BLOWGUN DARTS OF THE INDIANS OF ECUDOR... THE UNCANNY ACCURACY OF THE BLOWGUN BRINGS THIS FLYING DEATH *A DISTANCE AS GREAT AS* ***200 FEET TO A DIRECT HIT!***

WHAT IS THE LARGEST FLYING BIRD? *See Curioddities next time.*

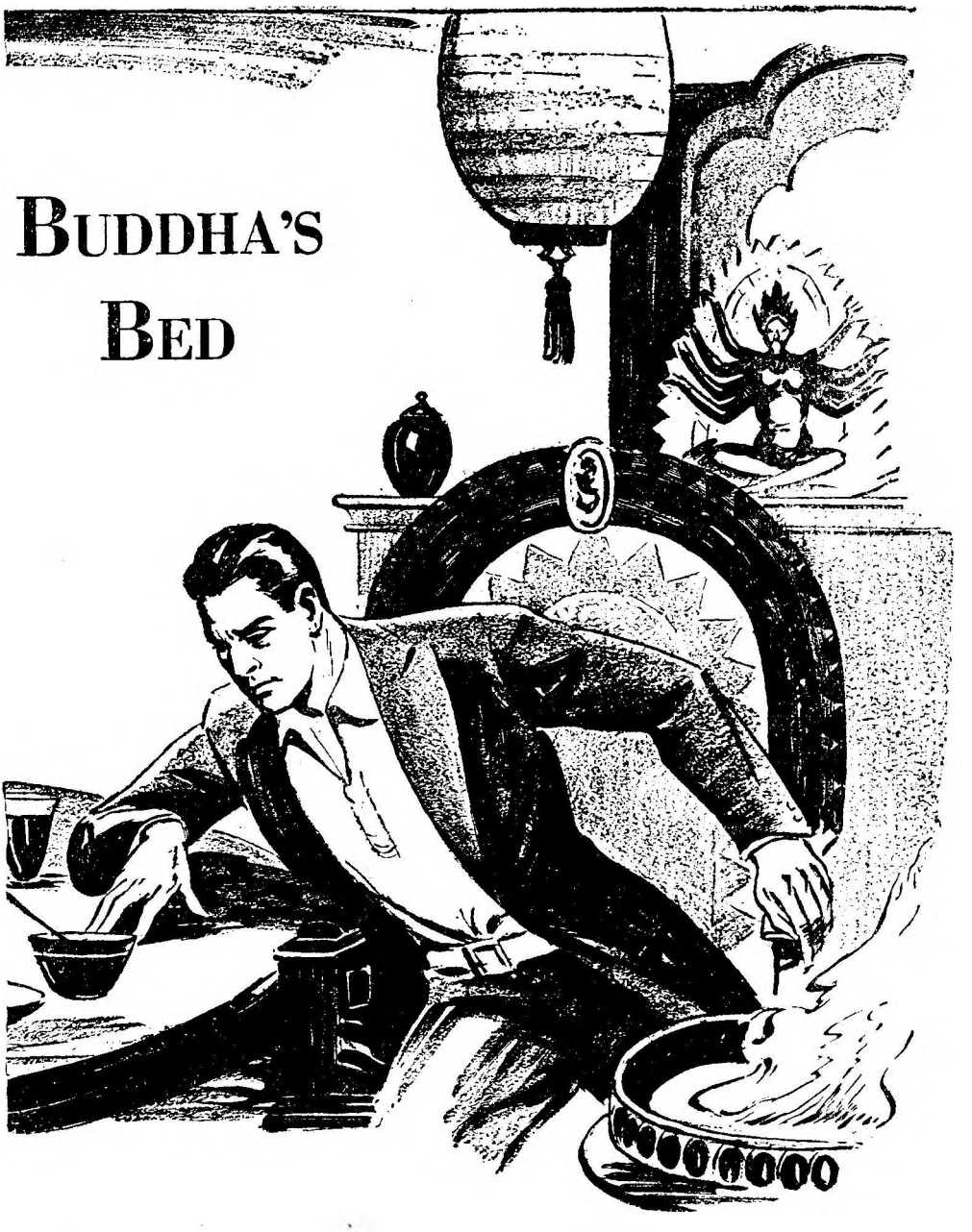
THE OLD

On the Borders of the Gobi
An American Looks into a War Lord's Treasure Chest

JOHN WEEKES reined in so sharp and suddenly that with his great weight and strength he all but hurled the little rat-like pony back upon her haunches. And indeed he had some excuse for handling so roughly the hardy little Mongolian steed who had so often been his sole companion across many miles of trackless southern China.

All that morning he had been following a mule-track across a low-lying plain in northwestern Yunnan that the Chinese called a marsh. It was, as a matter of fact, nothing more than an area of several square miles that in the rainy season was flooded by the overflow from the swollen waters of the Ching Chang, one of the larger tributaries of the Upper Yang-tse. Though, but a few days before, the water had been pouring over the rocks on the southern river bank that formed a kind of natural dam, hot sunshine combined with the porous soil had now reduced the flood to a series of pools; and it was upon a

BUDDHA'S BED



By CHARLES GILSON

Author of "The Blockade Runners", etc.

mudbank in the middle of one of these pools that Weekes now beheld the lifeless body of a man whom he had always counted as one of his best and most trusted friends.

A talented and cultured Chinese; a man with the national virtues of unimpeachable honor, innate courtesy, and above all a fierce, unquenchable love of country that had earned him an important position on the staff of General Chiang kai-chek. And there he now lay—supine, lifeless, fully dressed in his uniform, with arms and legs outstretched.

It was not impossible that Tsung-men had been murdered by the invading Japanese who had some reason to hate him; but Weekes seemed to remember that he had heard that, a few days before, the dead man had been sent up the Ching Chang to interview some Chinese official who was suspected of double-crossing the central government at Chungking, at the head of the Yang-tse rapids. However that might be, Weekes, who was nothing if not practical, had already realized that as yet he had no certain proof that the man *was* dead. Wading into the water, that was nowhere much above his knees, he reached the body, lifted it in his arms, and carried it back to dry land.

After a brief examination his medical knowledge assured him that there was no hope of resuscitation, for the simple reason that life had not been extinguished by drowning. The body was not swollen, nor was there any water in the lungs. Yet Weekes had not yet observed any visible scar.

Knowing the country as he did, he at once jumped at what seemed to him the most probable conclusion—poison; only to change his mind a moment later, when he found himself confronted by something in the way of a mystery. For he had suddenly observed a slight bruise in the immediate center of the dead man's forehead, less a contusion than a mere breaking of the skin. Also, and even more extraordinary, the skin had been taken off the knuckles of both hands.

This was a circumstance that puzzled John Weekes more than anything else, for he had never heard of a Chinese using his fists in self-defense on any occasion whatever, and he was quite certain that Tsung-men had been quite incapable of doing so. The question therefore of how death had been incurred was unanswerable. It might or might not, be explained by autopsy. All he could do was to take the body back to Chinese headquarters at Yunnan-fu, where there were several native surgeons capable of conducting an efficient post-mortem. For the moment only one or two facts were clear: since Tsung-men had not met his death by drowning, he must have been done to death somewhere up the river into which his corpse had been thrown, to be washed downstream over the rapids on to the marsh. It was also plain that he had been lying out on the mudbank for several hours, since his clothes were wholly dry. Yet how had he been killed, since it was obvious that neither knife, bludgeon, nor bullet, had done the work?

So far as he could see, there was nothing Weekes could do, but carry out his original intention—report the matter to his friend, General Fong-wei, who was in command at Yunnan city. Sadly, with slow, long strides, and leading his pony by the reins, John Weekes began to retrace his steps along the mule-track, aware that China had lost a champion, and himself—a friend.

A WORD about John Warrington Weekes, who was a better than average specimen of what the late Jack London was wont to describe as "the inevitable white man." He hailed from one of the southern states where he had passed some time as a medical student and then cut loose from his moorings, to spend a few years knocking around the South Seas; and his pidjin English was still of the "Sandalwood" variety. However, he seldom had cause to resort to that inadequate medium for expressing fundamental ideas, for his natural aptitude for acquiring foreign tongues had been cultivated by both circumstance and necessity; and if he knew China better than any other country in the world, it was because China wants more knowing. He had spent years of his life there, and had gone back at the beginning of the war with Japan because he felt he could do useful work.

Estimated at his true value by the educated Chinese, he was regarded by the coolie class with awe, as a kind of hybrid,

deified giant who bore a striking resemblance to Yen Wang, the king of the devil-gods. For, whatever else he was, Weekes was certainly not handsome, though because of his great height, immense physical strength, and rugged, kindly features, women looked at him twice, though he seldom noticed them. He was a man who never lost his head, and who had no nerves to lose.

Serving as a kind of jack-of-all-trades with the Chinese national army, his knowledge of surgery and medicine was as useful as his general adaptability. In a word, as a friend he was never out of the way; as an enemy, he was always in the way—and that was why, we must suppose, he was inevitable.

As soon as he got back to Yunnan-fu with the body of Tsung-men, he made his way to the headquarters of General Fong-wei, who had been well known to him even before the outbreak of the war.

Fong immediately gave orders that a post-mortem was to be held — though, whatever the verdict, there were certain circumstances that suggested that the problem might not prove as difficult as it seemed —and then sent for Weekes again.

Tsung-men, it appeared, had left the Yunnan headquarters about three weeks before upon a mission of delicacy that was fraught with a certain amount of danger. Far up the Ching Chang River, toward the border of the Shan States, there lived an ex-mandarin of the name of Tang-fan-li, who had once held the high position of viceroy of Szechwan. He was known to be a miser who had made a fortune out of squeeze during his long term of office; and more than once Chiang kai-chek had written to him, asking him to subscribe to the national funds to oppose the Japanese. So far, no reply had been received, and Tsung-men had been sent there to find out what he could and make an official report.

"But, bear in mind, my honorable friend," Fong-wei observed, "we had no reason to suspect His Excellency's duplicity, until we had heard the result of this post-mortem."

"Why, have they found out anything?" Weekes asked, wondering what was coming next.

Fong-wei shrugged his shoulders.

"Merely opium," he remarked. "That is somewhat extraordinary, since Tsung-men never touched the drug. Yet, it seems, he had swallowed almost enough to have accounted for his death."

"Signs of no other poison?"

"None. None whatever."

"And what about the scars on his forehead and fists?"

The general shrugged again.

"They cannot be explained," he answered. "The bruise upon the forehead could not even have rendered him unconscious. The doctors are of opinion that he was suffocated, but there are no marks upon the throat. A man does not breathe through his fists. It is very sad, very extraordinary, and certainly very strange."

"And you suspect Tang-fan-li?" the American asked.

"One cannot help doing so, though there is no evidence that the honorable Tsung-men even got so far as the yamen. He may have been murdered on the road by the Japanese. He was in uniform, as you know. I have sent men out to make inquiries of the villagers in the Ching Chang Valley. Though the villages are few and far between, some of them may have seen something that will serve as a clue."

JOHN WEEKES thought for a moment, and then made a suggestion that was perhaps characteristic of the inevitable white man.

"I think," he remarked, in his customary drawl, as if it was too much trouble to speak, "I think, I will take the opportunity of calling upon His Excellency, Tang-fan-li. I have heard of him often, but I have never had the pleasure of meeting him."

Fong-wei looked doubtful—or as doubtful as any Chinaman can look.

"Would not that be thrusting your head into the dragon's mouth?" he asked. "In your own parlance, it looks to me rather like asking for trouble."

"I am afraid," the other answered, "that is exactly what I have done most of my life. It has become a kind of a habit."

So much was no more than the truth. In a wholly adventurous life, in which he had scrupulously done his best to avoid the more decorous members of the opposite sex, John Weekes had found danger a coy and winsome jade who was shy of open courtship, and who, like many a cinema beauty, was considerably less impressive in a close-up.

General Fong, however, managed to persuade him not to settle anything definitely until his scouts had returned from the Ching Chang district, as they might bring back with them information that Weekes might find of use. And this, after the lapse of another five days, proved to be the case. On the narrow bridle-path that skirted the southern bank of the river, about midway between the rapids and the yamen of Tang-fan-li, a Chinese in officer's uniform had been seen speaking to a yamen-runner who wore the plum-colored livery of the mandarin.

So far as they could make out, the Chinese being invariably vague upon all questions of time and distance, this had happened *before* Tsung-men had reached the yamen—if he had ever got there. That was another minute link in the chain of circumstantial evidence that was associating Tang-fan li with the crime, and it was that that made the American resolve to undertake the mission in which Tsung-men had so signally and so fatally failed.

"I understand," he remarked, when next he interviewed the general, "that old Tang is nearly eighty years of age."

"Yet in complete possession of his wits," Fong smilingly replied. "He never was a fool. In the old days of the monarchy he made money out of every office he held—magistrate, prefect, viceroy. He has been hoarding his wealth ever since the Boxer Rising. All through the civil war he squeezed the province of Szechwan dry as a lemon, taking bribes from both sides and double-crossing his friends."

"Which means," Weekes added, "that he is likely to be up to the same game now?"

"That is more probable than impossible. The old man's coffers are stuffed with dollars, silver shoes of sycee and Yunnan gold-leaf. He does not approve of any modern Western methods."

"Unless possibly they are Japanese," Weekes suggested.

"That also is quite likely. But I was referring to the banking system. Not trusting the banks, he dispenses with interest, and prefers to keep his money in a strong box, or many such boxes. For half a century he has grown fat on the wealth of his country. It is only right that he should now subscribe to our cause—which is his cause as much as anyone else's."

"And so far, you have received nothing from him?"

"Not a cash! That is why we sent Tsung-men there. He knows that Tsung-men was on the staff of the Commander-in-chief, and Tang fears Chiang-kai-chek as the weasel fears the cave-tiger."

"Well, then," said Weekes, rising to his feet, as if his mind was now definitely made up, "it seems to me that he's the type of rogue who would sell his country to the Japanese for some place in a puppet government. But why he should have done away with Tsung-men is a mystery that has yet to be solved. That is why I am going to his yamen. I have met few of your countrymen, General, whom I respected more than my friend, Tsung-men—a man of great learning, with progressive ideas, and a certain sweetness of disposition such as you would never find in any European."

General Fong bowed, in acknowledgement of the compliment to his nation, and then, somewhat savagely, thrust his thumbs in his belt.

"Are you wise to tread," he asked, "upon ground that even the astute Tsung-men found so treacherous? And if you are resolved to go, are you wise to go alone?"

"What more could I find out, if I took with me a detachment with machine guns? Less. Infinitely less! If the man is guilty, he would be warned against me. As it is, I can pose as a foreign war-correspondent. Old Tang can scarcely refuse me your native hospitality, and it is not my custom to drift around with my eyes shut."

"Then so be it, if so be it must," the general replied. "There is nothing more to be said."

He, too, it appeared, had accepted the inevitability of John Warrington Weekes.

WEEKES made the journey on foot, carrying the few things he needed, including his medicine-case, in a couple of haversacks. Crossing the marsh, where he found the pools even shallower than before, after four days marching from dawn to sundown he came to the piled-up rocks on the right bank of the Ching Chang.

These had now dried in the sunshine, but a few weeks before the water of the flooded river had been pouring over them in a torrent; and, as there was a sweeping bend in the river at that place, it was easy to see that a floating body might quite possibly have been carried out of the main stream on to the flooded lowland.

The continuation of the journey up the river was uneventful, if interesting; for it was a part of China that had seldom before been visited by any white man. The bleak and barren landscape was cut up into a series of gigantic, razor-edged watersheds; villages were few and far between, perched like crow's nests on the hillsides, and the only road was a narrow bridle-path on the bank of the turgid river. It was upon this path that Tsung-men had last been seen, talking to a man who had undoubtedly come from Tang-fan-li's yamen, since the livery of the mandarin had been recognized.

It took the American another six days to reach his destination. The yamen—a collection of buildings, surrounded by an outer wall—stood on the very brink of a bluff that dropped sheer to the river, the current of which was now swifter than ever. About a mile upstream above the mandarin's palace was the small walled town of Tali-fu, the residence of the local prefect.

As Weekes approached the building, he took careful stock of the place, and saw at a glance that there were several windows that immediately overlooked the river. It was possible that from one of these the lifeless body of Tsung-men had been thrown. That was not an encouraging reflection for the man who now, loudly and importantly, rang the bell at the outer gate. But, as we have said, John Weekes had no nerves to lose, and he had made a habit of always asking for trouble.

The bell had sounded harsh, discordant, echoing in a courtyard beyond. Weekes had not long to wait. A shuffling footstep was audible, the jangling of keys; a little wicket in the gate was opened, and a face appeared.

A pair of pig-like, almond-shaped eyes scrutinized the stranger closely, and then asked him his business. Weekes explained that he was an American connected with a well-known New York newspaper, but that appeared to cut no ice with the owner of the expressionless face at the wicket. His august master might not be at home, and if he was at home, he was asleep, and if he was not asleep, he was busy.

Weekes, who was in no mind to put up with that sort of thing, ordered the janitor to go to his august master at once, and tell him that a foreign war-correspondent was at the gate who represented one of the most influential newspapers in the world and who was moreover personally well known to General Chiang kai-chek.

That settled it. The man disappeared,

and after an interval of about ten minutes reappeared, to open the gate and admit the guest into the yamen.

Crossing a courtyard, Weekes ascended some steps to a dragon door where he was greeted by a fat man who, by his livery, was evidently some kind of comprador or major-domo. This overfed and prosperous-looking individual explained that his master was a person of considerable consequence, a former viceroy and a mandarin of the Red Button.

Weekes replied by declaring that he himself was a person of no consequence whatever. He was but a stranger from a far country, he remarked, quoting Confucius—and thereby, by belittling himself and referring to the greatest of the Sages, proving that he had a thorough acquaintance with the Chinese, as well as General Chiang kai-chek.

He was thereupon ushered through the dragon door into a luxurious reception-room, in which the mandarin himself presently appeared through a curtained doorway.

ONE could see that he was very old. He was exceedingly small in stature, and as he walked leaning on a stick and almost doubled in half, he looked even smaller than he was. He had a face like a shriveled date that tapered off at the chin, where he wore a thin gray beard. His complexion being the color of a lemon, and his skin as wrinkled as that on a monkey's paw, he might have been a mummy, had it not been for his bright and scrutinizing eyes, hard as flint and bright as gems.

The usual courtesies were exchanged, at which John Weekes by constant practise was highly proficient. Explaining that he had lost his way in the mountains, he protested that such a miserable and worthless worm as himself had no right to intrude his objectionable personality upon one so learned and distinguished.

The mandarin bowed, bobbed, and shook hands with himself. His miserable and dilapidated roof-tree was at the service of the honorable stranger. He knew the power of the Press; he was aware of the greatness and wealth of the United States of America; he had the greatest admiration for General Chiang kai-chek, whom he described as a national hero and the saviour of his country. For these reasons he was complimented by a visit by one so distinguished and exalted.

Thus the old man never once changed his tune, though it was obvious to Weekes that he had some difficulty in controlling the features of his face. He went on to say that his guest could stay in the yamen just as long as he liked—permanently, perhaps. As he said this, there came an ominous glint in his eye—or it may have been the American's imagination. Trying to size the old man up, he came to the conclusion that he might have meant anything—or nothing.

At any rate, Tang-fan-li was still smiling and bobbing like some mechanical toy, protesting that everything he possessed was at the disposal of his guest. He should even sleep that night in the bed where once had reposed the weary, if celestial, limbs of the last and greatest empress of the Manchus. The Empress Dowager herself had visited him soon after his retirement from the vice-regal yamen of Szechwan, and the bedroom that she had occupied was at the disposal of the personal friend of General Chiang kai-chek. His head serving-man would conduct the distinguished foreigner to the chamber in question; and after that they would dine on such poor fare as his disreputable kitchen and his clumsy cook could produce.

Bowing, with his fat face devoid of all expression, the major-domo, on being summoned by his master, conducted John Weekes up the stairs into a bedroom that was as singular as it was impressive.

THE flight of stairs that led up from the reception-room ended at a balcony that connected with a corridor. Passing

along this corridor, Weekes observed, not far from the bedroom he was to occupy, another and narrower staircase that led to the floor below—a fact that he duly noted, and it was well for him that he did.

In the bedroom itself, the walls were draped with bright yellow curtains. There was an enormous lacquer cupboard with a pagoda design in gold, and two narrow key-hole-shaped windows that overlooked one of the inner courtyards; but everything else in the room appeared merely supplementary to the ornate and colossal bed that occupied about a quarter of the floor space.

It was bigger than an ordinary double bed and was covered with a richly embroidered quilt. All the woodwork, which was exceedingly heavy and massive, was lacquered in gilt, like most of the furniture, as also was the huge dome-shaped canopy that was supported by the carved upright bed-posts. The whole thing gave one the impression of being some kind of miniature temple rather than a bed, that to lie upon it would amount to a sacrilege, and to snore beneath that great concave sounding-board nothing short of sheer profanity. And yet it was as if there was something evil about the thing, as if that all-powerful and notorious woman who had once slept there had left something of

her personality behind her—a woman who might have been an Oriental reincarnation of Elizabeth of England, Catherine of Russia and Jezebel of Israel.

However, John Weekes, a practical man by nature, was more concerned with his creature comforts, not to say his personal safety. He had no particular liking for a feather mattress about two feet thick, especially as he realized that the room was insufferably hot, since there was no ventilation in the place, save for the narrow windows; but he certainly had no intention, in that house, and in the circumstances, of leaving the door open.

He had already satisfied himself that, as well as a lock, the door had strong bolts on the *inner* side. Though this may have afforded him some gratification, he was at the same time not a little surprised; for he knew that in not one Chinese house in a thousand would he find such a precaution. The fact that there was no bolt on the outer side of the door suggested that the Empress Dowager had preferred to lock herself in before she went to sleep—a natural precaution in one who had sent so many of her compatriots to join the spirits of their ancestors. As for Weekes, he contented himself with the reflection that he, also, could do likewise, and that gave him a sense of security that, as will be seen, he lost before the night was very much older.

Looking out of one of the windows, he surveyed the courtyard below. The light was already failing, but he could see as much as he wanted to. Immediately opposite was a building with a curved, ornate roof. To the right an extension of the main yamen building, and facing that, on the other side of the courtyard, a small postern gate in the high outer wall. It was therefore possible to get into the place without passing through the main gate through which he himself had entered. And if there was a way in, there was a way out—provided one had the key.

Remembering the mysterious fate of Tsung-men, the American was determined to learn what he could concerning the lie of the land before he rejoined his host in the reception-room below; and it was also the memory of his departed friend that

caused him to hesitate a moment, as he was about to put his baggage away in the lacquer cupboard.

"Opium!"

He uttered the word aloud, for a sudden thought had struck him like a blow.

Tsung-men, as Fong-wei had said, had never been addicted to the opium habit. He had once assured Weekes that he had never smoked a pipe in his life. Yet, when he was dead, he had been found to have swallowed enough opium to endanger his life!

Weekes picked up one of the haversacks he had already placed in the cupboard, though he was still following the train of thought that had been generated by the one word—opium.

"Opium—morphine—an antidote. Without doubt, it was best to be on the safe side. He was in no mind to be doped. And he had no means of knowing whether or not that was Tang-fan-li's intention.

Such were his thoughts. Why his aged host should wish to do away with him was another matter. That he might, or might not, find out in the course of the evening. For the moment, sufficient for the day was the evil thereof.

His medical knowledge advised him of a simple antidote to the poison of morphine that would not have occurred to a lay mind. A weak solution of permanganate of potash, a hypodermic syringe—and the trick was done. He had enough distilled water in his medicine-case to give himself another dose, if that should be necessary. He left the room, locking the door behind him and pocketing the key, feeling that he was prepared for all emergencies.

OUTSIDE in the passage, in which there was now but little light, he observed the narrow staircase to the right of his door. Where did that lead to? It might be as well to find out. It was part of the lie of the land, at any rate, and might prove useful, if he had to get out of the place in a hurry.

Satisfying himself that there was no one about, either in the corridor or on the balcony at the head of the main staircase, Weekes went silently down the narrow steps. In spite of the darkness he soon found himself at the bottom, where there was an unlocked door that opened on to the courtyard he had seen from the window. Knowing that he had no time to explore further and that the mandarin would be expecting him in the reception-room, he was about to close the door, when he saw something that immediately attracted his attention and caused him no little surprise. Halfway down the stairs down which he had passed was another door. It was only just high and wide enough to enable a full-grown man to pass through, and as it stood on the left of the stairs, it must either lead nowhere or connect with the Old Buddha's bedroom.

Clearly this was a matter that required instant attention: and Weekes was considerably more disappointed than surprised when he found that the door was locked.

Even if he had brought with him a bunch of skeleton-keys, he doubted very much whether he would have been able to open it, since many of these Chinese contrivances were complicated and unlike ordinary locks. All he could do was to investigate the matter from the other end, and returning to the bedroom, he felt convinced that the steps beyond the locked door must lead to the gilded lacquer cupboard.

Opening the cupboard, he soon satisfied himself that there was a hollow space at the back, and then, fumbling about at random, he discovered a sliding panel.

That was all he wanted to know. By locking and bolting the door of his bedroom from the inner side, he might have imagined himself secure. He now knew that that was far from the case. Knowledge that was satisfactory, on the whole, though it was not a state of affairs that can be described as wholly encouraging. However, knowing that to be forewarned was to be thrice armed, and heartened by the fact

that he carried a loaded revolver in his pocket. Weekes felt that it would now be no more than common courtesy to join his gracious host in the reception-room below.

The old man smilingly greeted him by again shaking hands with himself and trusting that his exalted guest had found in his bedroom all that he required. Replying that he had every comfort imaginable, and that he was much honored by being given such a magnificent and historic bed, Weekes was conducted through the curtained doorway into the room where he and his host were to dine.

The meal consisted of various Chinese luxuries, served up on little plate-like saucers and washed down with warmed Chinese wine, distilled from rice. At once Weekes spotted that there was something wrong with the wine, apart from the fact that the major-domo, who waited at table assisted by four other serving-men, did not fill the cups of the mandarin and himself out of the same bottle. In addition to the usual sickly, sugary taste of *samshu*, this particular vintage had a bitter, acrid flavor that the American recognized at once as the taste of morphine.

So far, so good, or so bad, as he chose to look at it. He had been wise to take a scientific precaution; but he presently realized, before he was halfway through the meal, that he was being doped to an extent that would soon put an ordinary man under the table with his consciousness completely blotted out. That meant that he had a part to play, and he was resolved to play it, though he had no pretensions as an actor.

Allowing his eyelids to droop, as if he were already half asleep, and in order to disguise the fact that his pupils had not already shrunk to the size of pin-heads, he spoke in a lazy, drawling voice, as if it was too much trouble to talk.

All the same, he did talk—and he talked to some purpose, with the idea of getting all the information he could.

Tactfully he suggested that Tang-fan-li, a man whose name was honored and esteemed throughout the length and breadth of China, had the reputation of being one of the richest men in the country.

"Rumor is a mirage," the old man replied. "It magnifies everything out of all proportion, and causes us to see that which does not exist. I am not exactly a poor man," he confessed, throwing out his shriveled hands, "but as I spend but little money in this remote neighborhood, I have certainly accumulated provision for my old age."

Weekes felt inclined to ask him when he imagined his old age was going to begin, but confined himself to a question more to the point.

"Would it not be meet and fitting," he asked, "if Your Excellency placed some of these funds at the disposal of General Chiang kai-chek? I understand the head of the government has made such a request; and surely the salvation of your country means more to you than a little surplus wealth?"

"Who would dispute it?" the old man declared. "So far as I am concerned, the general has but to ask, and he shall receive such funds as I am able to supply."

"But I understand he has asked, and more than once."

"If that is so, I am not aware of it. On the other hand, not so long ago, I sent a runner, one of my own men, to the government at Chungking, addressed to the Commander-in-chief and Prime Minister himself. It told him that I had packed

in boxes the equivalent of thirty thousand silver taels in shoes of sycee and Yunnan gold-leaf, and that he had only to send an escort to get it."

"Then," said Weekes, regarding the mandarin closely, "I can only assure you that that messenger never arrived at Chungking; for, had he done so, we would have heard of it at Yunnan-fu."

At that the old rogue threw up his hands in well feigned alarm.

"What if the runner has been captured by the Japanese!" he exclaimed. "In that case, I am doomed, I will be robbed of all I possess. For if the letter falls into their hands, they will certainly come here themselves. They may even put me to death."

FOR a moment the American did not answer, but he was doing some quick and solid thinking. And he was thinking of Tsung-men. Supposing this yamen-runner, who would have been wearing the mandarin's livery, was the man whom Tsung-men had met upon the bridle-path along the river bank? And supposing he was on his way, not to the Chinese government headquarters at Chungking, but the Japanese headquarters at Ichang, lower down the Yang-tse? Tsung-men, mistrusting Tang-fan-li, would have found out the contents of that letter—one could safely trust him for that. And then, supposing the messenger had returned to the yamen with the news that one of Chiang kai-chek's staff officers had got the truth out of him? There, staring John Weekes in the face, was a motive for Tsung-men's mysterious death!

The old scoundrel, as had been suspected from the first, was in communication with the Japanese.

This logical and coherent train of thought passed rapidly through Weekes' brain, while at the same time he never moved a muscle of his face. Pretending to be more drugged than ever, and than he really was, he closed his eyes.

"Why fear the worst?" he drowsily asked. "You have no evidence the Japanese captured the fellow."

"None. None whatever. But it may have happened."

"It is improbable," the American replied. "As yet these marauders have not penetrated as far as the Ching Chang Valley. There is no reason why they should do so. In these troublous days why anticipate disasters that may never happen?"

"That is indeed true! Nor can I believe that the gods would permit such a calamity to descend upon the gray hairs of one who has ever walked the paths of righteousness and justice. No doubt you yourself will take my message to General Chang-kai-chek, lest the messenger has lost his way?"

By that time John Weekes had come to the conclusion that never, even in China, had he encountered a more fluent and plausible liar. And the fact that he now had all the information he wanted was proof enough that the old villain intended that he should never live through the night. The circumstance that, by this time, he ought to have been silly with dope was additional evidence, if any were wanted; and moreover he had a suspicion that Tang-fan-li knew that Weekes knew he was lying.

That was not a pleasant reflection for the distinguished and exalted guest, who was already aware that, in spite of the antidote he had taken, the drug was beginning to have a very potent effect.

AND all the time Weekes was thinking, the mandarin went on talking. He had now got on to the subject of his friends, the Japanese, thereby proving himself as great a hypocrite as he was a liar. According to him, they were brutal and warlike barbarians; brown dwarfs, bloodthirsty by nature, who owed their death-dealing instruments of war to the civilizations of the West and their art, culture and letters to China, the country they would now subject and utterly destroy.

Weekes let him get to the end of what

he had to say, and then got back to brass tacks, knowing full well that, by doing so, as Fong-wei had said, he was placing his head in the dragon's mouth.

"Am I to understand," he asked, "that these boxes filled with gold and silver bullion are all ready to be taken away?"

"Undoubtedly. I have them here—in a safe place, of course. All that I have been able to save, for the service of my country."

"May I be permitted to see them?" John Weekes asked. "I can then assure the general, when I see him at Chungking, of your good and patriotic intentions, which, I am sure, he has never held in doubt."

Such a remark proved that John Weekes could play the Chinese game, if not so well as his crafty host. However the mandarin now scrutinized him with his sharp, little, glittering eyes, as if he were a philatelist inspecting some rare stamp through a microscope; and then he asked a somewhat extraordinary question.

The dinner, which they had eaten at a high table and seated upon chairs, was now finished. Tang-fan-li lay back in his chair, and folded his hands on all that he possessed in the way of a stomach. If his expression suggested anything, he appeared to be more than a little puzzled.

"Do you smoke opium, by the way?" he asked.

WEEKES was nearly caught in the trap, for a trap it was. Had he told the truth, and said that he had only smoked opium on rare occasions, Tang would have guessed at once that he had smelt a rat and had already taken an antidote. For the drug is accumulative, and only one well accustomed to it could have withstood the quantity the American had drunk with his wine, without having to ask his host for permission to lie down upon a couch.

"I am an opium slave," John Weekes penitently confessed. "I am one of those who cannot live without it. And what is worse, I not only smoke it, I eat it. I know the virtues of the poppy. I have yet to learn its pains."

Tang nodded his head, as much as to say, "That accounts for it."

"May I offer you a pipe now?" he suggested. "Now that my simple dinner is finished, I can keep you company, for there is no doubt the prohibited drug is an aid to the digestion."

Weekes declined. He confessed that he felt tired—dizzy, in fact. And as he rose to his feet, he staggered, and had to lean upon the table for support.

Nor was this all acting, for he was feeling far from well. He realized that, for the time being, he would have to forego seeing the treasure. As soon as he possibly could, he would have to get back to the medicine-case he had left in the cupboard in his bedroom. If he was not able to give himself another injection in the next few minutes, he would be in a bad way.

At the same time, he was filled with a kind of uncanny dread that was new to his experience. He dreaded going back into that room. He was painfully aware of some imminent, impending danger. As through a haze, he regarded the little, shriveled monster who stood before him, on the other side of the table, with a sly, sinister smile on his yellow, wrinkled face, and it occurred to him that he could seize that withered, self-complacent, grinning hypocrite by the throat and strangle him in a few seconds. If he killed him with a single blow, it would be no more than an act of common justice. Yet, knowing that the outer yamen gate was both locked and guarded, he realized that to no small extent he was in that old man's power. He could do nothing, but wait and see what would happen, conscious all the time that it was as if he stood upon the very brink of eternity.

"I must go to bed," he mumbled, feebly. "I'm dead tired. To tell the truth, I don't feel any too well."

The mandarin made no attempt to disguise his satisfaction, since he felt he had

no need to. The fool was in his power, already silly with dope. The marvel was that he was still conscious. But all foreigners were fools.

"May I conduct you to your couch of rest," he said. "It is only natural that you are fatigued after your arduous journey."

WEEKES began to stagger up the staircase, clutching the bannisters for support, the old man following at his heels. Stumbling along the corridor, he reached the door of the bedroom, where he took the key from his pocket.

Together they entered. The room was illumined by a bronze lamp suspended from the ceiling and the pale moonlight that streamed in through the key-hole windows.

"I never enter this room," Tang-fan-li observed, in a tone of pious awe, "without thinking of that great Empress whose word was law from the Si-kiang to the Great Wall! She had but to lift a finger—and the executioner did his work, or the high state official drank of gold, as we call it, that he might ride upon the dragon's back to the celestial regions, to join the spirits of his forefathers. Remember that, my honorable and exalted friend, you sleep tonight with the shades of the departed."

There was no doubt what he meant by that; and if he had spoken thus openly, it was only because he thought that his honorable and exalted guest had not wit enough left to understand him.

Weekes said nothing. He stood there, swaying, thinking, wondering. Should he throttle the old villain now, and have done with it? Or should he take his life in his hands, risk a night in that room that had a secret entrance, and try to discover for himself the whole truth of the matter?

It was no mock heroism that prompted him to take what risk there was, though he knew by now that that risk was greater than he liked; for he had still sense enough also to know that, if he put the old rascal out of the world then and there, he might find some difficulty in escaping out of the yamen. Besides, his immediate and urgent need was his hypodermic syringe, for his head was now singing like a kettle and his mouth dry as a bone.

The mandarin bowed to him as he backed toward the door.

"I have the honor to wish you a very long night's rest," he said—and a moment after, he was gone.

Weekes went to the door and listened. He could hear the old man's stick tapping along the corridor. Tap—tap—tap! It was the drug he had taken, the combined effects of a powerful sedative with a stimulant, and the resistance offered by the antidote, that put strange and gruesome thoughts into his head; that slow, persistent tapping of the stick upon the hard floor of the corridor sounded to him like the hammering of nails into a coffin.

NO SOONER had the sound vanished than he locked and bolted the door. Then he went to the cupboard, took out his medicine-case, mixed a few grains of permanganate with distilled water, and gave himself another injection.

He was still overcome by weariness; a sense of futility, as if nothing really mattered. It was as if his limbs were leaden. Yet he suffered no physical discomfort. He was able to think quite clearly—if only he could keep awake.

He went to the window and looked out, for the room was breathless and he wanted air to breathe. The moonlight shone down upon the courtyard; but he could see no light in any of the windows, and there was no sign of anyone about. When he flung himself down upon the bed, folding his hands behind his head, he knew that at all costs he must keep awake. Presently the injection would begin to work, canceling the effects of the morphine; he had taken it in plenty of time. Meanwhile he dared not close his eyes. If he did so, he might fall asleep—and if he slept, as Tang-fan-li had told him, his sleep might be longer than he liked. He remembered another say-

ing of that withered and sinister old peculator, with his gem-hard eyes and crooked back: "You sleep tonight with the shades of the departed."

That meant death—death before morn-

ing broke. It could have no other meaning. Yet how? That was a harder question to answer than why. The reason was obvious—John Weekes knew too much, and he would tell what he knew, if he was allowed to return to Yunnan-fu.

All the same there was much that could not be explained. Did the old man mean to decamp from the yamen where he had lived for nearly thirty years? If he had killed Tsung-men, and he now meant to do away with the American, he could not hope to avoid suspicion. The Commander-in-chief would send soldiers to arrest him, an investigation would be made—and then it would be all up with him. Yet, since Weekes himself was as good as doomed already, there could be no other explanation than that the cunning old traitor had already made up his mind to go over to the Japanese.

SUCH were the thoughts that passed through his mind as he lay upon the bed—the Old Buddha's bed, she who had once held life and death in her hands throughout the length and breadth of China. He had taken off his boots and his coat, and had lain down in his clothes. He had put out the hanging lamp, but because of the moonlight through the open key-hole windows, he could see everything quite clearly. He was staring upward, at the great domed canopy above him, the underpart of which was decorated with a design of flying storks with stretched wings above a fire-breathing, five-clawed dragon. He presumed the thing was made of wood; but, even so, unless it were hollow, it must weigh almost a ton. And then, upon a sudden, he became startlingly aware that *the whole thing was descending slowly and silently upon him!*

He was out of bed like a flash—to stand there in his stockinged feet, watching that concave devilish contrivance drawing nearer and nearer to the couch that he now recognized had been intended for his tomb. And, only a little time before, the persistent tapping of that old villain's stick had reminded him of the hammering of nails into a coffin!

How long ago? That was a strange question to ask; but, at such moments as this, a man will often think of even stranger things.

For aught he knew, he might have been lying there for an hour, an eternity—in a kind of hazy day-dream. But now, though he found it necessary to wipe the cold perspiration from his forehead, he was in full possession of his faculties.

Listening, he could hear a soft, creaking sound in the wall, just behind the head of the bed, and he did not want two guesses to know what that was; oiled chains from some infernal mechanism in the room below that were slowly lowering the canopy, closing more or less silently that gruesome, gilded man-trap.

The thing finished its irresistible and inevitable descent with a heavy, sudden jerk, a kind of snap like that of a gigantic lock, the outer edges of the dome—which Weekes now noticed for the first time were padded with some soft material—fitting exactly upon the ends and jambs of the bed. There were neither sheets nor blankets, but one corner of the silken quilt was caught

beneath the weight and crushed into the padding.

Weekes took a deep breath, to steady himself. It took a lot to make him lose his presence of mind, but he could not escape from the reflection that he had literally jumped out of the jaws of death, the mouth of the dragon—and it was only owing to the fact that he had kept awake that he was not now buried alive.

Tentatively he struck the top of the dome with a fist—and at once refrained with difficulty from giving a cry of pain. He had imagined the thing was wood. It was iron. Its weight must have been enormous. Twenty men as strong as himself could never have lifted it, and he was no weakling. Then he examined his knuckles in the moonlight, saw that he had taken the skin off and drawn blood, and then remembered once again his friend Tsung-men.

There, on that bed, where the Old Buddha may, or may not, have dreamed of her many crimes, Tsung-men had vainly, hopelessly struggled for life. Jerking himself upward into a sitting position, he must have bumped his forehead. Doped as he had been with opium, suffocation from carbon dioxide must have worked like an anaesthetic, though there was evidence that he had fought for his life, frantically, desperately, before the end. Battling with bare fists, fighting for life and breath, a living man in a tomb, he had at last fallen back unconscious—to breathe no more.

An insensate, glowing rage possessed John Weekes that seemed to have changed the very composition of his blood. He no longer feared anything—god, man, devil-god, or devil. He no longer felt any ill effects of the drug he had consumed. He was conscious of a new power in his limbs, in every nerve and muscle of his body, that might have been heaven-sent, but which in reality was no more than the result of the fury that burned within him like a living fire. Then, upon a sudden, he became aware of a gentle, scratching noise, though where it came from he had at first not the remotest idea.

It was a noise that was difficult to place. It seemed on the other side of the room, and yet somewhere under the floor. Then he remembered the cupboard and the sliding panel at the back. Someone was searching to put a key in the lock of the door below, the door that he had discovered when he had gone down the narrow staircase that led out into the courtyard.

Intuitively he crouched down—and then waited. He was screened by the great bed from the lacquer cupboard, and thus he waited, listening, straining every nerve, holding his breath, and yet with his great fingers twitching, like the talons of a bird of prey.

A key turned in the lock in the door below. He heard someone slowly ascending the steps, which he counted silently, under his breath, like a man about to give a word of command to a firing squad. One—two—three—four. That was all. And then he heard the panel drawn back in the lacquer cupboard.

Still crouching, he crept to the end of the bed—the bed that should have been his coffin. Peering round the corner, he saw a round, fat face that looked white in the moonlight that came streaming in through the window. Then he sprang—and he sprang like a tiger, for at that moment he had the heart of a tiger, and he saw again the body of his friend, Tsung-men, lying dead upon the mudbank on the flooded land south of the Ching Chang.

THAT yellow bloated murderer, who did no more than the vile bidding of his master, who did duty as the yamen major-domo and who for years had thrived on squeeze, was as powerless as a slug in the vise-like grip that had seized him by the throat. He could not cry out for help; he could not even gasp. He had no time for either astonishment or horror. With staring eyes and gaping, fish-like mouth, he was strangled into semi-consciousness, and

then his bull neck was snapped like a reed.

John Weekes let him fall to the floor with a thud. Then he flipped his fingers, like a pianist who has just rendered a masterpiece to his entire satisfaction. Next, on tip-toe—for some reason he could not explain—Weekes crossed to the doorway.

Withdrawing the bolts and taking the key, he unlocked the door, and looked out into the corridor. There was no one about. There was not a sound to be heard—silence like that of the house of death that place was meant to be. And somewhere on the floor below, that little, aged, crooked monster sat rubbing his hands and smiling!

John Weekes' first and natural instinct was to make a get-away as quickly as he could. He feared he would have but little chance of succeeding, if he went down the main staircase to the reception-room. Apart from the fact that he would be running a grave risk of being seen, he knew that he could not get through the outer gate without attacking the janitor and robbing him of his keys. He was ready enough to try that if he had thought it could be managed without the man giving the alarm; but a much safer plan, it seemed to him, would be to try the postern he had seen from his bedroom window.

Having made up his mind, he bent down and searched the corpse on the floor. In one of the man's pockets he found what he wanted: the key of the door beyond and below the sliding panel in the cupboard.

He next locked and bolted the other door—that which led out on to the corridor. Entering the cupboard, he passed through to the four steps he had counted—as it seemed to him, ages and ages ago—and a moment later, he was outside in the moonlit courtyard.

To avoid being seen by anyone who might happen to be about, he kept to the shade under the outer wall. If the postern was open, he was free. He would go down the river as quickly as he could. Nor would he rest, day or night, until he had got back to Yunnan-fu, where he would report what had happened to General Fong-wei. As soon as he had done that, a mounted escort would be despatched to the yamen. Tang-fan-li would be arrested, and the murder of Tsung-men thus avenged.

Such sanguine reflections brought John Weekes to the postern-gate in the outer wall—and, no sooner had he got there, than he pulled up with a jerk, with his heart again in his mouth. On the other side of that gate he could hear voices; he could hear the stamping of hoofs, even the clatter of arms, the ringing of rifle-butts upon the hard stony ground.

For a moment he supposed that the escort of which he had been thinking had arrived already, that they had come to arrest the mandarin; and then, almost at once, he realized that that was too good to be true. Whoever they were, outside the gate, they were foes, not friends of his.

WEEKES stood there for a second or so irresolute. Then he tentatively tried the gate, and found it locked. And at that moment a light appeared, on the other side of the courtyard.

Then he heard other voices, immediately behind him. Turning quickly, he saw several men, amongst whom he recognized old Tang himself, standing before an open lighted doorway in that part of the main building that flanked the other side of the inner courtyard. Realizing that, if he waited a minute longer, he would be caught, Weekes began to make good his retreat quicker than he had come.

Keeping well in the shadow, he crept like a cat along the foot of the wall, and did not look upon himself as safe until he had reached the door he had left open. And a minute later he was back again in the bedroom he had left but a few minutes before.

The body of the major-domo still lay upon the floor. Picking it up, he bundled it without ceremony into the cupboard, where he had already closed the panel at the back.

If he was yet to escape from that walled prison passing as a palace, he had now no option, but to risk the main gate. His one and only chance was to get there without being seen, overpower the gate-keeper before he could give the alarm, and gain possession of his keys.

Silently passing out into the corridor, he locked the door behind him, and on tiptoe approached the head of the staircase. There was a lantern burning in the room below, but no sign of anyone about. Most of the serving-men, so far as he could guess, as well as old Tang-fan-li himself, were in the other courtyard at the back. Why they were there Weekes could not imagine, any more than he could tell who were the mounted men he had heard on the other side of the wall.

His footsteps fell noiselessly as he passed across the thickly carpeted reception-room to the dragon door beyond. It was at this door, it will be remembered, that he had been greeted by the major-domo not so many hours before—the man he had killed, who now lay dead and huddled in the Old Buddha's bedroom. Assuredly no living man knows what fate awaits him round the corner!

To his relief Weekes found that the dragon door was not locked. Immediately before this was a small spirit-wall, around which it was necessary to pass, before the main courtyard came into view. And no sooner was the American round this wall than he was back again in a trice, and the sense of relief he had experienced but a moment before had vanished like a puff of smoke.

For he had had a glimpse of the gate—and one glance was enough for him. It was wide open—yet, so far as he was concerned, it might have been locked with a hundred locks.

In the archway by the gate a great bronze lantern had been lit, and the light from this shone downward upon a party of armed men. There were twenty of them, at least; soldiers in ragged, war-stained uniforms, who were laughing and talking among themselves, leaning on their rifles. And they were Japanese. Moreover, this was no enemy at the gate. The cursory glance John Weekes had got of them had been enough to tell him that they had come to the yamen as *friends*.

AGAIN he paused, at a loss as to what he could do next. It seemed that he was caught like a rat in a trap. He knew of but two entrances into the yamen—the main gate and the postern—and it was unlikely there were any more. Escape from either now seemed impossible; and if he could not escape, he must find somewhere where he could hide.

Then he remembered the man whom he had killed. For it had suddenly occurred to him that in either of the dark courtyards he would run far less risk of being seen and recognized, if he wore Chinese clothes. It was true the clothes of the man he had in mind would be an indifferent fit, but that was a minor matter. The comprador was not as tall as he was and a good deal fatter, but that was better than the other way round. He could get into them, at any rate—and that was what he had already decided to do.

Retracing his steps, he passed through the dragon door, crossed the reception-room, and ascended the stairs. In that gilded bedroom again, he went straight to the cupboard; and in less than five minutes he had changed clothes with the major-domo—the man who, at old Tang's orders, had worked that devilish contrivance and who had come up into the room, to see that his victim was dead.

John Weekes smiled to himself as he pulled the long plum-colored robe over his head. Since he had been in the yamen he had discovered all, everything that he had wanted to know. He had found out Tang-fan-li's perfidy; he now knew for a fact that the mandarin was in league with the Japanese. He had discovered exactly how and why Tsung-men had been murdered.

He himself had been doped, and he had dodged the drug with an effective antidote. They had tried to murder him, and he had escaped by the skin of his teeth. And now, by way of irony, he was not only still alive, but he was dressed in the livery of the ex-viceroy—and it was that man's life, or his. What was to be his fate, he had no means of telling, but of one thing he was certain: life was full of surprises.

JOHN WEEKES had not many feminine qualities or traits; but on occasions such as this he was curious to an impertinent degree. He could not remain where he was, and he had no intention of doing so. He realized there could be nothing to be gained by going back to the main courtyard. There was nothing to be seen there which he had not seen already. Far more was he interested in what was happening in the other courtyard; for by now he had seen something out of one of the key-hole windows that he considered more intriguing than surprising.

The postern was now open, and there had entered through the gate no less than six pack-mules, whom but a little time before Weekes had heard stamping their hoofs on the other side of the wall. Each of these mules was being led by a Japanese soldier, and they were now drawn up in a line in front of the door into the main building where Weekes had seen Tang-fan-li with several of his serving-men and yamen guards.

What the pack-mules were there for the American had no need to ask himself, for the thing was plain as a pike-staff. In the whole of his conversation with the mandarin he had probably been told only one thing that was true: namely, that the old rogue had certain treasure boxes, stowed away somewhere in the yamen, in which he had stored the bulk of the wealth he had been accumulating for years. And never for a moment had he intended that a copper cash of this should pass into the hands of Chiang kai-chek. He had preferred to purchase his own safety from the Japanese, with perhaps the promise of a place in any controlled government they might set up in China, and the Japanese themselves had now come to fetch the price of their goodwill. What was more, Tang-fan-li had known all along that they would come that night—and there was another reason why he should have taken steps to do away with an unwelcome guest.

Weekes, who had taken cover in a darkened corner of the courtyard, was able to see everything that was happening. He himself ran very little risk of being seen, and if he was seen, being dressed in the yamen uniform, he was unlikely to attract any undue attention.

He could see old Tang, bowing and scraping on the steps by the door; and again his fingers twitched, since he was powerless to grip that double-dyed old villain by the throat. He could do nothing for the moment, but stay where he was, watch what was happening, and trust to luck that no one saw and spoke to him.

Such a contingency did not seem to him at all probable, since all the men in the courtyard were fully occupied in carrying small boxes—that were obviously heavy—through the doorway to the transport animals that were cropping such lank grass as they could find growing between the flagstones. As for old Tang himself, he was talking to a strutting, little Japanese officer of senior rank who was evidently in charge.

Weekes estimated that it would not take them more than another ten minutes to load up all the mules. It was equally certain the Japanese did not intend to stay in the yamen that night; for none of the men had taken off their equipment, and otherwise they would not have been loading up the animals. And that meant that, before long, they would leave by the way they had come—and it also meant that then the postern-gate would be again locked.

Hence, if he were to escape, it was a case of now or never. The Japanese, as was

natural enough, were taking the treasure away with a strong escort, most of whom they had left at the main gate of the yamen, while the mules had been taken round to the back. Since the main gate was therefore out of the question, he must somehow reach the postern and make a dash for it, and there was no reason why he shouldn't have the luck to get through without being recognized as a foreigner. Anyway, he would have nothing to fear from the Japs, not one of whom would know him from Adam—or whomever their aboriginal progenitor might be.

As stealthily as before he began to edge along the wall—the outer wall of the yamen that was at least thirty feet high—only now he was careful to move only a few yards at a time, his main idea being not to attract any undue attention. In the semi-darkness he hoped to be taken for one of the mandarin's servants who had nothing in particular to do.

It was not a situation that he found particularly to his liking, for he knew he had no time to spare. Yet he was compelled to move at a snail's pace, gradually getting nearer and nearer to the gate through which he hoped to make good his escape.

PRESENTLY, almost before he knew it, he had arrived at his destination. To his relief he saw that there were none of the mandarin's men about, though there were several Japanese soldiers, most of whom were lying on the ground, naturally fatigued after their long march through the mountains.

He imagined he had nothing to fear from any of these, as they would not be able to question him, and in that light, dressed as he was, he would be taken for a Chinese of rather unusual physical proportions. And then he discovered to his mortification that one of the soldiers had been posted as a sentry; and it was this man who barred his way with a fixed bayonet, as Weekes was about to stroll casually through.

The sentry snapped out a few words in his own language, holding the point of his bayonet against the American's chest. John Weekes did not know more than a few words in Japanese, but he did not need an interpreter to know what the man had said.

The fellow had evidently received orders to allow no one to pass the gate; and whatever faults the Japanese had, they had at least the virtue of obedience; they were in the habit of carrying out their orders extremely literally, as a rule preferring to make themselves as objectionable as they could.

For a moment Weekes said nothing, did nothing, but just stood there, with the bayonet at his chest, trying to make up his mind and summing up the situation. Glancing over a shoulder, he saw that the pack-mules were all loaded, and Tang-fan-li was bowing and shaking hands with himself before the bemedaled little Japanese staff officer. The bargain had been closed. In a few minutes the little convoy would begin to move toward the gate.

He had a loaded automatic under the long Chinese robe that had so recently been the property of the major-domo, but he realized it would be folly to use it, even if he could shoot the sentry before the man drove home his bayonet. The men who were resting, lying on the ground, did not appear in the least interested in what was happening; but, on the other side of them, Weekes saw for the first time an orderly who was holding a horse.

At once a hackneyed line of Shakespeare's came into his his head: *"A horse! A horse! My kingdom for a horse!"* He did not happen, at that particular moment, to have a kingdom to trade, but it had instantly occurred to him that at this juncture a horse would be a lot more useful than a crown.

The animal in question undoubtedly belonged to the staff officer in charge of the escort, who was certainly of field rank and a person of some importance. And it was just about the sort of steed he would have. The major, or whatever he was, could not

have been much over five feet in height; and he had seen fit to attempt to enhance his dignity by selecting a sixteen-hand Australian whaler upon which he must have looked not unlike a monkey on a camel, for the stirrups were well above the girths.

Weekes found time to take in all this, and at the same time to consider the more immediate prospect of the point of a bayonet leveled at his heart. The man who was threatening him, and at the same time reviling him in Japanese, appeared to have a visage that consisted mostly of teeth and a pair of bloodshot eyes. Then, suddenly, in the midst of his abusive and unintelligible harangue, he went over backward, falling heavily and striking his head against the wall.

The thing had been done in a flash. The man's bayonet had been struck upward, and an uppercut under the chin had lifted him clean off his feet. And thereupon John Weekes went over the sprawling, foot-sore soldiers like a hurdler over his fences, to take the groom who was holding the horse completely by surprise. The man had no rifle and no other means of defending himself, save what he knew in the way of jujitsu—and he had small chance of showing what he could do at that. For a smashing blow in the face sent him reeling back—and a moment later, Weekes was in the saddle and tearing along the bridle-path that ran parallel to the yamen wall.

HE HAD not reached the corner of the building before he had cause to regret that he was not astride of the little Mongolian pony he had left at Yunnan and who was as sure-footed as a mountain goat. For the horse had stumbled and had nearly fallen over a loose stone; and on the off-side of the track was a steep slope where a fall might mean a broken neck. The American, who could hear shouting and yelling behind him, reined in and approached the main gate at a trot. Slower than that he dared not go, for he knew that the alarm would soon spread to the main gate where he had seen a larger party of Japanese than that which had accompanied the mules. Having turned the corner of the building, he was now upon a wider pathway on the river bank. As he passed the main gate, he got a fleeting glimpse of the men in the lighted archway; and although he could not hear them, he had little doubt that more than one of them must have let out an exclamation of astonishment.

And, indeed, it had already occurred to him that he must have presented a somewhat unusual sight. He was riding with loose stirrups which were far too short for him, and he had had no time to readjust them. Everything in Tang-fan-li's yamen being in accordance with what the mandarin himself would have called old time China, he was wearing the long silken robe of a Chinese of the upper class, and this flew out behind him in the wind that was driving up the valley. In addition to that, his great height and the size of the horse must have made them appear in the pale moonlight an awful and most portentous apparition.

At any rate, it was an apparition that came and went; that did not delay its headlong course for an instant to indulge in any hair-raising antics in the way of frightfulness. It came and it was gone—and no amazed and wondering man in the gateway was more thankful for that than John Weekes himself.

As soon as he was clear of the yamen, he drew rein, adjusted the stirrups to the

length of his legs, and then at a brisk trot continued on his way.

He had made up his mind by this time as to what he intended to do. His stolen mount was hard-mouthed, clumsy to ride, and had not acquired the habit of looking where he was going, for he stumbled repeatedly and had to be ridden on a tight rein. But, even if he had had his little Mongolian who was as sure-footed as a cat, Weekes had thought of a better way of getting down the river than by riding a horse. On his way up, he had noticed a village about two miles below the yamen —a fishing village like many in the interior of China—and he knew that there he would be able to beg, borrow, or steal, a sampan that would take him down that torrent as fast as any racehorse.

He had little to fear from pursuit. The Japanese had only one horse among the lot of them—and that he had stolen; and it would take old Tang, at that hour of the night, the best part of a quarter of an hour to get together a party of yamen-runners and guards. All he had to do was to get back to Yunnan-fu as quickly as he could —and the rest of it would be up to General Fong-wei.

He reached the village without any mishap, for which he was devoutly thankful; woke up the headman, and cut short the inevitable bargaining by thrusting into the fellow's hand a hundred dollar bill—a commodity that worthy had probably never seen before in his life. And soon after that, he was flying down the river with a skilled and practiced boatman at the *ooloo,* or long stern oar by which he was able to steer.

Steering by moonlight, in a current of that strength, where there were rocks in midstream and many sharp bends was no job for an amateur; and as it was, there were moments when Weekes was inclined to think that he had better have stuck to the horse, brute though the animal was.

For there were reaches on the river that were the next thing to rapids. The little boat—so fragile that a floating log would have smashed her like the shell of a nut—sometimes seemed to spring out of the water like a leaping fish, while at other times she spun round in an eddy, to be righted again in an instant by the strong arm of a man who had lived all his life on the river.

BUT the hardest task of all was to draw up, alongside the right bank, somewhere near the place where the passenger wanted to be put ashore. That was, of course, the natural rocky dam where the river overflowed when flooded on to the low-lying marsh where Weekes had found the body of Tsung-men. Fortunately there was a practicable landing place about a quarter of a mile further down, and here the grateful passenger was safely put ashore. Feeling that he owed the man his life, he presented him with ten Mexican dollars, and then watched him hitch the tow-rope over a shoulder, and set forth upon a return journey that was going to take him several days; whereas it had taken them no more than a few hours to come down with the current.

However it was now broad daylight, though the purple glow of sunrise still hung low above the western mountains. Having no baggage, Weekes was able to cover the ground at a steady jog-trot. He bought food at midday at a village, but never paused to rest. Even when it was late at night, he felt no signs of fatigue. He was striving to do something more than avenge the death of his friend, Tsung-men; he was consumed, as it were, by a burning resolution to rid the world of that shriveled, little octogenarian who was both a calculating, cold-blooded murderer and a traitor to his country.

It was that thought that spurred him on his way, as, in the early morning light, he followed the winding mule-tracks that led across the marsh. He was insensible to fatigue. The fact that he had been drugged but a few hours before did not seem to affect him—indeed, now that he had got

over the immediate ill effects, the morphine might have been acting as a kind of tonic, steadying his nerves. For all that, he had come to the end of his staying powers, and was reeling like a drunken man, when at about ten o'clock that night he stumbled into the headquarters of General Fong-wei.

The general was still at work, seated at his desk; and as he listened to Weekes' story, he never moved a muscle of his face. Nodding occasionally, as if he heard no more than he had expected, his sallow, immobile features registered neither pleasure nor surprise. Instead, as soon as the American had finished all he had to say, he made a most astonishing statement that could only have come from the lips of an Oriental.

"Very interesting! Our official maps are not very accurate, I am afraid. I should go to sleep, Mr. Weekes, if I were you. I will give orders that you are to be called in plenty of time."

"Maps?" repeated Weekes, who was dizzy with weariness. "What have maps to do with it? And do you think I can actually go to sleep until I have seen this matter through?"

"Why not? Besides, I can assure you, we will not be able to avail ourselves of your very valuable assistance, if you do not get some rest. Our course is very simple. First, we must lay hands on that gold convoy; and there ought not to be any difficulty about that. We may safely presume they will take Tang-fan-li's little contribution to the Japanese war-chest to Hankow or Nanking, and they can do that by river, as soon as they get to Ichang. But they can never get there, because the only route they can take is across the north of Kwei-chow province, and we can cut them off on this side of the Yang-tse. Pack-mules, heavily laden, cannot gallop, Mr. Weekes—and horses can. A party of mounted men will leave here at four o'clock in the morning; and after you have had sufficient repose and some refreshment, I am sure you would like to go with them—as you yourself have expressed it, to see the matter through."

"And what about Tang-fan-li?"

Fong nodded again.

"Half the party can return here with His Excellency's careful provision for his old age. The rest can go on to the yamen. He must be arrested and brought here. I will give orders to the officer who will be in command, Colonel Wu-chan, and I will also give orders to the executioner. And now, Mr. Weekes, again thanking you for the very valuable assistance you have rendered us, I must beg of you to take the rest you most surely need."

COLONEL WU-CHAN was an officer who had repeatedly distinguished himself during the war. He looked exceedingly fierce, and his voice was like that of a dove. He almost cooed when he spoke—which was seldom—but his men obeyed him with a promptitude that was rather the exception than the rule in the Chinese national army.

Mounted on their ill-groomed steeds, they were a ragged, disreputable-looking lot, who might have been members of some savage Mongolian tribe. However, they were men who had been hardened like steel in the fires of war, many of whom had had their relatives massacred by bombs and their homes laid in ruins. Though their implacable faces may have remained expressionless, one could see the hard glint of relentless resolution in their dark almond-shaped eyes. Life meant nothing to any one of them, and the death of even one Japanese meant much. Nor was their commander a man who knew any more of clemency than of fear—as, late that evening, John Weekes was to learn for himself.

The gold convoy from Tali-fu was overtaken near the junction of the Ching-chang River with the Yang-tse; and there are certain episodes in a war such as this that it is neither mete or needful to describe The Chinese, whatever his virtues may be—and they are many—regards mercy, on oc-

casions, as a sign of weakness, and prisoners as a merely unnecessary encumbrance. There were no prisoners taken—and that is all that need be said about it.

The captured treasure-boxes were sent back to Yunnan-fu with about half the squadron under the colonel's second-in-command; while the rest of them, with John Weekes among them, rode on to the Yamen, keeping to the bridle-path on the right bank of the river.

IT WAS at dusk four days later that the American again came within sight of the great rambling building where he had had such a narrow escape. He had taken no part in the massacre when the convoy had been taken; but now he felt, when he saw those grim, silent walls and the curved, ornamented roofs of the yamen buildings, that he was about to come into his own. A chance would be given him to avenge the murder of Tsung-men; to pay the account he owed the man who had tried to murder him in a bed that was an ingenious death-trap—a device, elaborate, intricate, and which in this twentieth century could have been found in no country but China.

Civilized savagery. Cultured cruelty. A slow, certain and painless process, save for the mental anguish the victim must endure throughout those long-drawn moments when he struggled for life and air. Such were the methods of a man like Tang-fan-li, an aristocrat, even in his crimes. He would have scorned poison or the knife. By the use of such methods he would have lost face; he would have placed himself on the level of a common bandit. He was a Chinese, an ex-mandarin of the Red Button, one who had once been the confidant of the Jezebel of the Orient. And as such he must live up to his reputation; he had to keep his face—and that, in China, amounts to much the same thing as self-esteem, taking a pride even in his crimes.

The party rode up to the gate with John Weekes and Colonel Wu-chan at their head. Not a word had been spoken for some time, but every man had his teeth tightly clenched and an ugly glint in his eye. They would serve every living soul in the yamen as they had served the convoy escort, down in the Yang-tse Valley, far above the great city of Chungking.

They found the gate wide open. There was no janitor on guard to ask them their business. Even in the wide courtyard beyond they could see no sign of any living soul. The whole place seemed to be deserted.

"There is something wrong here," said Colonel Wu-chan. There was something about the tone of his voice that suggested that he felt he had been swindled, deprived of a privilege. "It seems there is something wrong here," he repeated. "It appears the rats have fled."

Dismounting, he threw the reins to an orderly, and snatched his loaded revolver from its holster.

"Come with me," said he to the American. "You should know your way about this place."

The two of them passed round the spirit-wall and up the steps to the dragon door to the reception-room. Here there was no fat and gorgeous major-domo to receive them; and the moment they entered, they knew that Wu-chan had been right. The rats had fled from the sinking ship. They had arrived upon the scene too late.

For the whole place had been ransacked, gutted from roof to floor. Everything of value had been taken, even the carpets and rugs. The gilded memorial tablets had been hacked from the walls; the rich lacquer screens, the ornately carved blackwood furniture, the delicate paintings upon rice paper, the valuable pieces of pottery and Chinese satsuma—all had been stolen, obviously by the servants themselves. And there was not a sound to be heard.

In the room where Weekes had dined it was the same thing: everything had been looted, and the robbers had not taken the trouble to close a single door.

Passing from one room to another on the ground floor, Weekes led the way to the back of the yamen. Though he had not been into this part of the building before, he could find his way about quite easily, since he knew that he had only to go straight ahead to come to the inner courtyard and the rooms immediately beneath that in which Tang-fan-li had meant to do him to death.

They came to a place where two passages met, one turning sharp left and the other going straight ahead. They had evidently reached the corner of the courtyard to the right of the Old Buddha's bedroom, though they were still on the floor below. And in the first room they entered Weekes saw something that interested him intensely, though his companion took it all as a matter of course.

Being a room without furniture or ornaments, it had not been looted like the rest. The walls were whitewashed; the floor was bare, the boards being thick with dust, which showed several footmarks. Against one wall was a huge piece of machinery—a thing of cog-wheels, chains and levers. At the sides of this extraordinary arrangement were two enormous weights at the end of heavy chains; and as these weights had been lowered, they were now no more than a foot or so from the floor.

Weekes knew at once what it was. He knew that they were immediately beneath the Old Buddha's bedroom, and this was the machine that worked the great dome above the bed.

It was no more than natural that he should be curious concerning the exact method by which he should have left this world for the next. Taking hold of one of the levers, he pulled it toward him—to find that nothing happened. It was evidently the lever by which the weights were lowered, and as these had already reached their lowest limit, the cogs had become disconnected, and the weights could descend no further, since the domed canopy was now resting on the woodwork of the bed.

Trying the other lever, he met with immediate success. Each inward jerk he gave turned the cog-wheels and lifted both the weights an inch or so. Little by little, he was lifting the massive, metal dome—and the very thought that that fat, wheezing servitor had been silently gloating when he had worked this primitive apparatus, thinking that he had an unsuspecting victim in the room above who was both sound asleep and drugged, sent a shiver through John Weekes that was like a sudden blast of ice.

Almost savagely he turned to his companion, whom he discovered smiling complacently. It had never seemed possible to him before that Colonel Wu-chan was capable of smiling.

"I've seen enough of this!" Weekes growled. "This infernal box-of-tricks was made to bury a man in a living tomb. It was here they murdered our mutual friend, Tsung-men."

"Let us go upstairs," said Wu-chan quite casually. "I would like to see this thing. It is interesting, and I will tell you why. The Old Buddha herself never slept there. She valued her own life too highly. But she had the thing devised to suit her own ends; and you may be sure, in her time, more than one high official thus met his death."

Weekes leading the way, they rapidly retraced their steps, back to the reception room. Thence they ascended the stairs to the balcony and corridor that Weekes knew so well. The door of the bedroom was ajar, like all the other doors. They entered—and there stood aghast.

They were surprised more than horrified, though Colonel Wu-chan may have been a little disappointed. Already, from the room below, John Weekes had lifted the dome more than half way up the heavy vertical bedposts; and there, upon the soft silken mattress, lay the still and lifeless body of the mandarin, Tang-fan-li.

And he was still smiling. He had evidently died painlessly, willingly, knowing

that his path through life was ended. His death, like all his deeds, had been essentially Chinese; and in spite of his treachery and crimes, there could be little doubt that he had neither fears nor qualms about joining the spirits of his forefathers. Recognizing that all was lost, that his so-called distinguished and exalted guest had escaped, and that his guilt was thus exposed, he had considered it beneath his dignity to fly for his life, as all his retinue had done. Hence, giving orders to one of his most trusted servants to lower the dome upon him when he had reposed his feeble limbs for his long, long sleep with the shades of the departed, he had complacently sentenced himself to the same death that he had meted out to Tsung-men and which he had cold-bloodedly reserved for John Weekes himself.

So he had gone to that death willingly, wittingly, even gladly, perhaps. He had not struggled vainly against that crushing and inevitable force. Beyond doubt, he had drugged himself first—for he would die luxuriously as he had lived—and he had then lain down to sleep, knowing that by that means alone could he escape the doom that awaited him: the sword of the public executioner in the yamen at Yunnan-fu.

And because he had fooled his foes, he smiled; and he also smiled—because he had saved his face.

Even Though His Action Be Entirely Fortuitous, Any Man Who Burns Off Another Man's Whiskers Courts Calamity

MIKE HAGGERTY'S WHISKERS

By REECE H. HAGUE

Author of "Beef Hearts for Huskies," a Very Practical Story of the North

ROY BARSTOW'S disillusioned gray eyes regarded with approval the double row of frame and log buildings which comprised Willow Landing.

As he scuffed his feet in the snow lying thick on the raised wooden sidewalks, some of the tenseness departed from his tall, sinewy frame; the muscles of his lean, rather sombre face relaxed.

He was going to like Willow Landing. It was cold all right; but a little cold was a genuine relief after the burning Mediterranean sun. And it was quiet and peaceful. That was the main thing. Quiet and peace!

He had made no mistake in coming to this far northern Canadian outpost, Barstow reflected. It looked like one place where a man could live in amity with his fellowmen. Could shut his eyes and ears to the blatant bawlings of the European war lords; to the shrieks and moans of the dying and the destitute.

Two years before, Barstow in a moment of misguided zeal, had personally involved himself in the civil war in Spain. He had emerged physically intact but mentally nauseated. The one thing he had acquired in Spain was a fixed determination to let people do their own fighting in the future and himself follow without deviation the road of peace.

Now another more general war had flared up in Europe. In every city and town in North America radios blared and newspaper headings screamed war tidings. When they weren't dwelling on the war in Europe they were full of industrial disturbances and class disputes nearer home and arguments regarding the relative merits of alternative methods of government.

Roy Barstow did not want to hear about war. He did not want to read about war and he did not want to think about war. He had heard enough ideological altercations to last him for longer than a normal lifetime.

In this isolated snow-swept settlement surely one could be a rugged individualist and live in the deepest tranquillity!

But on the very night of his arrival in Willow Landing Barstow's dream of long and undiluted peace was rudely shattered. Even though his action be entirely fortuitous, any man who burns off another man's whiskers courts calamity.

If the victim who has been thus drastically denuded of face foliage happens to be a burly trapper claiming descent from a long line of hot-blooded Irish kings, the culprit faces annihilation if he persists in the doctrine of peace at any price.

When he entered Ole the Swede's establishment and purchased a stack of chips in the poker game, Barstow casually noticed a heavily-bearded man sleeping soundly if blatantly in a corner.

When he drew two cards and filled with aces up it was only natural that his mind should be concentrated to the exclusion of all else upon his hand and how to make the most profitable use of it. The nonchalance with which he lit a cigarette and tossed the match over his shoulder was simply a ruse to beguile his fellow players into believing that the hand in question was nothing to write home about.

How was he to know that a small spark of life still lingered in the match and that it would land in the slumbering man's hirsute facial adornment and create serious havoc therewith?

Roy Barstow never did collect on that full house. Developments followed so rapidly that by the time he got around to thinking about it again the card table was a mass of kindling wood and the cards were strewn all over Ole's floor.

Had Muskrat Mike Haggerty been sleeping less profoundly, the poker players been less intent upon the game and the atmosphere of the room less redolent of smoke and alcohol, the conflagration that resulted from Barstow's match would doubtless have been sooner noted and more promptly dealt with.

As it was the blaze was well established and had not only enveloped Haggerty's face but extended to the unruly mop of red hair on his head before he awakened from his dream that a score of weasles equipped with red hot spurs were using his countenance as a race track. His roar of alarm drew the attention of the gamblers to his plight.

Doubtless the intentions of the onlooker who attempted to quench the blaze with a bottle of Ole's popular gloom chaser were of the best; but from the manner in which the flames lapped up the fluid it was proved once and for all that the genial Swede's oft reiterated claims regarding its

alcoholic content had not been mere idle boastings.

Although it was Barstow who had the presence of mind to jerk off his mackinaw, throw it over Mike's head and smother the fire, Haggerty showed no appreciation of this timely intervention.

It so happened that every man in the room had a perverted sense of humor. When the mackinaw was withdrawn and Mike's blackened features surrounded by charred stubble emerged, a howl of laughter, in which Barstow could not refrain from joining, assailed the now whiskerless Irishman's throbbing ear-drums.

Muskrat Mike had been proud of his whiskers. He had been a long time growing them and bringing them to a state of perfection. As an exploratory hand groped around his stinging face and made the astounding discovery that a ten-year crop of whiskers had been harvested without his assistance and most certainly against his desire in a few brief seconds, his blue eyes widened in astonishment. The hilarity of the assemblage aroused first indignation; this as a realization of the enormity of the indignity to which he had been subjected slowly dawned, developed into intense anger. Bellicosely he shook his fists at all and sundry and hoarsely demanded, "Who burnt me whiskers? Show me the man what done it and I'll tear out his gizzard!"

Someone was sufficiently ill-advised as to indicate with a shaking finger the new arrival in Willow Landing, who was vainly endeavoring to contort his mirth-distorted features into a semblance of penitence and to frame a suitable expression of apology.

Haggerty waited for no explanation or declaration of remorse; but hurled himself at the stranger.

Still weak from laughter, Roy unsuccessfully attempted to side-step Muskrat Mike's rush, at the same time instinctively throwing up his arms in a gesture of defense

A wild swing from the infuriated Irishman penetrated Barstow's guard. A weather-beaten fist with two hundred pounds of bone and muscle behind it came to rest with a resounding thwack on Roy's ear and the latter promptly sat down on the flimsy card table, which was not designed with the solidity of a chair.

The erstwhile proponent of peace promptly forgot his desire to live in amity with all mankind, removed himself from the debris and promptly crashed home a blow in retaliation which landed full upon the mouth from which the backwoodsman was roaring threats and imprecations.

Muskrat Mike hastily spat out two teeth which his adversary's blow had jarred loose from their sockets and returned to the onslaught.

The fight that ensued has become a part of Willow Landing history. Haggerty's twenty-odd pounds advantage in weight was offset by Barstow's greater agility. What both men lacked in science they more than atoned for by their pugnacity and willingness to inflict and suffer punishment.

It was not until sheer exhaustion prevented either man from rising from the floor to which they had limply collapsed after a final interchange of blows which had degenerated into mere love-taps, that the battle ended.

ROY, with an effort, succeeded in struggling to a sitting position, his back propped up against a convenient wall.

From beneath swollen lids he surveyed the wreckage which had been Ole's furniture. A smile struggled into being on his lacerated face as he muttered thickly. "Looks like we'll have a hefty bill to pay for damages, Haggerty! But I guess it was worth it!"

An answering grin formed shape on the backwoodsman's equally mangled countenance. "Ath foighth go it wathn't tho bad," he acknowledged; enunciation some-

what hampered on account of the gap created by the missing incisors.

It is probable that had it not been for one of these minor incidents that have a habit of influencing lives and changing the current of destiny, a staunch friendship based on mutual recognition of strength and courage would have then and there sprung up between the Irish-Canadian and the former champion of representative Spanish government.

The former was, in fact, scrambling to his feet with the intention of offering the hand of fellowship to his recent antagonist when an indiscreet bystander remarked, "Damned if Mike ain't even more ornery lookin' than usual without his whiskers. He looks like a Son of David what'd got into hell by mistake and just dragged hisself clear of a brimstone pit."

Haggerty's regal Irish blood boiled anew at the insult; but it was against the man responsible for his predicament rather than the maker of the remark that his ire was directed.

With difficulty, Ole and the other men assembled, forcibly restrained Muskrat Mike from attempting to begin the battle all over again.

THE following morning Haggerty left for his backwoods cabin without having afforded Barstow an opportunity of composing and expressing an intimation of regret for his carelessness in bringing about Mike's denudation.

With the passage of time Haggerty's whiskers again attained much of their former splendor and with their flourishing his indignation against Barstow perceptibly diminished. Ultimately it would, no doubt, have entirely evaporated had it not been for Roy's unpremeditated invasion of his trap line.

When Barstow selected a trapping ground he was aware that Haggerty's camp was a few miles to the west of his but he was not familiar with the fact that for almost a decade Mike had been trapping in the territory lying immediately to the north of his own newly-built cabin.

Haggerty, setting out one day to lay his traps in the area which he had come to look upon as his own, saw to his amazement another trapper removing a glossy-skinned marten from a snare.

"Phwat the hell are you doin' on moi thrap line?" the Irishman shouted as he menacingly approached the trespasser.

Barstow looked up and Mike's indignation was not lessened when he recognized the well-remembered countenance and recalled the occasion of their first meeting.

This new affront was too much! Haggerty raised his rifle to his shoulder. Barstow leaped to cover behind a convenient spruce tree. A second later a bullet chipped the bark near his head.

Forgetting caution in his anger, Roy emerged from his shelter and advanced toward Haggerty. Muskrat Mike did not attempt to fire again. Leaning his rifle carefully against a tree, his newly grown beard bristling, he awaited the attack.

Suddenly Barstow halted when still several yards from Haggerty; regarded him momentarily with set face, then wordlessly wheeled and strode off into the woods.

In amazement Mike watched him disappear; deliberated as to whether or not to follow and wreak vengeance; eventually shook his head in puzzlement and trudged off toward his shack.

Roy, instead of returning direct to his own cabin, made his way to the camp of Sam Whalin, a trapper living four miles to the east of him, and to him described his encounter with Haggerty.

Whalin industriously chewed snuff while listening to the newcomer's story

and at its close pronounced judicially, "You're in the wrong, Barstow. Mike's been trappin' that ground for years, and a man takes one hell of a chance when he jumps another trapper's line in this kentry. Not that he oughta shot at you; but jist the same you was trespassin'."

"How was I to know the old hellion figgered he owned the whole country?" Roy demanded. "And even if I was trespassing on his line he had no license to try and plug me—I'd have tackled him on the spot, but the woods in winter is no place to stage a scrap like the one we'd have put up. We'd have probably crippled each other so bad we'd be lying out in the snow right now freezin' to death. You come over to his place with me, though, and I'll finish the fight we started in Willow Landing and finish it right!"

"Don't be a blasted fool!" Whalin adjured. "I know you're not skeered of Mike. But he's in the right, I tell you. I'll go over to his shack alone and tell him you didn't jump his ground knowin'ly."

Roy opened his mouth to protest; then decided to let Whalin, who was an old-timer in the country, settle the matter in his own way.

"That's okay with me," he agreed. "I see what you mean. A man's got to stand by the laws of the country. It'd be a hell of a note, all right, if every greenhorn who came in here started trapping all over the old-timers' ground. You can tell Haggerty I didn't know I was on his line and I'll leave that neck of the woods to him in the future. But tell him, too, that I've got no liking for being potted at like a mangy jack-rabbit and if he tries that stunt again I'm no slouch with a rifle myself."

Mike, whom Whalin discovered busily skinning muskrats, declined to accept Whalin's assurance that Roy's invasion of his ground had been due to ignorance.

"If he didn't know it was moi counthry he oughta," Haggerty insisted stubbornly, as he stretched a pelt on a frame. "I've no loikin' for shootin' a man who ain't heeled. Between you and me, Dan, Oi shot to scare the feller, not to hit him! Oi'm no cold-blooded murtherer. But you tell thot Barstow the next time I find him on me line it'll be a wake the boys around here'll be attindin!"

Roy relaid his trap line so that it would not infringe on Muskrat Mike's territory.

During the months that followed he saw no sign of Haggerty and almost forgot the Irishman's existence in the arduous labor of his new occupation.

THE long winter ended. The sun, which on its occasional brief appearances in the heavens had served merely as an ornament, commenced to diffuse welcome warmth; ice in the waterways honeycombed, cracked and commenced to disappear; snow gradually vanished from all but the most sheltered sections of the woods and tender, green shoots appeared on the willows lining the creek near Barstow's cabin.

Like most trappers in the North, Roy turned prospector when rock formation again became visible. Until well after the last ice vanished from rivers and lakes he searched for mineral outcroppings in the vicinity of his cabin. When summer was well advanced he launched his canoe and set out for Willow Landing to sell his furs and replenish his supplies.

It was at Amisk Creek portage, halfway to Willow Landing, that Barstow and Haggerty's trails converged on their respective routes to the settlement.

Never before in the countless years that Indians and the comparatively few years that occasional white men had camped on the portage had Amisk Creek been as low as it was that summer.

As Roy leisurely paddled his canoe toward the customary landing place, shelving rock normally hidden by two or three feet of muddy water was plainly visible.

Roy stepped out of the canoe and stooped to haul up his craft.

He did not immediately straighten up

but crouched as though hypnotized gazing at a vein of milky quartz; then dropped to his knees in excited haste as he realized the full significance of the yellow mineral with which the quartz was so liberally splashed.

With his prospector's pick Barstow feverishly scraped the over-burden from the point where the rocks ran into the shore and saw with mounting excitement that the continuation of the vein, when shattered, still showed free gold.

The journey to Willow Landing was forgotten as, almost dazed by his good fortune, he continued to follow along the line of strike; hacking away underbrush, stripping rocks of moss; chipping off their weathered surfaces in order to follow the course of the lode.

Satisfied that far from being a mere stringer it was a strong, wide vein which he had discovered, Roy sank down on his haunches, wiped away the perspiration which frenzied labor and excitement had caused to pour from his face, rolled a cigarette and feasted his eyes on the rich samples which he had broken from the ore-body.

Greenhorn luck! He'd heard about it; but this was too good to be true!

Again he picked up the samples. No there wasn't a scrap of doubt about it! It was gold sure enough. Yellow, gleaming gold that was worth more money now than ever before in history. Gold that men and countries struggled and fought for and then carefully buried away again.

He grinned sardonically. Well it was not his worry what happened to it ultimately. It was what its initial possession would mean to him personally that mattered. Somewhere far away from wars and talk of wars there must be a spot not quite as hot as the Mediterranean or as cold as the north of Canada where a man could buy himself a place and plant a garden; have a home, a real home. It was a long while since he'd known what a real home could be. There was that girl in New Haven, too! The tall, straight girl with the large, steady brown eyes whom he'd taken out once or twice and then run away from because he knew he was just a rolling stone without a future; sick of a world in which life was just a struggle for a bare existence for one, let alone two and possibly more than two. But now life looked different. The future looked different. How long would it take to get from Willow Landing to New Haven?

But these were just foolish dreams. There were things to be attended to immediately. A claim to be staked and recorded; mining companies to be contacted so that their engineers could examine the vein and make him an offer for it.

Barstow bestirred himself into action again and near the spot where the vein had first been revealed erected and inscribed a mineral claim discovery post. He then commenced to clear a trail along the strike of the vein preparatory to putting up the number one and two claim posts prescribed by the mining law.

IT WAS while he was engaged in this task, hidden from the creek by the bush, that Muskrat Mike Haggerty, also bound for Willow Landing, reached the portage.

Haggerty noted the other canoe pulled up on the shore. Then as he scrambled out on the same rock which had served Barstow as a landing place the canoe was promptly forgotten.

For Haggerty's astounded eyes also came to rest on the gold-studded quartz vein and from his lips came a wild whoop of jubilation.

Mouth open and eyes glittering, Mike stared entranced at the gold, while through his mind coursed dreams of the castles he would build in the home of his ancestors; the riches he would scatter among less fortunate Haggertys now that fortune had smiled upon him. Again a Haggerty would be a king in the Emerald Isle!

Slowly Muskrat Mike's vision faded.

Through his consciousness penetrated the sound of an axe being wielded somewhere back in the woods. Recollection of the other canoe and the fact that the extension of the vein had been cleared by human hands assailed him. As he looked around he saw the newly erected discovery post and approaching it read the name thereon inscribed.

BY SETTING fire to his whiskers, Roy humiliated Haggerty; by intruding on his trap line he had vastly annoyed him and now, by forestalling him in staking what promised to be one of the richest gold mines in the north, he had aroused his active hatred.

Emerging from the woods, Roy saw Muskrat Mike shaking his fist at the discovery post while he cursed long and fluently the luck which had let him down by enabling another man to locate the high grade lead first and added a few special imprecations against the individual responsible for his discomfiture.

"Haggerty!" Barstow called and Muskrat Mike looking around saw his enemy standing a few yards away.

The Irishman flung off his mackinaw, spat on his hands and commenced pawing the ground like an angry bull preparing for combat.

Roy, ignoring the hostile demonstration, said curtly. "Don't be a blasted fool, Haggerty! I located the lead and it's no use bellyaching. Chances are the vein extends beyond the limits of my claim and if you want to stake a claim tied on to mine you're welcome."

He gazed at Haggerty with indifference, but without active dislike. "Lord knows I wouldn't have picked you as a partner; but as you've happened along it looks as though you're elected. Neither of us have got the dough to prove up on this lode and the more ground we have the better dicker we can make with a company that can afford to develop the holdings. You'd best go ahead and tie a claim on to mine. Then we'll go into Willow Landing, record the claims and talk business."

Muskrat Mike permitted Barstow to have his say without interrupting; but there was an unholy glitter in his eyes as he responded caustically. "Shure and O'il shtake! But as for bein' a pardner wid ye, I'd as lief tie up wid ould Nick himself. Wance Oi get me shtakes in Oi'll talk to ye; and it won't be business, ye thrap line jumpin' descindant of Sassenach cattle thieves!"

Roy merely shrugged his shoulders and returned to work on his claim line. Couldn't blame the Irishman for feeling disgruntled at missing out on the discovery claim by such a narrow margin.

AFTER a brief interval he heard Haggerty crashing through the bush and the sound of his axe biting its way through crisp green timber as the Irishman staked an extension claim.

By the time Roy had staked his claim to his satisfaction the afternoon was well advanced.

Not worth while starting the first stage of the two-day journey to Willow Landing, he reflected. Might as well camp on the portage and head for the settlement the following morning.

As he was kneeling by the fire which he had lighted, preparing a meal of bacon and beans, Roy heard Mike approaching; called over his shoulder, "Bring along your plate, Haggerty, I've cooked enough for the both of us."

"Now me bhoy git up and let me look at ye!" Muskrat Mike ignored the invitation. His tone was belligerent.

"Go to hell!" Roy responded shortly. "Look here, Haggerty, if you think I'm going to fight over nothing at all, just after I've got my first decent break for years, you're badly mistaken."

"You won't fight, eh?"

With the words Muskrat Mike jerked the other man to his feet, swung him around and sent a hairy fist crashing into

his face. The frying pan Barstow had been holding fell with a clank to the ground: its contents scattered far and wide.

Roy reeled back: was only saved from falling by a jackpine against which he struck with a thud.

"Well, you asked for it and now you're going to get it and get it right," he muttered ominously as he steadied himself preparatory to springing to the attack.

For minutes the silence of the woods was broken only by labored breathing and the dull impact of fists meeting flesh.

Haggerty fought with wild abandon. The actual cause of conflict almost forgotten in the wild joy of battle. Barstow fought with the cold anger of a man who had been forced against his will into a conflict that he deemed absurd and unjustified but with grim determination to get a nasty job over with as rapidly as possible and try to pound some sense into this wrong-headed Irishman.

An inquisitive chipmunk, attracted by the alien sounds, took up a position of vantage in an adjacent spruce tree and added an accompaniment of excited chattering to the sound of battle.

So engrossed were the two heavily breathing, rapidly tiring combatants in their conflict that the jabbering of the chipmunk passed unheard and the approach up Amisk Creek of a large freighter canoe manned by two white men and two half breeds passed unnoted.

The first intimation Barstow and Haggerty had that other humans were in the vicinity was when a round of applause greeted a short arm jab which Roy landed on Mike's solar plexus, sending the Irishman staggering backwards, his face twisted in agony.

"Don't stop on our account, boys!" one of the white men in the canoe shouted, as the combatants by mutual consent let their weary arms drop to their sides. "We're enjoyin' it as much as you are. Never figgered on gettin' a ringside seat at a real good stoushin' fest all this way from the Landing."

"It's Jake Mason and his gang of thievin' blagyards, bad cess to 'em!" Mike gasped softly, more to himself than to his antagonist.

Barstow recognized the name. The sinister reputation of Jake Mason and his partner Mat Bly was known to everyone in the North.

Ostensibly free traders, their principal source of revenue was exchanging liquor to Indian trappers for fur. They were also reputed to be trap robbers and had been involved in more than one unsavory claim jumping episode.

MASON'S eyes widened as he too saw the quartz lead when he stepped on the portage.

The trader whistled softly. "Cast your eyes on the jewelry ore, Mat!" he said, his voice vibrating with excitement. "No wonder Barstow and Haggerty were fighting. I'd put up a bit of a scrap myself for a showin' as rich as this."

As he spoke, Mason hitched a holster containing a six-shooter which was hanging at his belt into a more convenient position.

Roy glanced toward his canoe in which his rifle was lying.

Mason intercepted the look and with his

right hand resting lightly on the butt of his revolver said meaningly to his partner: "Best collect the rifles out of them canoes, Mat, Barstow and Haggerty might be hurtin' one another real bad if we leave their firearms lyin' around."

As Bly silently obeyed the command, Roy and Mike cursed softly in unison and the former said in a bitter aside, "A while back you were talking of taking old Nick into partnership, Haggerty. Looks like he's sent along a substitute. I don't know what you're figgering on doing; but I'm going to hit for Willow Landing and record my claim as soon as I can shake this gang."

Mason's keen ears overheard the last part of Roy's declaration. "No need to hurry, Barstow," he drawled. "Lucky thing me and Mat come along just when we did. Now we'll be able to take in more territory and work out some sort of partnership between the bunch of us."

"Ye can shtake if ye want to!" Haggerty spoke through battered, swollen lips. "The country's open for miles. But divil an intherest do ye get in my houldings, Mason."

THE trader eyed the burly Irishman narrowly. "We'll see about that!" he said with dangerous quiet. "Until you've recorded these claims you're goin' to have a real job on your hands provin' who was the original locater."

"Is that so?" Mike advanced threateningly upon the traders.

As Mason threw up his gun, Roy went into action. His shout of "You bloody murderer!" chimed with the roar of the six-shooter.

Before the trader could swing the revolver from covering Haggerty, who had crumpled to the ground following the report, Barstow was upon him, seizing him with his sinewy arms and pinning the gun to Mason's side.

"Mat," the trader shouted as he struggled vainly to extricate himself from Barstow's hold.

The summons was unnecessary. Bly had already noiselessly approached behind Roy, the latter's rifle in his hand. Using the weapon as a club, Bly brought it down with crushing force on Barstow's skull.

His grip on Mason suddenly relaxing, Roy collapsed into an inert heap.

The trader surveyed the two men lying motionless on the ground and inquired of his partner, "Now what the hell are we goin' to do with these birds, Mat? I only creased Haggerty's thick skull when I fired and he'll be comin' around soon."

He lighted a cigarette and regarded the recumbent forms speculatively before resuming. "The country's got too damn civilized to just bump 'em off and plant 'em in the muskeg. If we did take a chance on doin' it, Amos and Johnny there"—indicating the two half breeds who had been impassive witnesses of the scene—"'d be liable to talk when they got a bit of hootch under their belts."

"You and the breeds can stay here and look after 'em while I hotfoot it in to the Landing and record the ground," Bly suggested.

"Oh, yeah!" replied his partner eyeing Bly coldly. "And then I might have a bit of trouble provin' I was your partner in the holdin', Mat. No, we got to think up somethin' better'n that."

"We can just leave 'em here and take their canoes along with us a ways," the shifty-eyed Bly proposed. "They'll have one hell of a time makin' their way to Willow Landing through the bush. If they do kick up a stink after we've got the claims recorded, it'll be our word ag'in theirs and the breeds'll back up what we say if we pay 'em good."

"I guess that's as good a plan as any," Mason approved. "We'll put our own names on their claim posts in case anyone else happens along before we start back for the Landing. They'll probably alter 'em again as soon as we're out of the way, but that can't be helped. We'll stick to the law, eh, Mat?" and Mason favored his partner with a twisted grin.

Bly and the half-breed Amos having been dispatched to change the inscriptions on the claim posts and the other breed, Johnny, having been instructed to prepare

a meal over Barstow's fire, Mason turned his attention to the men whose ground he was jumping.

Barstow was still unconscious, but Haggerty, from whose head a stream of blood was flowing, was sitting up gazing bemusedly about him.

"Come over here and sit down alongside your sparring partner," Mason instructed the Irishman. "I'd rather have you grouped than runnin' around single."

Mike rose groggily to his feet and staggered toward the trader. As he drew near, the trapper shook his head and blood from his open scalp wound spattered Mason's face.

"Be careful, damn you!" the trader exploded and roughly shoved the tottering Haggerty, sending him sprawling over the prostrate Barstow.

ROY stirred and opened his eyes. "What war've I been in now?" he muttered thickly. Then his brain cleared as he glanced from Haggerty to Mason and he relapsed into silence.

"So ye didn't kill the thievin' spalpeen afther all!" Mike remarked regretfully to Mason as he drew himself up on his elbows. "Him it was who robbed me of this dishcovery claim and if ye hadn't arrived just whin ye did, Mason, Oi'd of won it back offa him."

Haggerty appeared to ponder deeply before continuing. "Look here, Mason," he at length said ruminatively. "Ye can niver git away wid this claim jumpin' if me and Barstow tell our shtory. Ye'll be tied up wid litigation for years."

He noted with satisfaction that Mason was listening intently and asked in a placatory tone. "Will ye and Bly cut three ways if I come in wid ye? Thin if Barstow tries to put a spoke in our wheel he'll be laughed out of the North."

Mason eyed the Irishman thoughtfully and Roy glared at him with revulsion.

It certainly would simplify matters if Haggerty was on his side, the trader mused. He and Bly could see that Mike never actually got an interest in the claims and if he stirred up trouble later he could be dealt with. Eventually he, Mason, could doubtless devise some scheme of ousting Bly from his interest also and thus secure the entire property.

"You double-crossing Irish swine!" Roy's venomous reference to Haggerty broke into Mason's thoughts. But the trader had already decided to express acceptance of Mike's offer.

"Your proposition looks good to me," he assured Haggerty smoothly. "I'll put it up to Mat when he gets back. If the three of us stick together it won't matter a damn what Barstow here says."

"He's only a thrap line jumpin' greenhorn, anyways," Mike said disparagingly. "Us ould-toimers hev got to shtick togither, Mason. You got me sorta roiled a while back; but if Oi've got to hev pardners in this moine Oi'd rather hev you and Bly than Barstow. He's been gettin' under foot and causin' throuble ever since he came into this counthry."

Darkness was approaching when, a few minutes later, Bly and Amos returned from changing the names on the claim posts.

When Mason advanced Haggerty's proposition, Bly appeared to accept it with alacrity. However, drawing his partner aside he inquired anxiously, "You ain't seriously figgerin' on lettin' this wild Irishman in for a cut are you, Jake?"

"Of course not!" Mason assured him irritably. "I'm just lookin' for the easiest way out of this business."

"I guess Haggerty's on the square all right?" Bly's tone conveyed some misgiving.

"You bet he is!" Mason assured his partner emphatically. "Any man who hates another as bad as Haggerty does Barstow ain't slippin' up on any chance of doin' him dirt. Haggerty can see the writin' on the wall. He knows the only way he's got a chance of holdin' on to an in-

terest in this mine is by throwin' in with us and he's tickled to death at the idea of gyppin' Barstow. He won't know he's being left out in the cold until after we've got the claims recorded and then it won't do him no good to holler."

"Are ye headin' for the landing tonight?" Bly inquired.

Mason shook his head. "I'd figgered on pulling out after supper. But now that Haggerty's changed his tune there's no rush. We'll leave in the morning. Before we go we'll stick a rock through the bottom of Barstow's canoe and leave him here. We'll bring some boys back to start work openin' up the vein before the snow flies, and if Barstow's still hangin' around we'll just chuck him off the ground."

Bly nodded approvingly. "You've got a good head on you, Jake," he acknowledged. "I'm goin' to get some hootch out of the canoe and we'll have a drink before we eat that mess Johnny is cookin' up."

"Be sure and get our own liquor and not the rotgut we use for trading," Mason instructed.

HAGGERTY, when a bottle of liquor was produced, required no second invitation to take a drink; but Barstow gruffly instructed Bly to go to the devil when the latter tendered him the bottle.

Roy's head was throbbing outrageously; his body was aching from the blows which Haggerty had landed during their fight. The violent anger which he felt against Muskrat Mike even overshadowed his antagonism toward Mason and his partner. He had no intention of lying down under the bare-faced robbery of his claim. Yet try as he would he could think of no feasible way out of his predicament; particularly now that Haggerty had thrown in his lot with the claim jumpers.

Before they settled down around the fire to eat the meal which the half-breed had prepared, Mason gathered up his own and Bly's rifles in addition to the weapons belonging to Barstow and Haggerty, unloaded them all and placed them beneath the sleeping bag he had removed from his canoe.

"I'm goin' to sit right on these guns until I turn in for the night and then I'll lie on 'em," he announced. "I know you and Haggerty won't mind, Mat. It's best to have 'em all together in case Barstow gets enterprisin' and tries to get hold of one of 'em. I don't want to drill him if I can help it, but by God I'll do it if he makes a false move and we can frame up some story about what happened to him between us." As he spoke the trader significantly patted the revolver resting on his hip.

Their meal completed, Mason, Bly and Haggerty lounged near the fire, passing the bottle to and fro and discussing what they would do with the millions they assured one another their mine would bring them.

The two half-breeds sat silently in the shadow for a time; then curled up between their blankets and composed themselves for sleep.

Roy lay back conjuring his brain in an effort to devise some scheme for getting away from his captors and making his way to Willow Landing to record his claim. Like the others he fully realized that the first man in the settlement would have the best chance of convincing the authorities as to his right to the disputed ground.

The bottle had been emptied and a second broached before Bly evinced signs of drowsiness and Haggerty commenced to display indications of maudlin drunkenness.

"I'm goin' to turn in," Bly announced thickly as he stifled a yawn and tried vainly to suppress a hiccup.

"Good idea," agreed Mason, upon whom the fiery liquor seemed to have had little effect. "Think I'll hit the hay myself. Take Barstow over and put him between Amos and Johnny, Mat. . . . If you try to make a getaway, Barstow, I've told the breeds to jump you. I'm a light

sleeper myself and won't think twice about plugging you if Amos and Johnny can't handle you."

Roy realized that no good object would be served by opposing Mason's orders and inwardly seething complied with his instructions to lie down between the two half-breeds.

"What about anither bothle?" demanded Haggerty drunkenly as Mason and Bly stretched themselves out on their bedding.

"This one's still got a coupla good shots in it; help yourself," and Mason extended the second bottle.

Haggerty grasped it, staggered away a few yards and placed it to his lips. There was a prolonged gurgling; the Irishman swayed to and fro; then sagged to the ground.

"Our Irish partner'll sleep sound tonight, anyways, Mat," Mason predicted. But Bly's only response was a guttural snore.

Roy, from his position between Amos and Johnny, toyed with the idea of making a dash for freedom; but every time he stirred one or the other of the half-breeds showed signs of wakefulness.

The slowly dying fire near which the other white men were sleeping was between Roy and the canoes. Even if he succeeded in overpowering his guards, he knew that the noise of the scuffle would awaken the claim jumpers and his chances of getting to the river bank alive would be remote.

Nevertheless he was determined to make an attempt at a getaway before morning. He couldn't give up this gold and all it meant without a struggle. Lying back he tried to relax in preparation for the ordeal ahead.

The glow from the fire finally faded; the night was black and silent.

Roy, struggling against an almost overwhelming desire to sleep, was jolted back into sudden wakefulness by a dull, sickening thud, followed almost immediately by a splintering crash and a smothered groan.

Every sense alert, Barstow sprang to his feet. Like a flash the half-breeds were upon him, kicking and clawing like cornered wild cats.

ROY grasped a writhing form; crushed it in his arms until he heard cracking ribs and it grew inert; then dashed it to the ground. Wheeling around he confronted the second half-breed, whose talonlike fingers had been clawing at his throat from the rear.

A mighty uppercut sent his antagonist hurtling on top of his companion and Roy was about to make a wild dash for his canoe, chancing a shot in the dark, when the unmistakable voice of Haggerty shouted, "Jist a minute and Oi'll help ye wid them Injuns, Barstow, me bhoy. Oi'm afther collectin' our guns and the little pay shooter Mason dropped whin Oi clouted him wid me bothle."

Roy's amazement was followed by sudden understanding. Haggerty hadn't thrown in with the claim jumpers after all! He had been feigning drunkenness and awaiting his opportunity to put them out of commission before coming to his, Barstow's assistance.

"You don't need to worry about the breeds!" he assured Muskrat Mike in sudden jubilation. "They're sleeping right peaceful."

"That's foine!" came the Irishman's voice from the darkness. "Oi've got all the guns. Can you bring one of thim Injuns down to the canoe wid ye? We'll take him wid us as a passenger and make him tell the bhoys in the Landing the thrue story of the fight for the Barstow-Haggerty gould moine. We'll travel in my canoe and tow yours along. The Mason craft we'll set adrift afther Oi've got a bothle out of it to make up for the liquor I gargled and shpat out earlier in the noight."

A few minutes later Roy, seated in the

bow of the canoe proceeding slowly but surely through the night in the direction of Willow Landing, flung an apology over his shoulder at his former adversary.

"I sure thought you were a mangy cur when you started to play up to Mason, Mike," he admitted.

"I might have known you weren't that sort of a skunk."

Haggerty laughed uproariously. "The theatyre missed a grand acthor when Michael Shamus Haggerty turned thrapper," he admitted with a distressing lack of modesty. "Whin ye jumped Mason while he was afther shootin' me Oi knew ye weren't sich a bad lad afther all. Thot scratch Oi got on me topknot didn't even give me a headache; but Oi decided to lie low for a while and figger out me nixt move."

There was silence save for the slap of the paddles and Muskrat Mike's gurgling laughter. Then the Irish voice resumed with self-congratulatory cadence. "Divil of a chance would we have had of getting away if Oi hadn't done me little bit of play actin'. Afther them claim jumpin' blagyards thought Oi was slapin' off a skinful Oi jist waited me opportunity and when everything was quiet Oi crept up and beaned them wid me thrusty bothle. Bly's head was thot hard it broke the bothle; but it had served its purpose and Oi didn't nade it ony more ony way. It's sick and sorry men Mason and Bly will be whin they wake up wid swollen heads and foind they've losht their mine and the cargo of booze as well."

"I'd always heard the Irish were great dissemblers," Roy's head was throbbing unmercifully; but his heart was singing a paeon of joy.

"Dishemblers, is it?" Mike repeated reflectively. "Now Oi'm damned if Oi know if thot's a fighting word or not, Barstow; but Oi'll let it pass for this toime."

Had Roy been facing Muskrat Mike and the darkness been less intense he would have seen the delighted twinkle in the Irishman's eyes.

From the stern of the canoe came the clink of glass on teeth; the sound of liquor being joyfully inhaled and an ecstatic sigh.

With a foot clad in a heavy shoe-pack, Haggerty prodded a form crouched disconsolately in the body of the canoe nursing a jaw which the owner felt sure was broken.

"Grab this bothle, ye misguided haythen," commanded Mike when Amos the half-breed stirred. "And pass it to Misther Barstow so as he can drink to a speedy meetin' wid all our inemies."

There was silence for a few seconds, broken by Haggerty saying solemnly, "As wan pardner to anither, Barstow, I'd ask ye in all humility to give me notice the next toime ye feel loike burnin' off me whiskers and Oi'll visit a barber jist to save ye the trouble."

PART II

SOMETHING ABOUT THE STORY AND WHAT HAS HAPPENED BEFORE

THE *Malaspina*, a ship carrying a gold rush time passenger list north to the Klondike is wrecked off the treacherous coast. The passengers had comprised all sorts and conditions of men stampeding north for gold. Among them, was young Tom Carter, a hard rock man, but who, as some of the old timers on the ship said, was young enough to live it down. After the catastrophe of the wreck, Carter finds himself in a battered lifeboat, together with Thornton, a young Englishman, Marshall, a notorious gambler, a treacherous half-breed, and Judy Steele—daughter of a mining man and a true northerner if there

Sourdoughs Are All Hard Boiled—or They'd Never Be Sourdoughs!

HARD ROCK MAN

By

JAMES B. HENDRYX

ever was one. Judy had been coming home from school in the States, and it is she who shows the others how to survive in the wilderness when they finally manage to make their way to a bleak northern island. Subsistence in the bush is difficult, but hopes for an escape loomed when they discover means to patch their battered craft. They are planning to leave the island only to discover that Lapointe, the halfbreed, has stolen the boat and disappeared, leaving them once more marooned on an inhospitable coast.

The scene of the story then shifts back once more to the wreck of the *Malaspina*. On board her were two of Hendryx's well-known old-timers—Bettles and Moosehide Charlie. Before the ship struck they recognized Judy Steele.

CHAPTER VIII

BILL STEELE POSTS A REWARD

AT THE moment the *Malaspina* struck the rock, Bettles and Moosehide Charlie were standing at the bar. As the ship canted Bettles, with admirable forethought, seized the bottle that had stood before them as it was about to crash to the floor, corked it with his thumb, and with Moosehide at his heels, reached the door just as the milling mob of chechakos, together with the bartenders, and the entire contents of the back bar, slid down the sloping floor to bring up in a cursing, fighting tangle against the port bulkhead.

As the two sourdoughs reached the deck the long-drawn blast of the fog horn was

silenced and the lights went out. Shouts and screams penetrated the opaque smother of fog. Scrambling up the slippery deck, both managed to grasp the starboard rail as the list to port became more pronounced. Hooking an elbow about the rail, Bettles corked his bottle with his handkerchief and pocketed it.

"Yell fer Judy, Mooschide!" he panted. "You kin make her hear!"

Mooschide filled his lungs and his mighty voice went bellowing into the fog: "Judy! Judy Steele! It's Mooschide!"

There was no answer, but from every hand came a medley of loud-bawled orders, mingled with senseless shouts and screams and curses. They were well aft, and as the ship continued to list more sharply, were forced to cling to the rail with both hands. They could see nearer objects now, as their eyes became accustomed to the gloom. A peculiar grating and rasping sound attracted their attention. It ceased abruptly in a crash, followed by several loud splashes.

"It's that pile of new lifeboats sliding down the deck," cried Mooschide. "Mebbe we'd better slide down there!"

"Not me," Bettles exclaimed. "All them damn chechakos out of the smokin' room, an' the main saloon'll be tryin' to crowd into them boats—an' there won't be room fer the half of 'em. I'd ruther find me a plank."

"But there ain't no planks," retorted the practical Mooschide. "How the hell you goin' to find a plank, when there ain't none?"

"Cripes—here's a lifeboat hangin' right over our heads, if we could git the damn thing loose. How do you let them lifeboats down, Mooschide?"

"Why—damn if I know. You lower 'em, I guess. Them ropes an' pulleys has prob'ly got somethin' to do with it."

"To hell with the pulleys! If we could git up there we could cut them ropes an' let her drop."

"We might shin up these iron poles that's curved over the top of her," Mooschide suggested. "But if we cut her loose she'd drop down on the deck. Looks like they'd have them lifeboats hangin' out over the water, instead of in."

"They swing 'em out when they need 'em, you damn fool!"

"Well, by God, we need this one—an' it ain't swung out. There ain't no time when I needed a boat worst."

"Let's try to git in her," Bettles advised, "an' cut her loose. S'pose she does hit the deck? The way it's slanted she won't stay there—she'll go scootin' down into the water like a toboggan."

"All right, we'll try it. But if we wait a while 'fore we cut her loose, the way this side's raisin', we kin drop her straight down into the water, without even hittin' the deck."

"Yeah—an' have the whole damn ship upside down on top of us 'fore we could git away. This ain't no time fer waitin'—come on, hurry up! Cripes, these wet poles is slippery! I wisht my ancestors hadn't sprung so damn fer from monkeys."

AFTER much struggling and slipping the two reached the boat and slashed their way into her through the canvas cover. "Git back there in the stern, Mooschide," Bettles ordered, "an' be ready to cut them ropes when I holler. I shore wisht Judy was with us. It's goin' to be hell tellin' Bill about it in Skagway."

"We ain't in Skagway, yet—nor nowheres near it," foreboded Mooschide.

"Let 'er go!" Bettles cried, slashing at the ropes.

The next instant the bow dropped downward as Bettles clung with both arms to the forward seat, and there the boat hung, her bow just touching the slippery deck, while in the stern Mooschide dangled high above him as he clung desperately to the pulley gear.

"Cut her loose, you damn fool!" Bettles yelled. "What the hell you waitin' fer?"

"I wasn't ready, you hollered too quick,"

Moosehide panted. "Wait till I git holt of somethin'. If I cut her now, I'll be left up here hangin' onto this pulley."

"Well, for cripes sake hurry! I'm standin' on my head—an' my licker's leakin'."

A few moments later Moosehide succeeded in slashing the rope and the boat shot down the deck and splashed into the water, bow first, rocked violently, spun around, and settled on an even keel.

"Grab an oar," Bettles ordered. "We want to git to hell out of here! I've heard tell how when a ship sinks she sucks everything down with her."

"Hold on," cried Moosehide. "Here's a guy's head." He reached over the side. "Come on, fella—couple more strokes an' you'll make it!" The next moment he pulled a man into the boat.

"Pull out a ways, an' we'll hunt fer more of 'em," Bettles advised, shipping an oar as he tendered the bottle to the man who lay in the bottom, near exhaustion. "I know'd that licker'd come in handy."

MOOSEHIDE also shipped an oar. "Looks like, if you know'd so damn much," he grumbled, "you'd of waited till I was ready 'fore you cut them ropes. Cripes—you might of left me hangin' there!"

"Oh, I figgered you'd come along," Bettles replied. "An' about cuttin' them ropes—I used my head. Hell—if I'd of waited till you got ready an' we'd both cut 'em to onct, the damn boat would of hit broadside to the water, an' we'd of rolled down the deck instead of slidin' down. We'd of got spilt out, an' the chances is the boat would of hit the water, bottom side up. The way it is, we jest slid in bow first—an' here we be."

"Damn if we ain't! But the next time I git shipwrecked, I'll take a chanct on some other way of gittin' saved. Back water! Here's a couple guys hangin' onto the bottom of a boat. Mebbe they'd like a ride."

The men were hauled in and given a drink, and each promptly manned an oar. For an hour they cruised about in the thick fog, Moosehide bellowing at intervals the name of Judy Steele. They rescued eight more people from bits of wreckage, and by a rare stroke of luck managed to beach the boat on an island scarcely a mile from the scene of the wreck.

The next day they were picked up by a ship bound for Skagway from Vancouver, which had also picked up another of the *Malaspina's* lifeboats with twenty-six people aboard. Thus news of the disaster reached Skagway.

The two sourdoughs stepped into a saloon to be vociferously greeted by a big man who stood at the bar. "Hell—I thought you two was goin' to Seattle on a visit! What's the matter? Climate too hot fer you? Er wasn't yer folks glad to see you?"

Bettles and Moosehide exchanged glances and Bettles ordered a round of drinks. "Hello, Bill," he said. "Fill up."

"What's the matter with you boys? You look like you'd be'n to a funeral."

"We was on the *Malaspina,*" vouchsafed Moosehide.

"The *Malaspina!* She's due today, but I didn't know she was in yet. My sawmill machinery's on her. When did she dock?"

"She didn't dock," said Bettles, emptying his glass and refilling it. "An' what's more, she ain't never goin' to."

"What do you mean?"

"She run onto a rock in the fog last night an' sunk."

"Good God! Where?"

"Damn if I know—not far below Juneau."

"How'd you get here?"

"Me an' Moosehide managed to cut a lifeboat loose after most of the others had gone. We picked up eleven folks, hangin' onto pieces of stuff that was floatin' around an' this morning the *Alucian* picked us up, along with another boat with twenty-six aboard."

"There must have be'n a lot more people

than that on the ship. What became of them?"

Bettles shrugged. "Search me. Some of 'em'll prob'ly be picked up by other boats. There was about half agin as many passengers on the *Malaspina* as she'd ort to carried."

"Most of 'em prob'ly went down with her!"

"Yeah," Moosehide said, "most likely they did. But some of 'em would be bound to git saved."

"Not so many, I'm afraid," the big man said. "They'd all be chechakos. They'd start a panic"

"Most all of 'em was chechakos," Moosehide said. "There was a few sourdoughs."

"Who was there besides you, two?"

Bettles downed another drink, and cleared his throat harshly. "You've got to know sometime, Bill. I shore hate to be the one to tell you, but—Judy was on that boat."

"Judy!" The bronzed face of the big man paled perceptibly, as the name exploded from his lips. He glared at the other. "Bettles—you're crazy! Judy's in school—in Chicago. I sent her the money for the next term only a couple of weeks ago."

The old sourdough looked squarely into the eyes of this comrade of many a tough trail. "Steady, Bill," he said. "I ain't crazy. Judy was on the *Malaspina*. Moosehide an' I both talked to her yesterday. She told us about you sendin' her the money—an' how she used it to come back home on. She was homesick, Bill. An' with the papers all full of the big stampede, she couldn't stand it no longer—she stampeded, too. We tried to find her after the crash. Moosehide hollered her name as loud as he could. An' we hunted fer her, an' kep' on hollerin' while we was cruisin' around in the lifeboat, but we couldn't locate her—what with all the confusion, and the thick fog. It was hell, Bill—jest plain *hell!*"

Both sourdoughs noticed that as Bettles talked Bill Steele's huge shoulders seemed to droop, and his face took on a gray pallor. For what seemed a long time he stood silent, staring straight before him. Then suddenly he snapped alert. His shoulders stiffened, and the pallor left his face as his fist thumped the bar.

"It's like Moosehide said—some of those people are bound to be saved. An' Judy would stand a better chance than any of 'em. By God, she's a sourdough! She could tough it out where a damn chechako would crumple up an' die! Maybe she's washed up on an island somewhere. An' it might be a matter of a month or a year before anyone would find her. By God, I'll post a reward for her! I'll make it so big that every damn fish boat an' tug along the coast will scour the islands huntin' for her. I'll make it fifty thousan' dollars. That'll get 'em out. I'll post it here, an' in Juneau an' Sitka, an' Vancouver, an' Seattle. Fifty thousan' for returnin' her alive, or for information that'll lead to her recovery. If she's gone—I want to know it. I kin stand anything but this damned uncertainty."

Chapter IX

LAPOINTE LAYS HIS PLANS

THE night was black. Clouds obscured the sky. And on the island where five people lay between thick layers of spruce and cedar boughs, the only sound was the lapping of the waves against the beach. Four of the five slept. The other lay like a dead man—hatred, greed, murder, lust, eating away at his brain.

His hatred focused on the gambler who first of all had knocked him cold in the boat when he had attempted to keep Carter and the girl out of it. And it was he who had confiscated his belt knife and his match box. Who had told him upon two occasions, within hearing of the others, exactly what he thought of him. And who, as commander of the little party, had con-

trived to give him, Rene Lapointe, the hardest and the most unpleasant of the necessary tasks. It was Marshall who had ordered him to carry the game the others killed. And had forced him to collect the stinking seaweed for the signal smoke and pack it in huge armfuls up the steep rock slope. And made him fetch the heavy plank that Carter had found and carry it more than a mile along the rock-strewn beach. He, Rene Lapointe, had been forced to do these things against his will. He remembered Marshall's threat when he had ordered him to collect the seaweed and carry it up the rock—a threat delivered in a voice so soft and velvety that it had struck more terror to his soul than any loud-mouthed, angry outburst could possibly have struck. He recalled the man's exact words: "I won't kill you if you don't do it—but you'll wish to God I had."

His hatred encompassed Carter and Thornton because it was they who had designated Marshall as boss, when he, Rene Lapointe, who had lived all his life in the outlands, was infinitely better qualified for the job. Also he hated them because, with no attempt to disguise their intention, they had consistently maneuvered so that he had never for an instant during those two weeks on the island, been left near the girl.

And he hated Judith, upon whom his lustful dark eyes gloated, when he thought the others were not looking, because neither by words nor look, had she ever even so much as noticed his existence—he, Rene Lapointe, who among the young women of the fishing villages, and the klooches of the Chilkats, was quite the figure of a man.

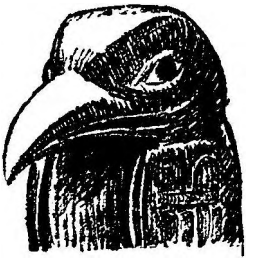
His thoughts dwelt upon the thick roll of bills he had seen Marshall draw from his pocket that day beside the fire, when he offered to get in on the game Carter and Thornton said they were playing. If only he could manage to kill Marshall, and get possession of the belt knife, the rest would be easy. He could handily dispatch Carter and the Englishman, both unarmed. And then—with the roll of money—and the girl——

He thought of slipping from his bed, bashing Marshall's head in with a stone, and seizing the knife. But in the black darkness, how could he find Marshall's head, buried as it was among the boughs, without waking him up? And suppose he didn't succeed in killing him with the first blow of the stone? The others would waken and—Lapointe shuddered involuntarily beneath his covering of boughs.

Anyway, this was their last night on the island. No longer would he be forced to perform menial tasks under Marshall's orders. No longer would he be regarded as a pariah, distrusted by Carter and Thornton, despised by Marshall, ignored by the girl. The boat was all patched and ready, even to the fixing of a tree in the bow for a sail, providing the wind held. Lapointe listened—yes, the steady lapping of the waves on the shore told him it had not changed. On the westward side of the island it would be pounding the rocks. But on this side was only the rhythmic slap-slap of the backwash.

Suddenly an idea occurred to him. The boat! Why not take the boat and slip away in the darkness? There she lay all ready, floating in the mouth of the creek. She was even provisioned with the birds and the rabbits the girl had cooked for the voyage. He could scoop up a supply of fresh water in the bark kettle, shove off, and disappear silently into the night. And all without any work! All he would have to do would be to sit in the stern and steer as the wind wafted him coastward. Let the others stay on the island. Damn 'em—let 'em stay here till they rot! He, Rene Lapointe, was the smart one. He would go on to the Klondike and dig gold. For a long time he lay there wondering whether the others were asleep. Snores reached his ears, coming at regular intervals, mingled with the lapping of the waves. That would be Marshall—Marshall

lying there with the belt knife strapped to him and the thick roll of bills in his pocket. Lapointe wondered vaguely whether it would be possible to slip the bills from the man's pocket without waking him. He decided that he couldn't. He wondered whether the others were asleep —or were they lying awake thinking, as he was? He would know soon. If his plan were to succeed he must act now. Someone might wake up in anticipation of an early start.



Deliberately the breed lifted the boughs that covered him, laying each aside without making the slightest sound. He sat up, slipped silently from his bed, felt for his pacs, and carrying them in his hand, made his way to the beach a few yards distant, feeling each step with his bare toes before setting his foot down. Groping beside the banked fire, he found the bark kettle, filled it at the creek, cast off the painter of tough cedar bark that made the boat fast to the stake driven into the sand, and with an oar poled her out into deep water. Once clear of the shore, the wind caught the small, heavily leafed cedar tree, and the bow swung away. Settling in the stern, Lapointe grasped his steering oar, and sailed out into the night.

Dawn broke with land dead ahead. It was the island they had seen from their lookout hill, the one Marshall had picked out for their first objective on the coastward journey. The stiff breeze was carrying the boat straight toward the beach, only half a mile away.

Lapointe glanced to the right and to the left, seeking a way to pass the island. With a fair wind, he had no wish to land, when every hour brought him nearer the mainland. But the dim light of early dawn showed no break in the shoreline. Evidently the island was several miles in extent. Leaning against his oar, he tried to shape a course that would carry him past the island, but despite all his efforts the craft merely drifted sidewise, or swung around and headed for shore. Dropping his oar, he made his way swiftly forward, and after some difficulty succeeded in unshipping his tree sail. He pushed it overboard, then spent considerable time and effort in retrieving it, when he remembered that without either knife or ax he couldn't get another. Shipping the oars, he rowed in the trough of the waves, parallel to the shore, hoping to round the end of the island. But the heavy boat moved logily, making scarcely any headway, but all the time being swept by the wind closer and closer to shore. Lapointe redoubled his efforts, pulling at the heavy oars until he was bathed in sweat, but it was to no purpose, and finally he gave it up, and swinging her stern to the wind, beached her on a strip of sand, where she swung sidewise and promptly filled with water as the waves broke over her.

CURSING his luck, the breed rescued the oars, the food, and the birch bark kettle and carried them out of reach of the waves. He was very thirsty, and taking the kettle, which had been overturned when the boat struck, he walked along the beach searching for the mouth of a creek. A two mile walk brought him to the end of the island, but he had found no water, so he retraced his steps and struck out in the opposite direction. He reached the other end of the island after walking a mile, but still found no fresh water. Consumed with a burning thirst by reason of his walk and his work at the oars, he dipped some water from an incoming wave. But he spat it out upon the sand when he tried to drink it.

He struck inland, and after a time came

to a low place wherein was some stagnant water. The stuff was warm, murky with suspended matter, and stank with the odor of rotton eggs. He drank a bellyful of it however, and realizing that he was hungry, filled his kettle and made his way back to the boat. As he approached he saw a gray shape slink into the bush. Setting down the kettle of water, he dashed forward to see a pair of lynxes fade into the undergrowth. Of his supply of grilled rabbit and grouse, there was no trace.

Cursing like a mad man, the breed took stock of his surroundings—one pair of oars, a lifeboat, rapidly filling with sand washed into her by the waves, one bark kettle filled with stinking water—no food. no knife, no matches.

In the far distance, upwind, he could see the island he had left—the island upon which were marooned Carter and Thornton and Marshall and the girl. He shook his fist, and whole heartedly consigned them, one and all, to utter damnation. Then he provided himself with some stones of throwing size and went hunting. He killed a rabbit in an open glade near the slough from which he had dipped the water, tore it apart with his hands and ate part of the meat raw, finishing his meal on berries which grew in abundance.

For two days the wind held steadily from the west, while the breed cursed the delay, and subsisted upon raw rabbit, berries, and foul slough water. Between times he gloated over the predicament of the four on the other island. True, they had fire, and an abundance of food and cold fresh water—but they must remain where they were indefinitely, while he could bail out the boat when the wind died down, and make the coast in two or three days. He scowled at thought of the thick roll of bills in Marshall's pocket. He almost wished he had tried to get possession of it while the man slept. There must be five hundred, a thousand, maybe two thousand dollars in that roll—more money than Lapointe had ever owned at one time in his whole life. In his own pocket at the moment was less than a hundred dollars—and the golden sands of the Klondike were very far away. He would have to do much work before he got there—hard work, packing heavy loads for chechakos to earn his way into the Yukon. But if he had Marshall's roll, he would not have to work. He could purchase supplies at Skagway, and go inside in style, hiring others to do his packing. Yes, he wished he had tried to get Marshall's roll. He shrugged. Well, it was too late now. But—wait! Was it really too late?

Rapidly Lapointe's brain worked, as his eyes gleamed with avarice. Why not? Why not get a boat and someone to help him, and a gun, and run out to the island and rob the gambler of his roll? Yes—and take the girl, too. He'd show her! He'd teach her to ignore his very existence. He would have her for himself for as long as he pleased, and then—he shrugged, and getting up from the stone upon which he had been sitting, began to pace rapidly up and down.

And he knew just the man who would help him! Cap Ambers—known as "Pig" along the coast, because of the fact that his stiff, bristly hair, little eyes, and elongated snout gave his face a strikingly porcine expression. Pig Ambers was just the man—waterfront thief, hooch runner, sea otter pirate, he was the owner and skipper of a nondescript fish boat of which his two klooch wives acted as crew. Pig Ambers would hesitate at nothing—would undertake any kind of shady proposition for a hundred dollars. When not in hiding from the coast guard or the police, he could always be found either at Snettisham, or at the Siwash village at the foot of Sumdum Mountain. Slipping his hand in his pocket, Lapointe drew out his lean roll of bills and counted them. He found eighty-seven dollars in all. This would be enough. He could pay Pig Ambers fifty down with promise of the balance when the job was done. And Pig would keep his mouth

shut, too. Pig damn well knew that if he, Rene Lapointe, wanted to he could tell what had become of the two Chinks that had got paid off at Yess Bay Cannery the fall before—could take the police to their bodies where Ambers had planted them in the muck of a salt slough with a rock wired to their necks. Yes, Pig Ambers would keep his mouth shut—or else.

Chapter X

THE BREED RETURNS

THE third day dawned calm and foggy, and Lapointe worked until noon ridding the boat of hard-packed sand, and prying her into the water with a dead spruce pole which he dragged from the bush. Then he laboriously rowed her to the nearer end of the island, only to find that the fog was rapidly dispersing before a brisk east wind. Realizing the futility of trying to row the heavy craft against the wind, he shoved her into the lee of a rocky point, and made her fast by means of some tough vines he sawed loose with the edge of a clam shell.

The west wind held for five days, and the breed bided his time with such patience as he could muster, comforted by thoughts of what lay in store for him—a woman and plenty of money.

When again the wind shifted into the west, he hoisted his tree sail, and shoved off. He spent that night on a small island, and the following day was picked up by a fish boat.

"Where'd you git that *Malaspina* lifeboat?" the captain demanded, thrusting his head out of the wheel house as the breed stepped onto the low after deck.

"I find her on islan'," Lapointe replied, as the deck hand called from the stern:

"Shall I make her fast? She's all stove in for'ad."

"Naw—turn her loose!" the captain ordered, as he beckoned Lapointe to join him. "What island was it where you found the boat?" the man asked with an obviously suppressed eagerness that put the breed on his guard.

He shrugged. "I don't know. Small islan' nort' of here, mebbe twent', twent'-fi' mile."

"Would you know it agin if you seen it?"

"*Oui,* sure I'm know zat islan'."

"Was there anyone on the island?"

"*Non.*"

"You sure? How long was you there?"

"Me, I'm on zat islan', fi' day. De win' she blow. I'm no kin git off."

"Did you look all over it?"

"*Oui.* I'm hont ze rabbit, ze berry for git somet'in' to eat."

"How come you was on this island? Was you huntin' the gal?"

"W'at you mean—hont ze gal? Me, I ain't hont no girl."

"Ain't you heard about the fifty thousan' dollar reward?"

"*Non.* I'm no hear 'bout no reward."

"You know'd the *Malaspina* run on the rocks an' sunk, didn't you?"

"*Oui,* I'm hear 'bout dat."

The man withdrew a folded Vancouver newspaper from behind a chart and handed it to the other. "Kin you read? Well take a look at that." He indicated the reward notice with a grimy forefinger and as Lapointe read the words, his facial expression never changed.

"NOTICE! REWARD!

"A reward of fifty thousand dollars ($50,000) in gold will be paid for the return of my daughter, Judith Steele, or for information that will lead to her recovery. Miss Steele was about 5 ft. 6 in., and weighed 130 to 140 pounds. Was a passenger on the *Malaspina* on her last trip. When last seen wore dress of brick red color (approximate), tan silk stockings, low tan shoes. Reward will be paid at Dominion Bank, Vancouver, or by me in Dawson upon return of this girl or receipt of information, as above.

"(Signed) Wm. Steele, Dawson, Y. T."

"Where the hell you be'n that you ain't saw that notice?" the captain asked. "It come out in the Juneau paper, too, the day

after the wreck—an' mebbe in other papers fer all I know."

The crafty brain of Rene Lapointe was functioning rapidly. "Me an' a Siwash nem Joe Bear live by Hoonah, gon' fishin' in canoe. Ze fog she com'—ze win' blow, ze tide go out, we git los'. All night we go. Nex' day we com' on ze islan'. Ze win' she smash ze canoe on ze rock. Joe Bear git drown. He no kin swim. Me, I'm git to ze shore. I'm fin' ze boat. She is smash on ze rock. I'm tak' ze pole an' pry her loose. T'ree, four days I'm work an' feex her oop, wit' birch bark, an' som' tarpaper I'm fin' on som' boards. W'en ze win' go down I'm com' 'way from ze islan'."

The captain nodded. "That's right—the wind's been from the east fer five days. An' you say you went all over this island? Didn't you find nothin'—like if anyone had been there? Not no track in the sand nor nothin'?"

Lapointe's face maintained its blank expression. "*Non.* I'm ain' fin' no track. Only fin' wan, w'at you call, ze skirt. It is in ze san' by de rock w'ere ze boat is bus' on."

"Skirt!" cried the captain. "What kind of a skirt? A red one?"

"*Non.* Not no red lak ze klooch wear."

"Was it dark red?" the man asked excitedly. "Was it kind of brick color?"

"Mebbe-so you call um red," the breed admitted indifferently.

"By God, that might be her skirt all right! Her, an' mebbe some others was in that boat, an' they went on the rocks an' she peeled off her skirt so's she could swim—an' then she couldn't make it. They all got drownded. If any of 'em had made it, they'd of been there on the island—er their tracks er somethin'! What did you do with this skirt?"

"I'm tak' it 'long to bail ze boat. W'en I'm seen you com' I'm ain' need it no more, I'm t'row it in ze water."

"Well," said the captain, "I guess that's the end of it. It's three weeks sence the *Malaspina* went down, an' there's only three, four of us stickin' to the job of huntin' the gal. The first few days every damn boat that would float was combin' the nearby islands fer her. Some of 'em even went quite a ways out—but hell, they'd better saved their coal. No boat could of got very fer back off'n the ship lane. What with the fog like it was, that night, an' the tide goin' out, they'd of cracked up on one of them islands shore as hell."

Lapointe agreed. He was thinking rapidly. He was afraid the captain would hear the rapid beating of his heart. Now instead of getting only the roll of bills in Marshall's pocket, he would get fifty thousand dollars in gold! He would have to forego the girl. She must be returned to her father or to the Vancouver bank—and with no tale of ill treatment to tell. Oh, well—fifty thousand dollars in gold would buy a lot of women. The woman part could wait. He must see Pig Ambers at once. If Pig had been lying low, as he generally was, at Snettisham or the Siwash village, he may not have heard of the reward. He handed the newspaper to the captain.

"Keep it," the man said gruffly. "I'm through with the damn thing—now I know the girl's dead."

Lapointe pocketed the paper. "T'anks," he said, "me, I lak for read ze news. I'm ain' see no paper for long tam. W'ere you go, now?"

"I'm right now headin' for Skagway. I've wasted time enough, an' coal enough a'ready on this wild goose chase!"

"W'at you tak' you ron me to Snettisham?"

"Snettisham! What the hell you want to go to Snettisham fer? I thought you said you come from around Hoonah?"

"*Oui,* but Joe Bear, he's woman gon' Snettisham for see her folks. I'm t'ink mebbe-so she lak to know 'bout Joe git drownded."

The captain grinned. "Yeah—mebbe she

would, at that. If I was most of these damn Siwashes' women, I'd be damn good an' glad to hear they was drownded. I'll run you to Snettisham fer twenty dollars. That's where Pig Ambers hangs out. Pig, he was in Skagway when the reward was posted, an' him an' his two klooches hit out to hunt fer the gal, like everyone else that had a boat. He picked up two survivors on an' island, an' charged 'em fifty dollars apiece to run 'em to Skagway. When it got around a mob run Pig out of Skagway. It was a toss-up whether they'd of strung him up er let him off with a coat of tar an' feathers."

"How mooch you charge you tak' me Skagway?" asked the breed.

"Not a damn cent, seein' I'm goin' there, anyway. Hell, I ain't huntin' no chanct of gittin' lynched, er tarred an' feathered! So you don't figger it's worth twenty dollars out of yer pocket to tell that Siwash's klooch he got drownded, eh? I guess yer right, at that. Hell, she'll find it out sometime. Er else she'll think he jest walked out on her. The last I heard this here Steele was still in Skagway. Mebbe if you hunt him up an' tell him about findin' that skirt, he'll slip you some money. Of course, it wouldn't be no information that would git the gal back, but he might slip you mebbe a hundred er so—onlest he figgered you was lyin'. By God, you ought to hung onto that skirt."

WHEN Lapointe stepped from the fish boat, in Skagway, his intention was to find Steele, tell him where the girl was and pilot a boat to the island. Thus the expedition would be at Steele's expense, and he would collect the reward for merely furnishing the information and piloting the outfit to the island.

But inquiry disclosed that Steele had left for Dawson a week before, in company with a couple of sourdoughs who had been passengers on the ill fated *Malaspina*. Obtaining a canoe, and purchasing a rifle, he paddled across to the Chilkat village, and hired a couple of natives, at fifty dollars apiece, twenty-five down and the balance on return, to take him out to the island where he had left the girl and the three men. They shoved off the following morning in a bidarka, equipped with oars and a light sail.

Between headwinds and fogs, they were forced to camp on various islands, so it was not until the evening of the tenth day out that they landed on the island upon which Lapointe had spent his miserable week of raw rabbits, berries, and stinking water.

Shortly after landing, he shot a lynx, more from revenge for his filched roast rabbit and grouse than for food, and after gorging himself on the tender cat cutlets, the breed sat for a long time staring gloatingly across the water at the island whose high, rocky apex stood limned against the sunset.

Tomorrow he would get the girl. He would also have his revenge upon the others—but especially upon Marshall whose roll of bills he would take at the point of the gun. He would take back his knife and his match box, and before leaving he would put out their fire—so that they, too, would know how it felt to eat raw rabbit. He was sorry he could not, in some manner, befoul the creek so they would have to drink stinking water. And as he gloated, his crafty brain toyed with the idea of demanding more than the fifty thousand dollars offered in the reward no-

tice for the return of the girl. He reasoned that if a man would offer fifty thousand of his own volition, he could be made to pay maybe a hundred thousand if he had to. Greed glittered in the dark eyes, as he cast about in his brain for some means of forcing the man to pay more. Instead of returning the girl to Skagway, he could land somewhere on the outer coast—somewhere between Cape Spencer and Yakutat, take her inland, and leave her in custody of any one of a dozen or more renegade Chilkats he knew. For a payment of gold they would guard her well in some inaccessible mountain fastness. The details of how he would get the gold from Steele could be worked out later. He could make his way to Dawson over the Dalton Trail. Surely there would be some way—if the man were made to understand that his only hope of getting his daughter back lay in paying the sum demanded, he would pay.

That night the three retired early and as the first hint of dawn grayed the horizon, they shoved off. In his eagerness to get started Lapointe failed to notice that the Indian who stowed the stuff in the canoe had failed to include the rifle, which lay on the ground near where they had skinned out the lynx.

With the distance only half covered, the wind died down and a fog drifted in from the sea.

Chapter XI

The Passing of Sam Marshall

MARSHALL stirred restlessly beneath his covering of boughs, opened his eyes and lay for a few moments striving to rid himself of a feeling that all was not well. He tossed aside the boughs and sat up. In the gray half-light of early dawn he saw that the nearby boughs had been disturbed—the boughs under which Lapointe had been sleeping. Leaping to his feet the man peered through the gloom toward the mouth of the little creek where the night before the patched lifeboat with her tree sail in place had been moored to its stake. The boat was gone! It needed no prodding among the scattered boughs to tell him that the breed was gone, also. His swift movement had wakened the others—Carter and Thornton emerged from under their boughs, and the girl from the nearby wikiup of cedar bark the men had erected for her.

"What's wrong, old chap?" asked Thornton. "My word, you leaped to your feet as though you had been stung!"

"We've all been stung," the gambler replied. "The breed's gone, and the boat along with him. It's all my fault," he added bitterly. "I've always slept close as I could to him to keep him from pulling a fast one of some kind. And then the only time he does it, I lay there dead to the world and let him get away with it. What a swell boob I turned out to be! And I'm the wash-out you boys picked to run this outfit. I'm the guy you give a vote of confidence to."

"Cut it out, Sam," Carter interrupted. "We've all got just as much confidence in you as we ever had. You've done a swell job—"

"Yeah—ain't I? Lay here and let that damn breed get away with our boat!"

"But he didn't awaken us, either," Thornton said. "The bounder must have gone about the business silently!"

"He sure as hell didn't have no brass band accompaniment," Marshall agreed. "But I ought to have heard him, anyway."

"It's nobody's fault, at all," the girl exclaimed. "And there's no use standing around sobbing about it. Lapointe's gone, and the boat's gone—and that's that!"

"That's right," Carter agreed. "No use crying over spilt milk."

"Or locking the barn door after the horse has been stolen," added Marshall sourly.

"My word!" cried Thornton, popping the monocle into his eye and regarding the other two with concern. "But you don't

get milk from horses, you know! An' you keep 'em in stables; not barns. It's the cows you get milk from—but we haven't got any milk, so how could we spill it?"

Even Marshall joined in the laughter that followed. "You better put that in your letter to the *Times*," he advised. "Maybe someone will come across with the answer. But Miss Judith is dead right, there's no use standing around belly-aching about it."

"Well, a thing like the loss of a boat never affects me that way!" replied Thornton. "Only certain things I eat. If you ask me, I'd say we're jolly well rid of that bounder, Lapointe. We haven't got him on our minds every minute, tryin' to determine what he's up to. At least, now we know Miss Judith is in no danger from him."

"I wasn't afraid of him," the girl said grimly. "I despised him thoroughly. If he'd ever made a pass at me I'd have smashed his head in with a rock!"

They made their way to the beach and as Carter uncovered the banked fire, the Englishman gazed out over the water. "I can't see him anywhere," he said. "The blackguard must have gone early in the night."

"It wouldn't do us any good to see him," Marshall replied. "Once he got far enough from shore so we couldn't knock him out of the boat with a rock, he was safe. But," he paused, his pale eyes narrowed slightly, "he won't get away with it. This is a horse on us, all right. The game ain't played out yet, though—by a damn sight. If he shows up anywhere on the coast between Nome and Frisco, I'll handle him myself. If he don't—if he goes on inside—well, I've got some pretty good friends on the Yukon that'll look after him for me—and be glad to do me a good turn." The velvety softness of the man's voice fell on the ears of the listeners with a deadly menace that no loud bawled threat could have achieved. The girl turned away with a slight shudder.

"I wouldn't like to be in Lapointe's shoes," she murmured, as she joined Carter at the fire.

"Nor I," he agreed. "Marshall's no man to fool with."

"He's like dynamite wrapped in velvet," the girl said. "And now you've got the fire going, you men better go and rustle something for breakfast, while I make a new boiling kettle. That miserable breed not only ran of with our boat and our breakfast but he stole our kettle too!"

Marshall tossed the girl the knife, and the three struck back into the bush from which they emerged an hour later with four grouse and a couple of rabbits.

NEARLY four weeks passed. Days of high winds. Days of dripping rain. Days of opaque fog. And days of calm, and bright warm sunshine. The four hunted, and took turns on watch at the lookout station on top of the high rock. They were uneventful days during which the girl realized that each of the three men loved her.

Her heart warmed as she realized the innate fineness of them; each so different from the other, yet each with the same sense of honor that forbade his taking advantage of her plight—or of seeking a preference that would make it awkward and uncomfortable for the other two.

Now and again, out of sense of pure devilment, she would give one a chance to belittle another, as when one day she found herself alone on the lookout with Thornton, she said, "Tom's a hard rock man. I never knew a hard rock man to amount to anything in the placer fields."

"Haw! I don't know what a hard rock man is, but you can jolly well take it from me that Tom Carter will make good, no matter where you put him. Fine chap, Tom. Top hole! They don't make 'em better."

And another time when the others were hunting, and she and Carter were alone at the fire: "Thornton's funny—he's so, sort

of dense—just like the Englishman you read about, don't you think?"

"He may not see a joke as quickly as some people," Carter replied, "but believe me, he's A Number One clear through! There's one thing you can bank on—he's dependable. You'd know that no matter what happened, Thornton would do what he believed to be right. He's high grade."

And after Carter had gone for an armful of wood, the girl had smiled to herself. "They're sourdoughs at heart, every one of 'em. They're clean—and honest. They're square!"

With the passing of the days the four gave up hope of being sighted by any of the regular line boats. Several times they saw the smudges of smoke far out at sea that told of a passing liner. But though they always lighted their fire, nothing ever came of it. Either their smoke was not sighted from the ship, or it was attributed to Indians smoking fish.

Hope gradually dwindled of their being picked up even by a stray fish boat. They seemed to be as far off the regular fishing grounds as they were off the lanes of the liners. They talked of building winter quarters, and picked out a spot in the center of a dry cedar swamp, where they would be protected from the wind, and would have plenty of bark at hand to build a cabin.

Came a morning of light easterly wind. When they finished breakfast Marshall's attention was attracted by a splashing sound. "There seems to be more fish than usual left among the rocks by the tide," he said. "I've got a hunch that we'd better begin laying in a supply of 'em while we've got the chance. If we've got to winter here, they might come in mighty handy. I don't know much about the habits of fish—but I do know that along the coast sometimes they're plentiful, and again there ain't any."

"That's right," the girl agreed. "We can make a smoke house out of bark and smoke 'em! Of course, we can get grouse and rabbits in the winter—but smoked fish would certainly break the monotony."

SO, ARMED with stout clubs, they succeeded in killing a dozen good sized fish. Then the breeze died down, and a fog drifted in from the sea, and they returned to the fire and proceeded to clean their catch. And it was while they were thus engaged that a man stepped abruptly out of the fog. It was Lapointe. In his hands he carried a single-barreled, smooth-bore trade gun. And behind him, a few paces away, stood two Indians. The Indians were unarmed.

He was not the surly, sullen-eyed character to whom the four had become accustomed. There was an arrogant glint in the black eyes, and a sinister smile on his lips as he asked with mock solicitude after their welfare.

"How has it been wit' you, my frien's? You no have' got tired, *non,* of waiting for ze ship? Zis place is very far from where ze ships com'. But me, Rene Lapointe, I have com' back. I have com' for ze so beautiful girl. I am very sorry zere is no room for all in ze bidarka. But I can only tak' ze girl. Ze men must stay here, mebbe long tam—mebbe forever."

Marshall glanced toward Judith whose face had turned a shade paler under the tan. When the breed paused, the girl spoke, her eyes flashing and her lips fairly dripping scorn.

"You lousy, mangy cur! Do you suppose I would go any place with you? I'd die first—die right here among *men!*"

The gambler noted that both Carter and Thornton had shifted their positions slightly, interposing themselves between Lapointe and the girl. The breed's face flushed even darker than was its wont, and the dark eyes smouldered.

"*Non,* you will not die. But if anywan try to keep you here, zat man will die."

When Marshall spoke, his voice was so low as to be almost inaudible, yet every word came distinctly to the ears of the

listeners. "If I was you, Lapointe, I'd turn around and get back in the bidarka, and I'd go away from here, while the going's good. I wouldn't stop when I got to the coast. And I wouldn't stop in the Klondike, either. I'd keep on going till I'd got to where no one had ever heard of me before. I've got some good friends in the Yukon country, Lapointe. They're men who wouldn't hesitate a minute to knock off a breed that had tried to pull what you tried to pull in keeping Miss Steele and Carter out of the boat—and what you're trying to pull now. They won't knock you off because they like to kill folks, Lapointe—but because they damn well know that the country will be a lot better off when no more low-lived varmints like you are running around in it."

A blaze of hate flashed into the dark eyes, as the breed's lips twisted back to expose his teeth between which his words issued in a snarl. "Damn you! You steal my knife—my match box. You say—com' an' git 'em! I can't come git 'em zat time; you t'ree, an' I am only one. You treat me lak' a dog! But now it is my time! Now I com' for git ze knife—ze match box—an' ze so big roll of bills. You mak' me liv' lak ze dog—now I mak' you liv' lak ze dog, an' eat your rabbit, an' your bird, an' your feesh raw. I'll tak' all ze matches—an' I'll put out your fire!"

AS THE breed talked, the gambler's lips set into a hard thin line. Unnoticed he had slipped the knife from its sheath. In a flash he gathered his legs under him and leaped straight at the speaker, who raised the gun and fired at a distance of fifteen feet. Marshall fell face forward upon the sand. "Rush him!" he gasped. "Muzzle-loader—he—can't reload!"

Carter and Thornton leaped forward at the report of the gun, and the Englishman went down and out from a blow on the head with the barrel. Carter closed with Lapointe and they fought for possession of the gun. The engineer managed to land several telling blows upon the breed's face, receiving blows and kicks in exchange. Neither dared relinquish his hold on the weapon. Lapointe called shrilly for the Indians to come to his aid, but they stood stolidly aloof, watching the fight with seeming indifference as to its outcome. Manifestly this was not their war. They preferred to remain neutral.

Suddenly, with a curse, Lapointe went down as Judith Steele dived at his legs from behind, closed her strong young arms in a vise-like grip about his knees and jerked his legs out from under him. Lapointe's grip on the gun slipped, and Carter hurled it far out of reach. The breed kicked loose, both regained their feet, and the fight was renewed.

To avoid the sledge hammer blows of Carter's fists, Lapointe closed in with a clinch that carried both to the ground, where they strained and struggled, and thumped at each other, as the girl danced about them brandishing the knife she had picked up from the sand where it had fallen from Marshall's hand, but not daring to strike for fear of stabbing Carter. Finally the engineer's strong, lean fingers closed upon the breed's throat. The man struggled frantically as his supply of air was cut off—but not for long. His eyes seemed about to pop from their sockets, his tongue protruded from between his back-drawn lips, and his face turned a dark purple. Then suddenly he collapsed.

Accompanying one of the Indians to the bidarka, the girl returned with a babiche line with which she helped tie Lapointe, hand and foot. Thornton rolled

onto his side, raised himself to his elbow and blinked owlishly, as he passed his fingers gingerly over the great welt on his forehead.

Dropping to her knees beside Marshall, the girl unbuttoned his shirt upon the front of which appeared an ever widening red stain. The man looked up into her face with a smile—half wistful—half cynical. "Never mind, sister," he said. "There's nothing you can do. My number's up."

Tearing the shirt away, she ripped it into strips and deftly fashioned a pledget with which she plugged an ugly hole just below the heart, holding it in place with a bandage.

As she worked Marshall beckoned to the two Indians and as they approached, Judith seated herself and took the wounded man's head in her lap. "Don't talk," she ordered. "Lie perfectly still."

The cynical smile widened. "I could do that, sister—like this—forever." From his coat pocket he drew the thick roll of bills. "Do you savvy their lingo?"

"Maybe they talk English. I'll ask 'em." She turned to the natives. "*Kutux mika boston wawa?*"

One of the Indians nodded and Marshall pointed to the unconscious breed. "How much he pay you come here?"

"Wan hondre dolla," the man lied.

"All right. Take the woman and two men to Skagway, and they'll give you two hundred."

"You're going, too!" cried the girl.

"That's right, sister. I'm going—but not to the mainland." He turned to Carter. "Load the gun, Tom, and keep it by you. Don't give 'em a break—especially the breed." The man seemed to be growing weaker. His breathing became labored and he looked up into the girl's face with a pain-wracked smile. "It's been—a good game. With damn good sports. A—good—clean—game. A man don't mind—losing—in a game—like this."

"But you haven't lost!" cried the girl, taking his hand in her own, as the tears streamed unheeded from her eyes. "You played your string out like a man—like a sourdough! You knew when you leaped at him you didn't have a chance. You did it—for us."

"Well—why not?" and again the cynical smile. "You're real folks. The best—I've known—in many a day. These two love you. One of 'em's bound to lose. The one that gets you will have more luck than is coming to any one man. You're all jake, sister. You're sitting pretty. No matter which one you take, you can't lose. The other will be a game loser—and I wish him luck. I—love—you—too, but—I ain't—your kind. It's better—this way. It wasn't in the cards—for me to win—in that game."

"But—I tell you you have won!" sobbed the girl. "I love you! We all love you. We couldn't help loving you."

"Hear! Hear!" cried Thornton in a hoarse, unnatural voice.

"I'll tell the world we do!" added Carter, the words breaking into a thin falsetto.

"Well, looking at it that way—maybe you're right. I have won, I guess. My luck's still running—it's a good—way—to go." He paused, gasped for breath, and seemed to gather strength. The cynical grin widened. "You know I always suspected there was a—decent streak in me—somewhere." He extended the hand that still grasped the roll of bills toward the Englishman. "Take it, Thornton, old sport. I stole part of it from you—the rest from—the other chechakos. I won't be needing it—where—I'm going. And—take a tip from—a friend. Never play against—a gambler. We're a rotten lot—never give a sucker—a break—" The words faltered on his lips. He retched spasmodically, and blood gushed from his mouth in a torrent. He was dead.

Tears of which they were not ashamed coursed down the lips of all three. With an ax from the bidarka, one of the Indians fashioned some crude wooden shovels. They buried him there in the sand. And

Carter and Thornton set a wooden slab over his grave.

"I'm coming back here," the girl said, as she stood looking down at the mounded sand, "and I'm going to have a stone set where that slab stands now. It will be granite—and on it just three words will be chiseled:

SAM MARSHALL
SOURDOUGH

CHAPTER XII

THE CAMP ON THE ISLAND

CARTER retrieved the trade gun and examined it with interest. "I've seen those old muzzle-loaders hanging on walls, here and there with a powder horn and bullet pouch dangling from them, and their owners always say 'Oh, yes, that belonged to my grandfather. He was a famous hunter in his time—could knock the eye out of a squirrel at fifty yards every shot.' Or, 'That's my great-uncle Ike's old rifle, he could knock the head off a turkey at a hundred yards, every time. He was a famous shot, in his day.' I've often wondered if these old-timers were all such wonderful shots, what made 'em famous?" He handed the gun to one of the Indians. "Here, load this contraption. I don't know how."

The man took the gun and started for the bidarka. Judith stopped him. "Give it to me!" she ordered, holding out her hand. When the man had complied, she said, "Now go and get the powder and balls and bring 'em here." She turned to Carter, "Never trust a Siwash till you know him, especially a Chilkat, and more especially a Chilkat that a man like Lapointe would hire to help him with his dirty work. I'll load the gun myself, and then I'll know for sure that there's plenty of powder in it, and a slug instead of just wads."

When she had capped the nipple, she turned to Lapointe, who had come to and was watching with smouldering eyes. "Nice gun you've got here—*komooks,*" she taunted, swinging the barrel into the crook of her elbow.

"But his name is Lapointe, don't you know!" Thornton corrected, as the man on the ground scowled.

"He knows his name, all right," the girl replied. "*Komooks* means 'dog' in Chinook." Again she turned to the man on the ground. "As you pointed out to us, *komooks,* there is not room in the bidarka for all. So you will stay here. Only it won't be forever, in your case. It will only be until some men come for you. They'll be policemen. And they'll take you to Sitka, and put you in the jail. And after awhile they'll hang you for the murder of Sam Marshall, while all the people look on and make jokes about it. And you'll spin around on the end of the rope, and strangle, and get black in the face, as you did when Tom choked you—only this time you will not come to again, because they'll leave you hanging there until you are dead. As you said, this island is very far from where the ships come, and you'll be here when the policemen come for you."

As the girl ceased speaking the breed surged and strained against the thongs that bound him, while from his lips issued a tirade of filthy invectives, directed for the most part against the two Indians who listened with stolid indifference. He paused, and his hate-flashing eyes turned upon the girl. "If ze Siwashes had not left my new rifle on ze island w'ere we camp las' night I would kill all ze men! If zese cowards would have help me fight Carter, I would have kill him, even zen!"

"My word!" exclaimed Thornton. "Shut your filthy mouth, will you!"

"Let him rave," the girl said.

"You no kin go 'way an' leave me tied!" whined Lapointe. "You no kin tak' ma match box, an' ma knife!"

"We're not leaving you tied, *komooks,*" the girl replied, "because we don't want to cheat the hangman. But, we're taking the match box, and the knife with us. Oh, yes, and I'm taking that new mackinaw of

yours that I saw in the bidarka. It's a nice warm one, and I'm sure you wouldn't want me to be cold, or to show up on the mainland in these rags." She indicated her tattered jacket and waist. The skirt, torn in a dozen places by her hunting forays into the bush, had been mended, after a fashion, by means of a crude needle contrived from a grouse bone, and yarn unraveled from the men's discarded socks. Her own silk stockings had long since disappeared, and her tan oxfords were in a woeful state of dilapidation.

"You tak' my coat, I freeze!" whimpered the breed.

"No you won't. It won't begin to get cold for a month, yet, and the policemen will come for you long before that." She turned to Carter. "All right, Tom—put out the fire, and we'll be pulling out of here."

The engineer hesitated. "Don't you think, maybe, we'd better leave the fire? After all, the nights are getting—"

"He wasn't going to leave you any," the girl interrupted. "If he wants a fire, let him make one."

"But he has no matches!"

"He may have a pocketful of 'em. We don't know. We haven't searched him. If he has, all right—let him keep 'em. But if he hasn't; let him work for his fire. There's plenty of rotten wood on the island, and saplings for a bow, and those pieces of babiche line he's tied with. Let him get fire like his Siwash ancestors did—or go without! I told him we're going to leave him just as he would have left you—and we are."

Carter went to douse the fire, and Thornton grinned. "Gad, you're hard-boiled, as the Americans say!"

"I'm a sourdough. The sourdoughs are all hard-boiled—or they'd never be sourdoughs." When the engineer returned from the steaming embers, the girl cocked the gun. "All right, Tom, cut him loose while I keep him covered, and we'll be on our way."

Drawing the knife from the sheath he had taken from Marshall's belt, Carter cut the thongs that bound Lapointe's wrists and ankles. The man stood up, his eyes blazing, and it seemed for a moment as though he would leap straight at the girl, even as Marshall had leaped at him. Carter held the knife, ready to strike at the first move. The girl stood, gazing straight into the breed's face, her fingers on the trigger of the trade gun.

"Well," she taunted, a metallic ring in her voice. "Will you take it, now—or wait for the hangman?" Lapointe hesitated only for an instant, then, turning on his heel, walked rapidly away.

THEY stepped into the bidarka and shoved off, the Indians at the oars. A light breeze had sprung up from the west, and as the fog lifted one of the natives stepped the light mast and hoisted the sail while the other rowed. Seated in the stern, the girl handled the steering paddle, the old smooth bore close beside her. When the breeze stiffened, she slipped on Lapointe's new Mackinaw. In one of the pockets her fingers encountered a bit of paper. She withdrew it and read the notice of the reward posted by her father. "So that's why Lapointe came back for me," she said to herself as, unnoticed by the others, she crumpled it and dropped it overside.

In the pocket also she found a box of rifle cartridges, and that evening after landing on the island they recovered the new rifle that had been left there the night before.

"It's a good thing Lapointe forgot this gun," the girl said, "or there might have been a different story to tell. He would have killed all three of you as he did poor Marshall if you'd offered any resistance. The only thing that saved you is the fact that he couldn't reload." She turned to the Indians. "One of you go for water while the other gets the stuff out of the bidarka and makes a fire. When you get that done,

you can cut a pile of branches for beds. We'll go hunting for some meat. I see Lapointe brought some dishes and canned stuff along for the trip. He evidently didn't intend to starve me, anyway."

"I hope he brought some salt," Carter said. "I've almost forgotten what it tastes like."

"There's probably salt in this outfit," Judith replied. "But with all the meat we've had, we don't really need it. Marshall was right about the desire for salt being only a habit, providing you've got plenty of meat. Moose, and deer, and caribou, and sheep– the browsers and grass eaters—all visit the salt licks, but did you ever try to feed salt to a dog or a cat?"

"I never thought of it before, but I believe you're right," Carter admitted. "I know the farmers at home all put out blocks of salt for their cows, and horses, and sheep. But I never saw a dog licking it."

Thornton pointed to one of the Indians approaching from the bidarka with an armful of bedding. "Lapointe must have got tired of sleeping under boughs. I see he brought some new blankets with him. You can have those tonight, Miss Steele. They look warm and comfortable."

"Do they?" smiled the girl. "Well, you're welcome to 'em."

"Why?"

"They've been rolled up with those Siwash blankets for several days, and by this time they're most likely thoroughly inhabited."

"Do you mean that the beggars are infested with vermin?"

Judith laughed. "That's probably the polite way of saying it. 'Crummy' we call it on the Yukon. Come on, let's go see what we can find to eat." Carrying the new rifle, she led off into the bush. Retrieving the other gun, Carter followed, with Thornton bringing up the rear. Do you expect to hit anything with that?" the girl asked as Carter came up with her.

"I can tell you better after I've tried," Carter smiled. "I brought it along because I remembered what you said about never trusting an Indian till you know him. I thought it would be just as well not to leave a loaded gun lying around where they could get hold of it. Whether I can hit anything or not, I'm going to fire this thing before we go back—and we won't reload it."

The girl nodded. "You're learning fast," she said. "In the North, it's paying attention to things like that that sometimes spells the difference between living, and not living. When you're handling Siwashes, never let 'em forget for a minute that you're boss. I wondered if one of you would think of the gun. If not, we'd have gone back after it."

"My word, look yonder!" Thornton exclaimed, pointing toward a spruce tree that jutted at an angle from a rock ledge.

"What about it?" asked Carter, as he and the girl turned to regard the tree.

"Why, a moment ago some large animal leaped from the rocks into that tree and concealed itself among the branches!"

"It was probably a moose," grinned Carter. "Or maybe a red squirrel."

"Probably a *loup cervier,*" the girl said. "I saw where Lapointe had skinned one, there beside his fire. We'll go over and see. I hope it is. I'm sure fed up on rabbit and grouse."

"Lucy V!" Thornton exclaimed. "Sounds like a woman's name! I believe you're spoofing us—what do you call us—oh, yes—chechakos! I give you my word, if that was a woman she was a mighty spry one!"

The girl laughed. *"Loup cervier* isn't a woman's name — although I've seen women that could live up to it. It's a *lemolo, pish-pish*—wildcat—bobcat—lynx. Whichever you prefer to call him, we don't want to pass him up. He'll taste mighty good after our diet of rabbits and grouse and fish!"

"But, my word, one can't eat a cat, you know!"

"Can't, eh? You wait and see—that is, if we're lucky enough to get him. There's lots of good meat the chechakos pass up, just because of its name—wildcat and muskrat, for instance. And they pass up other meat because of other prejudices,

skunk is good eating, yet how many chechakos ever eat 'em?"

"How many chechakos are there?" Carter grinned.

"I don't know—why?"

"Oh, nothing—only if I knew the answer, I could give you the exact number who don't eat skunk."

"An' you could add one more for good measure," Thornton said. "I've smelt the bally things—an' that's enough!"

"Come, come," laughed Carter. "You've got to overcome your silly prejudices, Lionel, you didn't even like porcupine!"

"I didn't fancy it much, but I ate it. If this blasted cat tastes anything like hedge hog, I'll jolly well stick to the tinned goods for supper."

IT TOOK some maneuvering to locate the big cat which lay flattened against the slanting trunk glaring out from between the concealing branches with yellow, baleful eyes. At the crack of the girl's rifle the animal came tearing down through the branches with a great commotion and struck the ground where he lay twitching and clawing spasmodically for several moments before he finally lay still.

"This will be all the meat we'll need," the girl said, as they skinned out the carcass. "And if you both don't say these cutlets remind you of the nicest veal you ever tasted, I'll miss my guess."

Thornton eyed the elongated carcass dubiously. "Can't say it looks very appetizin'. But tell me, don't the sourdoughs ever eat any of the more—er conventional foods, such as mutton, an' beef, an' Yorkshire puddin'?"

The girl smiled. "Of course we do, when we can get 'em. I don't know about the Yorkshire pudding, but we have mutton when we're lucky enough to kill a sheep or a goat, and we have moose and caribou and bear meat instead of beef. We have beaver, too."

"Haw! Bears an' beavers!"

"You never tasted anything in your life better than bear paws, or beaver tail, or moose muzzle!"

"Paws, an' tails, an' muzzles, how, extraordinary! 'Pon my word—an' why is it that you must eat these—er—outer parts of all these animals?"

"At least," laughed the girl, "we don't eat things that stink—like some of the cheese you chechakos think is so grand! Come on, let's knock over a few rabbits or grouse, so we'll have some meat to take with us tomorrow."

They had proceeded but a short distance when a rabbit emerged from a thicket, hopped a few feet and stopped to eye the interlopers. Carter raised the trade gun, sighted it, and fired. The gun roared like a cannon, and belched forth a volcano of acrid gray smoke as Carter took a quick step backward and spun half way around. When the smoke cleared away the rabbit was nowhere to be seen.

"Good Lord!" the engineer exclaimed, moving his arm this way and that to ascertain whether or not his shoulder was intact. "That gun sure plays both ends against the middle!"

Judith giggled. "Oh, it must have kicked! I'm sorry, I guess that's my fault. You see, I'd never loaded one of 'em before. I knew Lapointe was a tough hombre, and I wasn't going to take a chance of those Siwashes doublecrossing us by putting in too little powder, or leaving out the bullet. So I put in what I figured would be powder enough, and then added a little more

for good measure. And I rammed the wadding in hard, and then put in two lead slugs to make sure. I made up my mind that if I had to shoot Lapointe, I wasn't going to shoot him easy—I was going to stop him!"

"I guess you'd have stopped him, all right," Carter grinned. "But I don't believe *you'd* have stopped short of the next island. Anyway, the gun's harmless now till it's reloaded."

"I'll take the guns and the *loup cervier* back to the fire and get supper," the girl said. "You two keep on until you get a few rabbits or grouse so we can have some meat to take with us tomorrow. It might be that because of fog or wind or something we'd be forced to land on some little island that didn't have any game on it, and there isn't very much of that canned stuff."

"How about giving us the rifle?" Carter asked. "Just because I missed a rabbit with that old blunderbuss, isn't saying I couldn't have got him with a decent gun."

"You've been doing pretty well with rocks and sticks," the girl replied. "Why waste ammunition?"

"But—why not waste it?" Thornton exclaimed. "We'll be in Skagway tomorrow or the next day, and we can buy all the ammunition we want."

The girl smiled. "We thought we'd be in Skagway 'tomorrow' about six weeks ago—but we aren't there yet. If we couldn't make it then on the *Malaspina* from just a few miles below Juneau; it's no cinch we'll make it now from God knows where, in a bidarka. Saving ammunition gets to be a habit. The sourdoughs have learned by long and sometimes mighty costly experience never to throw away anything on the trail that might possibly be of use in an emergency. If everything goes all right there's plenty of time to throw away stuff you don't need when you get to the end of the trail. But most any old-timer can tell of times when a piece of string or wire, or a nail, or a couple of cartridges, or a few ounces of left-over grub have spelled the difference between life and death. What the chechakos don't seem to realize is that in the outlands there isn't a store just around the next corner."

Carter smiled. "You're dead right. If Lionel and I never become sourdoughs, it won't be because we didn't have a good teacher!"

"Well, the only trouble about becomin' a sourdough, don't you know, is that there's so blasted many things to remember!" the Britisher exclaimed.

"After all," the girl said, "the whole thing is just using common sense. There are a few trail tricks that make things easier, but in the wild country carelessness kills more men than everything else put together. I'm going back to the fire now. Give me the knife so I can cut up this cat. I don't want to roast him whole."

Chapter XIII

The Siwashes Attempt a Fast One

AN HOUR later the two hunters returned with two grouse and half a dozen rabbits.

"Supper's ready!" called the girl, as they emerged from the bush. "And if you both don't say it's the best supper you ever sat down to, I'll never speak to you again! There's canned corn, and flapjacks, and roast *loup cervier,* and tea! We've got salt, too!"

The meal was devoured to the last crumb, and both men pronounced the *loup cervier* the finest flavored meat they had ever eaten. Thornton smacked his lips. "My word! Who would have believed that a cat could taste like that? I must admit that when I viewed that long skinny carcass after we had removed the fur from it, I felt a most disquieting revulsion in the region of my stomach. And after the hedge hog, I didn't know whether I could go through with it. But I wouldn't have missed it for the world! 'Pon my word, I'd write a letter to the *Times* lauding the cat as a most delightful gustatory del-

icacy, except for the fact that Aunt Agatha would most certainly read it, and would undoubtedly cut me off with a shillin'! The dear old thing has cats all over the place. But she'll do well to keep an eye on 'em after I get home!"

"I never ate a common house cat," the girl said. "I don't know how they'd be."

"But these cats of Aunt Agatha's are not common ones! No indeed. They're Maltese, an' Siamese, an' Persians, an' the Lord knows what not. An' owin' to their moral laxity there's some that even Darwin couldn't identify."

"Ought to make a swell pot-purry," grinned Carter, "especially if it was washed down with a bumper of this tea. One application of it is guaranteed to remove warts, superfluous hair, or boiler scale."

"I had to make that tea good and strong," defended the girl. "The only fresh water on this island comes out of a slough. It's muddy, and has things floating around in it, and it stinks to high heaven!"

The rabbits and grouse were cleaned and while the girl roasted them in anticipation of an early start the following morning, Carter and Thornton cut boughs for the three beds.

THE camp was astir before daylight. After a hurried breakfast one of the Indians was dispatched to the slough for a pail of water to be made into strong tea for the trip, while the other busied himself in rolling the blankets and carrying them and the other stuff to the beach and stowing it in the bidarka. The Indian returned with the water as the three whites were finishing their breakfast, and the girl sent him for an armful of wood as she set the tea pail on the coals. As he returned, the other stepped from behind him with the muzzle-loading trade gun at full cock covering the three by the fire.

"Give all de money!" he demanded. "Lay heem on de groun'. Den go dis way!" He pointed toward the left. The man's eyes were on Thornton to whom he had seen Marshall hand over the roll of bills.

"Oh, I say, old top—you can't do that! Point that gun the other way, the bloody thing might go off!"

Carter's eyes sought the repeating rifle lying, together with the package of roast meat, a few feet away in the opposite direction from that indicated by the Indian. Instantly the girl's words flashed through his brain. "Never trust a Siwash till you know him, especially a Chilkat," and, "Carelessness kills more men than everything else put together."

Noting the glance, the Indian brought the muzzle of the gun to bear directly upon him. "No kin git!" he grunted as the engineer bitterly cursed his carelessness in not keeping the two guns within reach. Close beside him the girl's eyes narrowed slightly as she spoke to the Indians in a cool, matter of fact tone.

"Well, drop that wood! Don't stand around holding it all day. And you'd better drop that gun, too—if you know what's good for you."

The man with the wood glanced toward the other, who scowled ferociously at the girl. "We git de money! We go 'way in de bidarka. You stay dis islan', lak' Lapointe stay on nudder islan', savvy?"

"You're making a damn fool of yourself," the girl replied coolly. "If you don't drop that gun and go about your business of packing that stuff to the bidarka you won't even get the money Marshall promised you for taking us to the mainland."

Neither Carter nor Thornton attempted to conceal the admiration in their eyes as they regarded the girl. Never, thought the engineer, had he witnessed a like exhibition of sheer bluff. Then, suddenly, his heart seemed to freeze with horror. Deliberately the girl rose to her feet as the Indian swung the gun directly upon her, and started toward the rifle! The Indian, too, seemed nonplussed. But only for a second.

"Com' back!" he called roughly. "You no git. I shoot."

The girl paused and regarded the man with a sneering smile. "Well, shoot then —don't stand there bragging about it," she said, and stepped toward the rifle.

Just as the Indian brought the sights to his eyes Carter leaped, and as the man pulled the trigger the engineer's chest was almost at the muzzle of the gun, directly in line with the girl. There was a puny snap as the hammer exploded the cap, and the next instant Carter grasped the gun by the barrel and wrested it from the grasp of the astounded Indian.

The girl had the rifle now, and there was no trace of anger in her voice as she addressed the Indians—only scorn. "I told you you were making damn fools of yourselves," she said. "I told you that if you didn't drop that gun you wouldn't get a cent for taking us to the coast—and you won't. We'd leave you here on the island if we didn't need you to row the bidarka. Don't ever try to outguess white people—you can't do it."

Rifle in hand, she returned to the fire and selecting a few sticks from the armful the Indian had dropped, nested them against the tea pail as the two Indians turned sullenly away. Carter glanced at the gun in his hands.

"Why didn't it go off?" he asked. "They must have reloaded it during the night or they'd never have tried to pull that stunt."

Judith laughed. "Sure they reloaded it. I knew they would. I knew they'd make a play for that roll when I saw the look in their eyes as Marshall handed it over."

"Then why didn't it go off? Did you dampen their powder?"

"No, that wouldn't have fooled 'em. They'd have spotted damp powder, and then they might have gone ahead and planned some other way of robbing us—might have watched their chance and clubbed us, or bashed our heads in with rocks. As long as they thought the gun was in working order all they had to do was watch till they caught us away from the rifle."

Thornton got up and followed the Indians who had slouched off toward the bidarka.

"But," Carter persisted, "why didn't the gun go off?"

"It'll take a monkey wrench to fire that gun," the girl smiled. "Before I carried it back here I whittled a sliver and drove it into the nipple and broke it off so the spark from the cap couldn't get to the powder. They'll have to unscrew the nipple and drive out the plug."

"I'm afraid," Carter said in frank admiration, "that I'll never make a sourdough. There's too much to learn."

THERE was that in the dark eyes that made Carter's heart beats quicken as she answered. "You'll make a sourdough. You've got what it takes—and that's something that can't ever be learned. You've either got it; or you haven't—guts. You saw what that gun did to Marshall, and you didn't hesitate for an instant—you jumped right into it."

"It doesn't take much guts to jump in front of a spiked gun," Carter smiled.

"Yes—but you didn't know that it was spiked."

Thornton returned to the fire as the girl threw a handful of tea into the boil-

ing water. "Do you know I thought the bounders would try to make off in the bidarka an' leave us here on the island, so I followed 'em—an' they would have, too, but the bloomin' oars are gone!"

Judith nodded. "Yes, I hid 'em. While I was getting supper last evening I sent

one of the Siwashes for wood, and the other for water, and when they were out of sight I slipped the oars out and cached 'em in the bush."

"They still had the sail."

The girl smiled. "But I had the steering oar. Did you ever try to sail a boat without a rudder? This tea's ready now. You carry the pail and the meat to the bidarka. Tom will take the guns and I'll get the oars. There's a breeze springing up and we want to get going."

Chapter XIV

RESCUED

TWO hours after they embarked from the island the wind stiffened, the sky became overcast, and the low rumble of distant thunder sounded at intervals. The heavily loaded bidarka wallowed logily in the waves and the Indians cast anxious glances skyward as they worked at the oars. Judith, who was handling the steering oar, headed the craft for the nearest island, some five or six miles away.

"Lower the sail," she ordered, "and get ready to do some bailing. If these waves get any higher, they'll begin breaking over the side." To the Indians she said, "And you'd better lean on those oars, if you don't want to drown!"

It grew darker in the west. Lightning zig-zagged between the racing clouds, and the thunder became a continuous roar. The wind came in squalls and now and again a wave broke over the side. Rain began to fall and Carter emptied the tea overboard and began to bail with the pail.

Suddenly Thornton who was in the bow pointed toward a spot a few points to starboard. "There's smoke!" he cried. "By Jove, it's a boat of some kind! I saw it distinctly as the lightning flashed."

The girl headed the bidarka toward the smoke, and in a few minutes Thornton called out, "She's headed this way. I saw her plainly then. But she's a small craft —some kind of a tug, or somethin'."

"Fish boat," the girl said. "I hope they see us. We're never going to make that island in this thing, with the load we've got."

Anxiously the three whites eyed the approaching boat while the Indians redoubled their efforts at the oars. Presently Thornton shouted, "They see us! There's a man on the deck—two of 'em—an' one of 'em's holdin' a glass on us."

A few minutes later the fish boat drew close alongside and two unshaven faces peered down at them from the low deck.

"Take us aboard," Carter called. "We're about swamped."

One of the figures, a huge man in oilskins spat a stream of tobacco juice into the water. "Yeah? Well, what the hell ye doin' here, anyway?"

The girl forestalled Carter's reply. "We've been on an island for a month. These Indians found us there, and we hired 'em to take us off. We were cruising around among the islands with a sailboat and we got wrecked."

"Yeah? An' where'd you start from?"

"Sitka."

"You got any money?"

"Sure we've got money!" Carter replied angrily.

"Let's see the color of it."

The fish boat had shut off her power, and the two boats were popping about in the waves as Thornton held up his roll of bills. Another unshaven man peered at them from the deck house open at the stern, and another from the window of the wheel house forward. The big man, evidently the captain, spoke.

"All right, work her around in the lee an' we'll take you off. Not too clost there! Fend off with them oars, er we'll be on top of you. One to a time—now. Women first. You in the stern there, stand up—an' give us yer hands when she comes up alongside."

The girl was jerked aboard as the bidarka rose on a wave to the level of the deck, and after some maneuvering,

Carter and Thornton were similarly rescued. The two Indians refused to be taken aboard. As soon as Thornton was hauled onto the tug, they rowed away, down wind. The captain grinned. "They'll make it now she's ridin' higher. It's their own damn fault if they don't—so what the hell!" He eyed the three dripping figures with a grin. "Step below," he invited. "We ain't got much room on this tub, but we might's well git in out of the rain while we talk business." He gave a gruff order to the man who had appeared at the opening. The man disappeared, and presently the boat shuddered throughout its length and gathered speed, as the machinery rumbled noisily.

The other who had helped pull them from the bidarka remained on deck, as the four crowded into a little cubby hole forward under the wheel house. In the cabin were a bunk covered with filthy, disheveled blankets, a shelf-like table built against the wall, and a three legged stool that served as a chair.

"Where do you want to be took to—Sitka?" the man asked.

"No, Skagway," the girl replied. "We started from Sitka. But we were going to wind up our cruise in Skagway." Both Carter and Thornton wondered why she had invented the yarn about the sailboat cruise, but neither spoke.

"Well, Skagway's closer," the captain said. "I kin run you there fer a hundred dollars."

The girl laughed. "You can run us there for twenty-five dollars and make a profit," she said.

"Yeah? Well, listen. Folks that kin afford to cruise around amongst the islands in them fancy sailboats, kin afford to pay my price, see?"

"Oh—rather!" Thornton replied, drawing the roll from his pocket and handing over the money, which the captain counted and pocketed. "Now take us to Skagway as quick as this boat can make it. We should have been there long ago."

"Yeah? Well, not so fast! If you've been out on some island fer a month—an' by the looks of ye I guess that ain't no lie—a couple more days ain't a-goin' to hurt you none. I'm headin' fer Yakutat fer a cargo of fish. There's forty boxes waitin' fer me to pick up there in the mornin'."

The Englishman glanced about the tiny room with ill-concealed disgust. "Two days!" he exclaimed. "But where would you put us? This boat seems—er—ah—just a bit crowded, don't you think!"

The other scowled. "Well, the *Sally B* ain't no liner, 's a fact. She leaks water in, an' steam out. An' she stinks of oil an' fish. But, b'God, she'll git you to Skagway—an' that's a damn sight more'n that bidarka'd of done! There ain't no grand saloon, an' no dinin'-room, an' that there bunk of mine's the only bunk on her."

"Just so. I was merely wonderin' if, for say, another fifty dollars you'd run us straight into Skagway, instead of goin' after your load of fish?"

The captain reached into a tiny cupboard, produced a bottle and took a long drink. Rasping the dregs from his throat, he spat upon the floor and returned the bottle without offering a drink to the others. The Englishman's words, or his attitude, seemed to have angered him and he replied with a snarl.

"No, I won't. Not fer fifty, ner a hundred, ner a hundred an' fifty! B'God, it'll do folks like you good to live like other folks does fer a few days. An' besides, if I miss out on them fish, I don't git no more trade from Yakutat."

"When did you leave Skagway?" the girl asked.

"Skagway! Hell, I ain't been to Skagway sence spring! I've been north all summer. Fished out of Valdez till I lost my gear in a gale. Got to haul other folks fish now, till I kin git me some more. Clear out of here! I gotta take the wheel. Want to make Yakutat by mornin'."

The three stepped into the roofed after house as the captain followed and closed the door to the cabin—the only one on the boat. The rain had ceased and they made their way to the deck and found seats on coils of rope and empty fish boxes. The captain made his way to the wheel house from which emerged another bearded man who set to work helping the one who had helped pull them aboard. They had what seemed a hopeless task of trying to disentangle a heap of lines and tarded nets that littered the forward deck. The wind held stiff but the sun broke through the clouds and dried their clothing as the little boat pitched and tossed. Steam leaked from a dozen loose joints and filled the air with a warm, greasy odor. Black smoke poured from the single stubby funnel and flowed about them in billows. From somewhere below came the clank and pound of an engine sadly in need of repairs, and the thump of a pump with loose parts. A grimy man emerged at frequent intervals to wipe his hand on cotton waste, take a drink from a bottle, and scowl dourly at the three passengers. Several times during the afternoon the captain called one or the other of the deck hands to the wheel while he visited his cabin. As darkness approached it became quite evident he was drunk.

One of the deck hands disappeared below and returned presently with an open tin of beef, a pan of pilot bread, some boiled potatoes in a kettle, and a pail of tea which he set upon the deck, and without a word, returned to his task of disentangling gear.

Thornton eyed the meat doubtfully. "My word!" he exclaimed. "Food just tossed onto the deck as though we were a pack of hungry dogs—what?"

Judith giggled, and drawing the knife from the sheath at Carter's belt, pried some meat out of the tin. "And I'm hungry enough to eat it, no matter what it is, nor how it's served." She took a bite of the meat, and reached into the pot for a potato. "It isn't half bad—really. And the potatoes and tea are piping hot. You'll be lucky if you never have to eat anything worse than this."

"Well, thank the Lord, we'll be in Skagway in a couple of days," grinned Thornton, helping himself to a potato.

"We hope we will," supplemented the girl. "We didn't make it on the *Malaspina*, and we didn't make it in the bidarka, and judging by the sounds that come from the engine room, I'll bet a lot of things could happen to the *Sally B* before she hits Skagway, or even Yakutat, wherever that is!"

"If she blows up, or runs on the rocks," Carter said, pointing to the two boats on the after deck, "there's a couple of dories handy. With the engineer and the captain both drunk it seems to me it'll be a miracle if something doesn't happen."

"It's been jolly so far," said Thornton. "I hope nothin' annoyin' will occur to spoil our trip. How does one manage the tea in the absence of cups? Maybe fishin' boat etiquette demands that it be passed about like a lovin' cup. I'll ask the captain." He got up off his coil of rope and stepped around to the wheel house. Presently he returned.

"Did you find out?" Judith asked, smiling up at him.

"The captain is a boor. He told me to go to hell. If he hadn't been steerin' the ruddy boat I'd jolly well have slapped some manners into him."

CHAPTER XV

WRECKED

AFTER the deck hands had lighted the kerosene running lights Carter sauntered around to the wheel house. "How much do you want," he asked, "to rent the lady your cabin for the night?"

The man twirled the spokes of the wheel and leered down at him. "I'll let my mate take the wheel, an' share it with her fer nothin'," he grinned.

Carter's eyes narrowed, as he stepped closer. "One more crack like that and I'll cut your damned throat!" he said.

The grin died on the other's lips and the eyes that met the narrowed gray ones faltered. "Jes' a li'l joke," he said. "Hell, can't you take a li'l joke?"

"No. That's one kind I can't take. How much do you want for your cabin—you to stay out of it?"

"Cost her twenty dollars. An' I'll go down there first an' git out my licker."

"Here's your money. Go get your liquor. And then stay away from there—if you know what's good for you. I'm a light sleeper—and I won't be far away."

THE man called one of the others to the wheel and stepped below to return a few minutes later, a couple of bottles bulging his pockets.

Returning aft Carter picked up an oar from one of the dories and, motioning the girl to follow, stepped below and led the way to the little cabin, in which the captain had lighted a small tin bracket lamp. "You sleep here," he said. "There's no lock on the door, but you can brace this oar against it."

The girl glanced toward the bunk with its disheveled bedding. "Those blankets look positively poisonous," she said.

Carter nodded. "Yes, but if you smoothed 'em out you could spread that extra set of oilskins over 'em and lie on them. You won't have any covers, but with the fire going all night under the boiler it won't be too cold in here. Anyway, you'll be out of the wind, and can get some sleep."

"There's a bar of soap!" the girl exclaimed. "Do you realize that we've been without soap for six weeks?"

"I certainly do," grinned Carter, "and there's another bar on that shelf. I'll slip it into my pocket and dip up some water and take a bath."

The girl eyed the tin wash basin dubiously. "There's a pail of water here—but that wash basin is crusted with dirt and dried soap."

"Use the pail. The captain won't know the difference. He's too drunk to care, anyhow."

The girl's brow drew into a troubled frown. "I don't like this layout. I'd almost rather be back in the bidarka."

"The bidarka couldn't have made land with the load she had. The waves were breaking over the side, and the wind was rising. This tub got to us just in time."

"But the engineer's drunk and the captain's drunk, getting drunker all the time. Do you suppose they know what they're about? How to run the engine, and steer the boat, and things like that?"

Carter grinned. "Well, both the captain and the engineer are well past middle life, and looking at 'em I'd say that neither one of 'em are drunk for the first time. If they've managed to keep alive this long the chances are they can hold out for the rest of this trip."

"I guess you're right," the girl agreed. "But I sure wish we were safe in Skagway. And you bet, if there's another boat of any kind in Yakutat we'll finish the trip in her. Anything would be better than this!"

CARTER stepped from the cabin and heard the girl fix the oar in place against the door before he joined Thornton in the stern. Finding a pail, he attached a line to it and drew up a bucket of water. He produced the bar of soap, and both he and the Englishman pulled off their clothing and scrubbed themselves in defiance of the cold wind that blew over the water.

Presently the captain lurched from the wheel house, wrapped himself in the bearskin tossed aside by the man he had called to relieve him, and threw himself down on the pile of tangled gear forward. The engineer emerged from below, awoke a man sleeping in one of the dories, rolled up in his bearskin, and was soon snoring

loudly. In the darkness the boat pitched and tossed, and the dilapidated machinery clanked on.

With no covering Carter and Thornton slept fitfully in the shelter of the open after cabin through which one must pass to reach the forward cabin occupied by the girl.

In the gray of the morning Carter awoke from one of these fitful naps with an indefinable feeling that all was not well. He was lying on some bags of sacked coal. His muscles felt stiff and sore, and he was chilled to the bone. The boat bucked and pitched and the machinery thumped, and clanked and rattled. He sat up and stretched his stiffened muscles, and as he did so he caught a slight movement from the narrow passage that led to the forward cabin. Peering into the gloom, he made out a huge form before the girl's door. As he looked a hand reached for the latch and lifted it. When it didn't give, the captain placed both hands against the door and shoved—just as Carter hurled himself upon him. Caught off balance, the man staggered back against the bulkhead, and slipping around him before he could regain his balance, Carter rushed him toward the stern, and out through the after cabin where he tripped over an empty fish box and sprawled upon the deck.

With a loud-bellowed curse he lurched to his feet, grabbed an iron belaying pin from a box beside the winch and lunged at the younger man, who side-stepped the flail-like blow, as he drew the belt knife from its sheath and struck out wildly. There was a hoarse, gurgling cry, and as the captain staggered toward the rail, the belaying pin dropped from his hand and warm red blood spurted from a gash in his neck and splashed upon the deck. Other spurts followed in rapid succession. The captain groped blindly with his huge arms, lurched heavily forward, as the boat heaved suddenly upward, and somersaulted over the low rail, and disappeared.

Thornton appeared from somewhere just as the drunken engineer threw off his bearskin and staggered from the dory, swinging a razor. At the same instant, the man from below reached the deck armed with an iron sluice bar.

In the rapidly strengthening light Carter caught a glimpse of high mountains looming close—and of a wide-eyed, bearded face staring out from the wheel house window. The next moment, he was giving ground before the advancing man with the sluice bar. Out of the tail of his eye he saw Thornton catch up the belaying pin that had dropped from the captain's hand and leap for the engineer. Armed only with the sheath knife, Carter retreated, backing around the winch as the man from the engine room followed thrusting viciously with the long chisel-like sluice bar, his eyes glaring ferociously above his stubble of black beard.

IN VAIN Carter's eyes darted here and there seeking some loose object that he could hurl at the oncoming figure. But he could find nothing. Just as it seemed that he must be cornered between the after rail and one of the dories, and either be speared with the sluice bar or forced to jump overboard, the advancing man set his foot squarely upon the bar of soap Carter had left on the deck after taking his bath. He slipped, spun halfway around at a sudden lurch of the boat and crashed backward as the sluice bar clanged against the winch. Carter lunged forward and just as the man's hand closed upon the bar he leaped upon it with both feet, clamping the man's fingers to the deck. A heave of the boat threw him off balance and just as the other, with a yowl of pain, jerked his fingers free, Carter lashed out with a heavy pac and caught him squarely on the point of the chin. The man rolled against the winch and lay still.

Again in a glance Carter saw the mountains towering close, and the bearded face in the wheel house window. He saw, too, that Thornton had retreated before the

cursing, razor-swinging engineer until he stood in the open end of the deck house waggling the belaying pin before the man who was dancing about threatening to carve him into ribbons.

Sheathing his knife, Carter picked up the sluice bar and grasping it in both hands hurled it at the engineer's legs. The heavy bar caught the man squarely behind the knees, and sweeping both legs from beneath him, brought him sprawling backwards to the deck.

At the same instant there was a shrill cry of terror from the wheel house, followed by a grinding splintering crash, as the boat struck a submerged rock, pivoted, swung stern to the wind, and then heeled sharply to starboard. The clash and clang of machinery ceased suddenly and a volcano of steam poured upward from the engine room and enveloped Thornton in a cloud of white vapor. Regaining his balance Carter leaped for the opening and plunging into the white smother, made his way to the narrow gangway just as Judith succeeded in releasing the oar that braced her door shut.

"What happened?" cried the girl.

"We're on the rocks!" he panted, snatching up an armful of bedding. "Take the oar and make for one of the dories! Hurry, she may sink any minute!"

They reached the opening of the deck house to see the man from the wheel house and the engineer toss the unconscious form of the man Carter had knocked out into a dory, leap in themselves, and shove off. Thornton was already busy with the sluice bar prying the other dory loose where its nose had got jammed beneath a winch lever. Judith and Carter joined him, tossing the blankets and the oar into the boat, they added their efforts and just as the tug seemed about to disintegrate completely in the pounding waves that had already swept away her wheel house and most of the deck house roof, they succeeded in launching the small craft and shoving clear.

As they shipped the oars they could see the other dory, with the two men at the oars, bobbing up and down on the waves, several hundred yards away. Bending to the oars, Carter and Thornton headed the boat into the wind as the girl took her place in the stern. Close at hand the waves beat thunderously against the rock wall that rose straight out of the depths, sending great fountains of spray high into the air. Grimly the two labored and the little boat, riding the waves like a duck, began to pull gradually away from the menacing rocks.

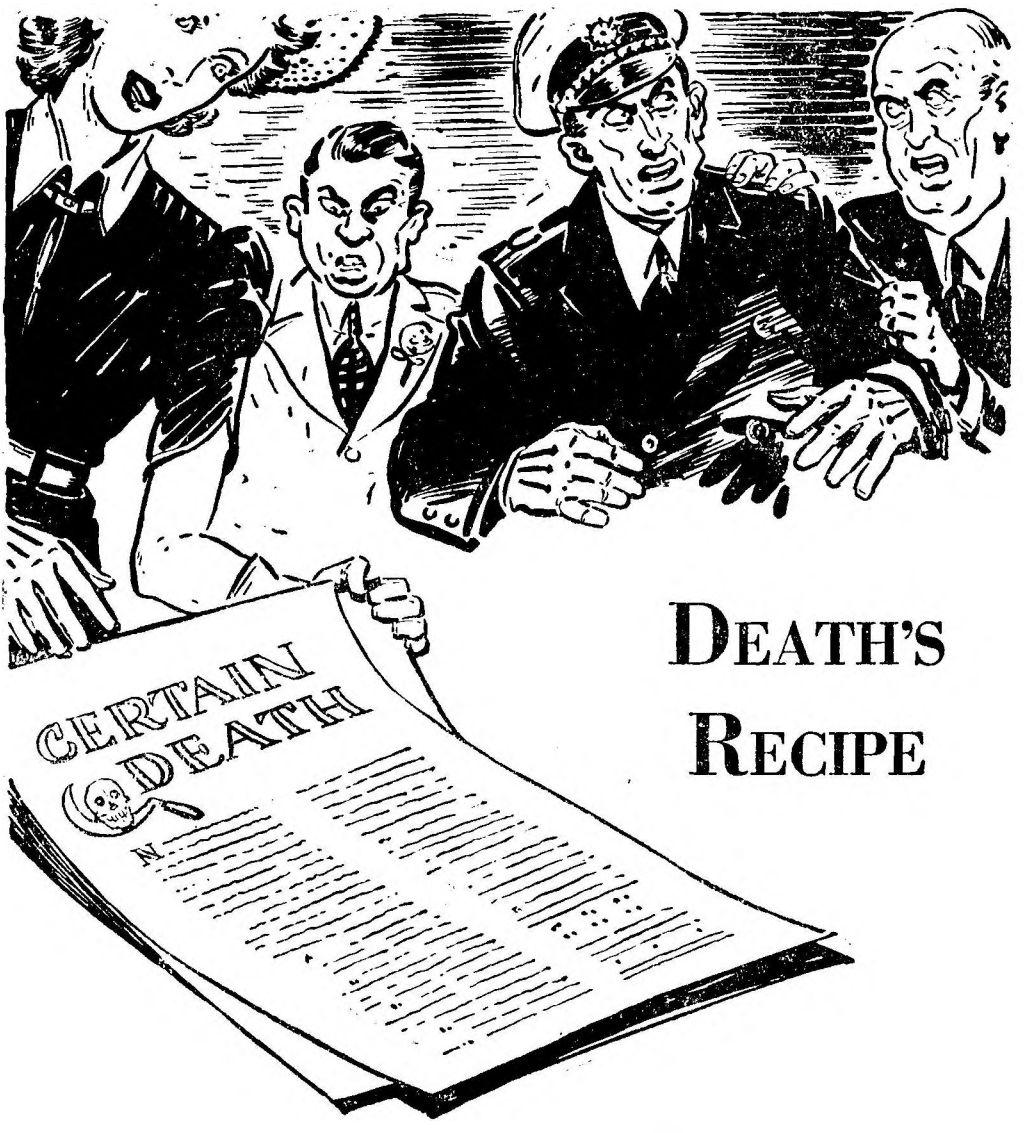
"This must be the mainland," Carter said. "Which way shall we go? Where is Yakutat?"

The girl shook her head. "I don't know —never heard of it before. It must be some Siwash fishing village. The men in the other boat probably know. We'd better follow them." She paused, her eyes searching the sea ahead. "But," she cried, "we'll have to hurry or we'll loose 'em! Look what's coming!"

Carter turned in his seat and glanced ahead. A quarter of a mile away he could see the other boat as it lifted onto the wave crests and disappeared in the huge troughs—and beyond it only a gray smother. As he looked the boat was blotted out by a billow of opaque fog. Again it appeared, indistinctly, only to be swallowed up as the fog bank was driven upon it down the wind. Then the clammy breath of the fog brushed their cheeks, and they were completely enveloped so that even the towering mountains disappeared.

(*Part III in the Next* SHORT STORIES)

But Frisco Ed's Chief Interest in Any Boarding Party Was the Pearls in the Ship's Safe



DEATH'S RECIPE

By NEIL MARTIN

Author of "First Command" etc.

FRISCO ED McKINNEY placed the purser's receipt between the covers of his passport, tucked the passport in its customary pocket of the money belt about his slim waist and prepared to turn in. Since the *Travancore* cleared from Port Kennedy, this had been his nightly ritual, for the purser's receipt represented pearls —almost one hundred thousand dollars' worth. And Frisco McKinney was by nature a careful young man, particularly with other people's property.

He was buttoning the pocket flap of the

money belt when some inner sense warned him of another presence. This was the second time since the little inter-island steamer cleared from the Thursday Island port that McKinney was aware of being watched. Someone, he realized, was standing on the deck outside the screened window of his stateroom.

Masking his discovery behind a forced yawn, he lifted his pajamas from the berth and stood there, as if undecided about turning in. Naked, except for his shorts and the money belt about his waist, he looked entirely competent and just a trifle hardboiled; tall and bronzed, wide-shouldered and narrow-hipped, with the long-muscled arms of the natural boxer.

With a shrug of indifference, he tossed the pajamas on the berth, turned to the mirror above the washstand and examined the shadowy bristle on his pugnacious chin, a calculating gleam in his hard blue eyes. To a casual observer, he might have been admiring his own reflection. Actually, his left hand was moving stealthily toward the light switch.

As his hand came in contact with the switch, he snapped off the light and then whirled to face the window. A man's head and shoulders were framed in the rectangle, looking like a silhouette cut from black paper.

"Slipped up on you that time, fella!" McKinney chuckled.

He sprang to the door, thrust it outward and looked along the deck, just in time to catch a glimpse of the white-clad figure that ran in a half crouch and whipped out of sight around the after end of the engine room.

REALIZING the futility of pursuit, McKinney closed and locked the door. Sitting on the edge of his berth, he pulled on his pajamas, then filled and lit his pipe. He stretched out in the bunk and puffed reflectively, wondering which of his five fellow passengers was a Peeping Tom.

He guessed the reason that lay behind the other's curiosity, and regretted now that he hadn't gone south to Sydney and there taken the *Sonoma* direct to San Francisco, instead of taking passage on the *Travancore* from Thursday Island to Manila, where he planned to catch one of the regular Pacific liners for the States. But traveling north on the little inter-island steamer was like being with home folks, for Captain Stroud and Purser Guppy were old friends.

Staring into the darkness, he mentally assembled his fellow passengers. Davidson, the mild-appearing little man who occupied a room on the starboard side, he dismissed as harmless. Also Chester and Tunwell, who claimed to be in business in Manila. That left Campbell and Ahearn.

He had been suspicious of the latter two from the moment he had crossed the steamer's gangway. Campbell, a tall, blond Queenslander, whose low-pitched Australian drawl was flavored with a trace of Scots burr, had tried to strike up an acquaintance with McKinney on the first day of the passage. But when McKinney came to realize that he was being adroitly pumped, he dropped the other like a hot potato.

As for the man who was down on the passenger lit as Michael J. Ahearn, no one seemed to know anything about him. Somehow, his very name seemed to suggest a bluff affability, a characteristic which Mr. Ahearn was trying to live up to and making a very bad job of it.

It wasn't that McKinney was unduly suspicious of his fellowmen. But eight years in the Far East had bred in him an attitude of vigilance that had become second nature. Consequently, Campbell's spurious friendliness and adroit inquisitiveness had put him on his guard. Ahearn, too, he kept at arm's length, for he couldn't understand why a man who sounded his r's so far back in his throat should try to pass himself off as an Irishman. That in itself might have seemed funny to McKinney had it not been for the fact that he was

convoying to New York close to one hundred thousand dollars in choice pearls, of which only about ten thousand dollars worth represented his own share.

Because of the war, the pearling business had become temporarily disorganized. Vessels were rotting at their anchorages, and prime shell which once brought close to a thousand dollars a ton on the dock in Singapore was now collecting mould on the storage wharves of Broome, Port Kennedy and Ely. Likewise, the market for pearls, once centered in Amsterdam and Paris, no longer existed. Consequently, to stave off bankruptcy, the few pearlers still operating out of Port Kennedy had formed a pool to offer their pearls in the only available market, New York, and McKinney had been entrusted with the delivery of the gems to a New York jobber. Hence his suspicion of his fellow passengers.

HE WAS startled out of his reverie by a warning blast of the steamer's siren. Glancing toward the window of his stateroom, McKinney swore softly as a man's head and shoulders were silhouetted for an instant upon the copper screen. Frowning, he rose quickly from his bunk and peered through the window.

Outside on the deck, between the window of his stateroom and the door of the adjoining room, a rack containing a reel of fire hose was fastened to the superstructure. The little passenger, Davidson, was standing below the rack. As McKinney watched, the man jerked a long envelope from the inner pocket of his linen coat, thrust it behind the coil of canvas hose and then flitted silently aft.

"Well," McKinney commented, "so he's the one who's been peekin' in at me? Reckon I'll have a talk with him in the mornin'."

He was about to turn back to his bunk when the tall, erect figure of Campbell appeared before the window, silently as a ghost.

The Australian was reaching toward the hose rack, a smile of triumph on his lean face. Suddenly he drew back his arm, glanced quickly toward the bridge, then turned and ran aft, his canvas sneakers falling soundlessly on the deck.

No sooner had Campbell passed from McKinney's view than another man appeared before the window, looking about him in apparent indecision—a squat, bow-legged figure, with a large globular head. McKinney's lips puckered in a soundless whistle as he caught the glint of starlight on the pistol in the other's hand.

"Well, I'll be a monkey's son!" McKinney muttered, as the man whirled on his heel and went forward again. "First, it's Davidson. Next, it's Campbell. And now comes that phony Mick, Ahearn, with a gun—a regular game of hide and seek!"

Again, the bellow of the siren beat against his ear-drums. Opening the door, he stepped to the rail and looked out ahead. A big motor cruiser was lying broadside to the steamer's path, apparently disabled.

"That lad's fixin' to get himself run down," McKinney commented.

The white beam of a flashlight showed below the steamer's bridge, cut like a sword through the darkness and then winked off and on in a signal. An answering flash came from the motorboat, which began to move slowly toward the larger vessel. Peering forward, McKinney saw Ahearn standing below the bridge, a flashlight in his hand.

The strident jangle of the telegraph sounded an instant before the diminishing rhythm of the engines told McKinney that the *Travancore* was slowing to a stop. A minute later the steamer was rolling sluggishly to the oily swell of the Banda Sea, steam roaring from her exhaust pipe.

Footfalls clattered on the treads of the bridge ladder as the passenger who called himself Chester descended in advance of the captain and his two mates. Behind the officers came Tunwell, who was urging them off the bridge at the point of a pistol.

As they reached the deck, Ahearn waved them toward the chartroom.

"Holy Pete!" McKinney exclaimed in sudden alarm. "What in hell's comin' off here?"

He darted back to his room and groped frantically under his pillow for the six-shooter he had placed there that evening before going to dinner. Failing to find the weapon, he switched on the light and emptied his berth in a fruitless search.

"Damn!" he swore. "Somebody's laid the ground for all this." He switched off the light, stepped to the window and watched the big motorboat drawing alongside, her short foredeck crowded with turbanned Malays.

"It's a hold-up, sure as I'm a foot high," he went on, as he watched Ahearn stand by, pistol in hand, while two of the steamer's crew lowered a Jacob's ladder over the rail. "These guys will strip the ship's safe as bare as Mother Hubbard's cupboard. Hell! It begins to look as if old man Guppy's receipt isn't goin' to be worth much, after all."

IN HIS twenty-eight years of life he had been in many tight corners. But nothing like this had ever happened to him before. He had just seen Captain Stroud and his two mates herded off the bridge and ordered into the chartroom, prisoners. Now the Malays were coming over the side from the motorboat, led by a tall white man. If he had only Chester, Tunwell and Ahearn to consider, he might eventually have found a way out of his difficulty, for it seemed impossible that three men, even armed, could continue to intimidate thirty others. But the arrival of the fourth white man and the Malays made the odds too heavy.

"Holy Pete!" he groaned. "How can I ever face the boys back in Port Kennedy again?"

He stood to loose something like ten thousand dollars himself, if the boarders succeeded in forcing the purser to open the safe. But he was thinking only of his three associates, and of what the loss of the pearls would mean to them.

He stepped away from the window as someone halted before the door of his stateroom. The panel was jerked open, and Chester stood outside, his pistol pointing into the room.

"Come out, Major," he ordered. "You're wanted in the chartroom."

"Major, is it?" McKinney drawled, stepping over the storm sill. Having had his master's papers for years, he was accustomed to being addressed as captain. But to be called major was something new in his experience. "You're sure liberal when it comes to promotin' a guy," he added.

"Don't try to stall, Major," Chester frowned. "We've been wise to you ever since you came aboard in Port Kennedy." He motioned impatiently forward with his gun. "Get along to the chartroom."

McKinney's response was a left to the face that raked along the side of Chester's head and almost unshipped his ear. Chester barked a curse, sprang at McKinney and slashed at him with his pistol.

"Steady, Vantin! Don't lose your temper."

McKinney slammed a right to the chest which sent Chester reeling against the rail, from which he rebounded, only to pause suddenly and let his pistol fall to the deck. Turning, McKinney saw Campbell standing a few feet away, covering Chester with a 9 mm Webley.

"Get Vantin's gun, Major," Campbell ordered curtly.

Glancing past him, McKinney saw a squat figure creeping stealthily toward the Australian.

"Watch out for that phony Mick!" he warned, and then dived for Chester's pistol.

Chester kicked the weapon beyond McKinney's reach and added a second kick that caught him on the shoulder and sent him sprawling. Almost in the same breath,

the report of a pistol blended with the bellow of the exhaust. Campbell's right leg shot forward and he teetered on his left toe like a figure dancer, fighting to maintain his balance, until a roll of the ship sent him crashing to the deck.

"I put that one in your leg, Captain," Ahearn declared coldly, emerging from the shadows. "The next one will be in your head, unless you learn to watch your step."

Campbell sat up on the deck and gripped his right thigh with both hands, his face twisted in a grimace of pain.

"Thanks—for nothing!" he grunted.

Ahearn lifted Campbell's Webley from the deck, examined it critically and then thrust it carelessly inside the waistband of his trousers. Turning to Chester, he said:

"I believe it would be safer if we kept these fellows away from the ship's officers. They're bound to start trouble." He nodded toward McKinney and added grimly, "Particularly the major."

"Put them aft in the saloon," the other suggested. "That will put the length of the ship between them and the officers."

McKinney scrambled up from the deck. All this talk of major convinced him that he was being mistaken for someone else, although he realized that the others' mistake didn't minimize the danger of his losing his precious package from the ship's safe. He glanced covertly past Ahearn and Chester to the two Malays standing guard by the door of the chartroom. The others, with Tunwell and the fourth white man, were over on the starboard side, apparently looting the staterooms. He looked at Campbell and winked; with only two men to consider, things weren't so bad, after all.

He sprang at Ahearn, shot a cannon-ball left to the man's barrel chest and slammed him back against the deck house with a force that jarred the pistol from his hand. Ahearn rebounded like a rubber ball and came at McKinney with swinging fists. McKinney drove a piledriver right to the other's mid-section, followed up with a left to the face, exulting as he felt the other's nose collapse under the impact of his knuckles. He was in his element now; here was something he understood. And he was at least making an effort to save his own property and the property of his associates.

Standing toe to toe, they swapped punches. Ahearn could take it; he seemed to be all steel and whipcord. McKinney grudgingly admitted that the fellow should have been a real Irishman, instead of a phony. But there was nothing phony about the chopping lefts and rights that he drove at the American's head. Neither was their anything phony about the lacing he was receiving from McKinney's capable fists.

Out of the corner of his eye, McKinney could see Campbell reaching toward Ahearn's gun. Another swift glance showed him that the two Malays had deserted their post by the door of the chartroom and were now racing aft. He couldn't see Chester, although he sensed that the fellow was somewhere behind him. He smashed a left to Ahearn's chin. The other went limp, fell into a clinch and went to his knees, dragging McKinney down with him. Campbell uttered a warning shout, which brought McKinney's glance around to Chester, who was towering above him, his pistol lifted for a downward stroke. And then McKinney felt the weapon smash down on his head and he fell forward on top of Ahearn.

When McKinney returned to consciousness, he found himself lying on a settee in the saloon with his hands fastened behind his back. Campbell, similarly bound, was seated in a chair a dozen feet away, his right leg held stiffly out in front of him, his chin sunk on his chest in an attitude of utter dejection.

"Holy Pete!" McKinney exclaimed, as memory came flooding back to his brain. Instinctively, his thoughts flew to the money belt about his waist. It was still

there; but its presence was no assurance that his package was still in the ship's safe.

He looked across at Campbell and called, "Hey, there!"

THE Australian lifted his head and regarded him with lack-luster blue eyes. "Hello, Major!" he responded weakly. "I thought that blighter, Vantin, had stove in your head."

"Vantin—who's he?"

"Alias Chester, you know. Or has that rap on the noodle destroyed your memory, Major?"

"Look here," McKinney queried, "what does this major business mean? I'm entitled to be called captain, all right; but that major stuff sounds like the army. I don't get it."

Campbell regarded him with a puzzled frown. "Aren't you Major Lyle?"

McKinney shook his head. "I'm not travelin' under an alias. Name's Edward Joseph McKinney, Master Mariner, sail or steam."

The other stared at him in frank doubt. "Why, then," he asked, "did you mix into something that doesn't concern you?"

"Because I figure those guys will loot the ship's safe." McKinney explained. He told Campbell of his charge and added in conclusion, "Anyway, Chester started it when he called me on deck."

"Carried the battle to you, as it were," the Australian said thoughtfully. "The fact of the matter is that everyone had you taped for Major Lyle, of the American Intelligence Service."

"I reckon, then," McKinney ventured, "you and those other guys are intelligence men, too?"

Campbell shrugged. "I don't suppose it will do any harm to inform you that our friends are freelance agents. International spies, perhaps, would be a better term. Their leader is Fritz Radlow, alias Ahearn, an Alsatian. Chester is really Pierre Vantin, a renegade Belgian. Tunwell's real name is Heinrich Finsch. And the fellow who came aboard with the Malays is named Brengleman. They're after the Cargillite formula."

"Cargillite formula? McKinney echoed.

"It's the formula for what is perhaps the handiest explosive that so far has been discovered," Campbell explained. "A fellow named Cargill, down in Victoria, perfected it.

He was looked upon as a sort of crackpot until the authorities discovered that a four-pound bomb of his explosive, dropped from a plane at five thousand feet, not only laid the bush flat for an eighth of a mile in every direction but also generated a colorless, tasteless gas against which no gas mask made would be proof."

"Isn't the use of poison gas outlawed?" McKinney quizzed.

Campbell smiled cynically. "A gentleman's agreement, which stands good only so long as everyone concerned agrees to be a gentleman. But think how handy a thing Cargillite would be in strafing ground troops!" he added with professional enthusiasm.

"Guys like Cargill," McKinney growled, "ought to be confined in a nut house."

CAMPBELL shrugged. "A matter of opinion. In that case, perhaps you'd be pleased to know that Cargill was murdered and his formula stolen. I imagine our little friend, Drigalski, could tell something about that."

"Who's Drigalski?"

"Pardon me! Davidson, you know. His real name is Feodor Drigalski, Soviet agent. He's carrying the formula now, probably planning to deliver it to another Soviet agent in Manila."

"And you and those other guys are tryin' to get it away from him?"

Campbell grinned. "Quite so! It is anyone's game, seeing that Cargill left no heirs. If Drigalski delivers it safely to his fellow agent, the Russian government will be manufacturing Cargillite by the ton within the next ninety days.

"Of course," he added, "the British government will get it, sooner or later. Even a red-hot Commy has his price, you know. Anyway, it's impossible to keep anything like that a secret for very long."

"Was this Major Lyle after it, too?" McKinney quizzed. "Hell! I didn't know old Uncle Sam went in for that sort of thing."

"The old game—get it to keep someone else from getting it," Campbell said. "For all their peace talk, the Yankees are no different from the rest of humanity. Of course, it may be that they are planning to sequester it in their secret files, just as the British government plans to do, if we can keep it from falling into enemy hands."

McKinney nodded absently. He really wasn't interested in the formula, except that it was of paramount interest to the raiders.

"Reckon I ought to be thankful they're not after the contents of the ship's safe," he said.

"But they are," Campbell informed him. "Of course, the formula comes first, but before they leave, they'll force the purser to open the safe. So you might just as well kiss your pearls good-by."

HE STARTED as a flurry of pistol shots blended with the stamp of running feet on the poop overhead. A chorus of yells drifted from forward. A gun blasted outside the companionway and was answered by the staccato report of an automatic somewhere on the bridge deck.

"Drigalski, I presume," Campbell said. "Those fellows aren't going to have an easy time with that little devil."

Another blast of gunfire sounded from without. For a moment it seemed as if a battle was being raged on the after well deck. Footfalls rang on the iron ladder leading to the poop, pounded on the deck overhead and whispered on the carpeted treads of the companion stairs. Then Drigalski groped his way blindly into the saloon, his pistol gripped in a bloody hand.

Blood dyed the front of his shirt, bulged the garment at the waistline until it looked like a leaky wine skin. Crimson drops splashed the carpet as he staggered to the center of the saloon and then turned to face the companionway. Then he went to his knees, suddenly, as if he had been struck down by an unseen hand. He tried to rise, got one foot under him and fought to lift himself from the deck, only to fall over on his side with a sudden roll of the ship. His pistol slipped from his hand and slid out of sight under a chair. Another roll of the steamer turned him on his back, and he lay staring at the dome light overhead.

"Gone west," Campbell muttered. "He was dying on his feet when he came below. I suppose those blighters have got the formula now."

"To hell with the formula!" McKinney snarled. He was thinking of his pearls, and of the dead man's gun under the chair. He strained at the turns of heaving line about his wrists and felt them give. "Lord!" he prayed. "Just let me get my mitts on that gun."

"Better go easy, old man," Campbell warned. "You can't fight the whole gang. They're rather terrible—"

"I'm pretty damn' terrible myself, once I get started," McKinney panted, straining at his bonds. "Just let me get a gun in my fist and I'll show you, fella."

He ceased his efforts as a cautious footfall sounded on the stair treads. Then Vantin came into the saloon, swooped like a buzzard upon the body of Drigalski and, like a buzzard, tore frantically at the dead man's blood-soaked garments. Campbell looked at McKinney and smiled.

"Ha!" Vantin caught the Australian's expression "So, you have it!" He came to his feet and glared at Campbell." We did not believe when Drigalski said you had stolen it."

"That was very kind of him," the Australian drawled. "Clever, too."

"He killed Brengleman and Radlow, damn him!" Vantin declared.

"If I had the formula," Campbell said quietly "would it have been necessary for him to put up a fight?"

Vantin shrugged, stepped to the foot of the companionway and called on deck. Flinsch came into the saloon, accompanied by the purser, who was being guarded by two Malays.

"It isn't on him," Vantin declared, pointing to the almost nude body of Drigalski. "We searched these others"—he indicated McKinney and Campbell with a nod—"without finding it. That means it's still hidden somewhere aboard this ship."

Flinsch shrugged. "We'll just have to keep on searching." He glanced at the saloon clock. "It's only one-thirty yet. We've still got five hours before daylight."

One of the Malays plucked at his sleeve and said, "Suppose we make this fella open ship safe? Make'm search later."

"We might as well," Flinsch agreed. He looked at Guppy and added, "You'd better open up and save yourself a lot of misery."

The purser shook his grizzled head. "Nothing doing!"

"In that case," Flinsch drawled, "we'll have to let Hamid put the screws to you."

He and Vantin helped the two Malays force Guppy into a chair. The purser struggled furiously, but he was like a child before the combined strength of the others. In five minutes his wrists were fastened to the arms of the chair.

Taking advantage of the struggle, McKinney wrenched at his own bonds and felt like shouting when his right hand slipped free. He was about to shake the turns of line from his left wrist, when Flinsch stepped back from the purser's chair and glanced over the saloon. McKinney lay still, his hands beneath him, while he watched Flinsch fumble in his trousers pocket and produce a small penknife, which he handed to one of the Malays.

"Proceed, Hamid."

The Malay opened the small blade of the penknife, gripped the purser's right forefinger while the others watched in anticipation.

Seeing his advantage in the preoccupation, McKinney came off the settee like a

jumping jack and plunged across the saloon toward the chair beneath which Drigalski's gun was lying. Before the others could turn, he had scooped up the weapon and was leveling it across the chair back.

"Throw up your hands!" he ordered.

Flinsch's right hand paused halfway toward the pistol thrust inside the waistband of his trousers. Vantin rested his right hand on the purser's shoulder and stared. The two Malays crouched before the chair like a pair of brown statues. No one moved.

Instantly, it became apparent to McKinney that he had created an impasse. The others were making no effort to resist. Neither were they complying with his order to throw up their hands. They just stood there and stared.

"Hell!" McKinney snarled. "Ain't you rats goin' to start something? Or is this a posing act?"

That brought action. Vantin dropped behind the chair, leveled his automatic over the purser's shoulder and fired. Flinsch snatched at his gun. One of the Malays straightened from his crouch and hurled his kris, which stuck, quivering, in the upholstery of the chair. McKinney heard Vantin's bullet smack into the arm of the chair as he dropped to cover behind

it, and he wondered if the slugs would come all the way through. Even as he thought of that, he was sighting around the chair at Flinsch, who was nearest.

The report of Flinsch's weapon sounded like a thunderclap in the confined air of the saloon. McKinney pressed the trigger of his own weapon.

The only result was a dull, metallic click.

VANTIN laughed and rose from his crouch behind the purser.

"Too bad your trick boomeranged, Major," he jeered. "Now be nice and let Ali tie you up again."

McKinney came slowly to his feet and watched the Malay snatch his discarded bonds from the sette and come toward him with a confident grin on his face. McKinney waited until the fellow came within striking distance, then brought the empty pistol crashing down on his turban, beating him senseless to the deck. Whirling to face Vantin, he flung back his arm and launched the weapon at his head.

The hurtling pistol reflected the soft glow of the dome light overhead as it whirled like a pinwheel across the saloon and caught Vantin squarely between the eyes, dropping him to the carpet like a length of chain.

Swooping toward the fallen Malay, McKinney dragged an old-fashioned long-barelled revolver from the fellow's sash. The air in the saloon rocked to the blast of Flinsch's gun, and a mirror shattered into fragments, which tinkled to the deck with a roll of the ship. A second bullet clipped McKinney's shoulder as he straightened up, took hurried aim at Flinsch, all the time wondering if the ancient weapon would fire.

He pressed the trigger, felt the recoil that almost jerked the pistol from his hand and saw Flinsch stagger backward, clutching with his left hand at the back of the chair in which the purser was tied, while he strove to lift his weapon for another shot. Suddenly he pitched forward on his face and lay still.

McKinney sprang across the saloon, snatched up Flinsch's gun, then lifted Vantin's automatic from under the purser's chair. He turned to look for Hamid and saw a pair of naked brown legs vanishing through the companionway.

"My word!" Campbell gasped. "That was sudden!"

"We're still deep in the woods, fella," McKinney said. He pulled the kris from the chair upholstery and sliced through the turns of heaving line about the Australian's wrists. "Here, take this." He thrust the old revolver into Campbell's hand.

He freed the purser, then searched the clothing of Vantin and Flinsch and found two full clips, with which he reloaded the two automatics. Aware that the Malays wouldn't abandon without a fight this opportunity to loot the steamer, he crept on deck.

Below the bridge a group of Malays was gathered in noisy altercation about Hamid. Others had deserted their post outside the forecastle and were hurrying to join the main body. McKinney estimated that they numbered about a dozen men.

Presently their argument came to an end, and they started aft, silently as stalking cats. Catching sight of McKinney on the poop, they paused for an instant, then came on with a rush.

McKinney dropped flat on the deck, thrust both automatics out before him and commenced firing. A kris flickered above his head. A bullet struck the iron treads of the ladder and ricocheted within an inch of his face. More bullets knocked slivers from the caprail. Screams of rage, yells of agony and the thud of falling bodies blended with the staccato reports of the two automatics and the dull booms of the few old revolvers possessed by the attackers. For a moment it seemed as though he must be overwhelmed by their

rush. Two of the Malays, pushed on by pressure from behind, actually came halfway up the poop ladder before he blasted them down.

That was the turning point. The others fell back. One broke and ran. His panic was communicated to the others, and in an instant they were in full flight. Rushing forward along the short well deck, they scrambled over the rail into the motorboat, cast off and sent the power craft roaring away into the darkness.

McKINNEY felt a surge of relief as he watched them go. Examining the clips of his pistols, he saw that only three cartridges remained. Realizing what a close call it had been, he went forward. The bridge deck was a shambles. The bodies of Radlow and Brengleman were lying beside the door of the engine room, and between there and the bridge were strewn the bodies of half a dozen Malays.

"Cripes!" he muttered. "That little Drigalski guy sure raised some hell before he cashed in."

Unlocking the door of the chartroom, he stuck his head inside and grinned at the astonished officers.

"The war's over," he announced. "You can come out now."

He looked aft and saw Campbell, assisted by the purser, come on the bridge deck.

The Australian reminded McKinney of a one-legged crane as he hopped on his sound leg toward the hose rack beside the window of his stateroom. Thrusting his right hand eagerly behind the coil of hose, Campbell drew forth the envelope and regarded the American with a grin of triumph.

"Got it!" he gloated. "I saw Drigalski hide it there just as the motorboat was sighted. I was about to remove it, when I saw Radlow dogging me. So I decided to leave it where it was."

He hopped toward the chartroom and halted in the rectangle of light shining through the doorway. With eager fingers he untied the string securing the flap of the envelope. As he pressed back the flap, there was a faint crackling sound, as if a match had been struck. Then the envelope burst suddenly into flame.

"Hey!" Campbell exclaimed, dropping the envelope as the blaze seared his fingers. He hopped toward it, stamped upon it with his sound foot. But the envelope continued to burn with a faint, hissing noise. Campbell's good leg let him down, and he crashed to the deck and there beat with futile hands at the blaze.

"Get water!" he shouted. "Hurry!" He looked up at McKinney. "Damn it! Don't stand there like a bloody fool!"

McKinney made no move. Grinning, he watched the three mates get in one another's way as they tried vainly to stamp out the blaze and succeeded only in scattering the ash. Captain Stroud stood in the door of the chartroom and watched in a short of stunned silence the antics of the others as they tried frantically to extinguish the envelope and its contents, which were now blazing like a pine torch.

Suddenly a vagrant puff of wind whisked the burning envelope from the deck. Like a Jack-o'-lantern, it soared above the rail. The mate made a swipe at it with his cap and wafted it farther away. Another puff of wind carried it far over the side, where it hovered, blazing merrily for nearly a minute, then dropped suddenly toward the surface of the sea, a mere film of glowing ash.

"Damn!" Campbell swore. "That dirty little swine doctored the paper and fixed some sort of fuse inside the envelope, so that it would catch fire if it were opened by anyone but himself. I wish I'd thought of that possibility. But it's too late now. My word! What a loss!"

He held up his hand to McKinney, who hauled him erect. The American peered over the side and said:

"If you ask me, it's anything but a loss. As I see it, the world's a heap better off

without it. You know, you said a while ago that it was impossible to keep a thing like it a secret for very long."

Campbell nodded sullenly. "That's true enough."

"Sure! And if you'd got it for your government, wouldn't the Heinies have got it, and then the Italians and the Russians? And the next thing we know, the Japs would be tossin' it around. Now I ask you, wouldn't that be one helluva mess?"

Campbell glowered; disappointment tended to make him unreasonable. "Regular boy scout, aren't you?" he sneered.

Captain Stroud came out of his daze with a cackle of laughter. "Frisco McKinney, boy scout! My word! Wait till the crowd back in Thursday hear about that."

McKinney's hard-boiled face softened in a good-natured grin.

"Sure!" he agreed. "Boy scout—that's me." He stepped to the door of his stateroom and paused with his hand on the ring-handle. "Boy scout—sure! And if you think I haven't done my good deed for the day, just go aft and take a look. Now I'm goin' to catch up with my shuteye."

THEM AGGRAVATIN' TWINS

CHAPTER I

"I'LL LIVE TO TORTURE YOU!"

A PAIR of tall cowhands, identical twins with yellow hair and lean faces thickly coated by freckles, the color of their dark bay ponies, rode slowly down Main Street in Soapweed, Texas, late one July afternoon observing and discussing things of interest to young scamps with an eye for women and an appetite for deviltry.

Said Pinto Hawkins, "I count five saloons from here."

"And nary a jail in sight," declared Paint with some satisfaction.

Pinto nodded comfortably. "Uh-huh, no jail. Now I can see three drunks and two powerful pretty girls."

"And I done spotted no less'n three Mexican bandits."

"How d'you know they're bandits?" he asked.

"From the way they're a-lookin' at the girls."

Pinto snorted through his bony nose. "Huh! When I look at wimmen as pretty as them, I'm a bandit at heart."

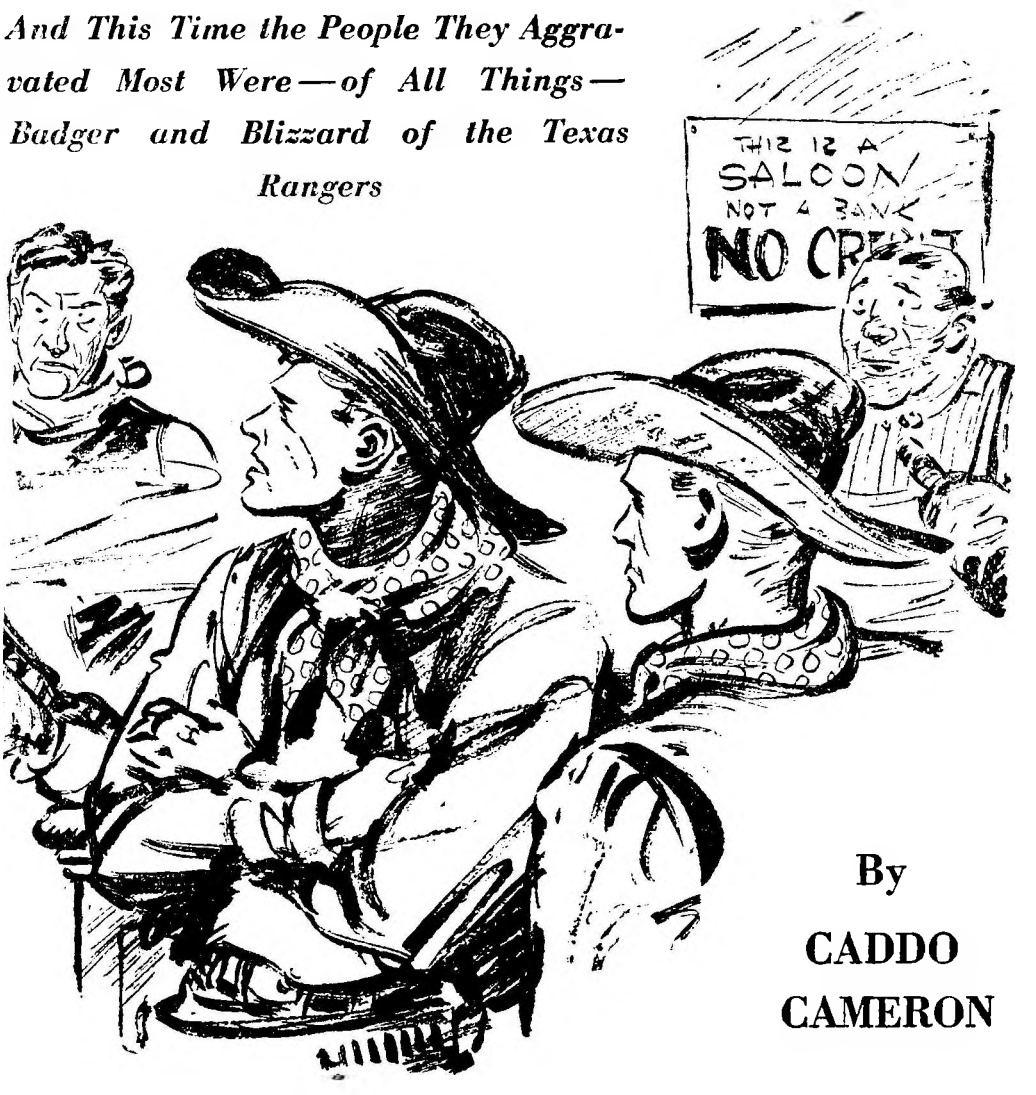
With an eye on the girls, Paint told his brother, "You're a spotted-faced sucker for calico, that's what *you* are."

Pinto ignored the insult. He drawled, "Betcha we get along right well in this here town."

"Wouldn't be surprised."

The girls, black-haired little beauties, were strolling down the left-hand sidewalk toward the twins. Paint's bandits were three ornately dressed Mexican horsemen with expensive rigging and thoroughbred mounts. They had halted in the street close enough to speak to the girls without

And This Time the People They Aggravated Most Were—of All Things—Badger and Blizzard of the Texas Rangers



By CADDO CAMERON

lifting their voices. One of the riders, a large finely built man, removed his silver-and-gold sombrero and bowed easily from his saddle. The girls strolled on, looking the other way.

The twins were not more than twenty feet distant when this happened. They grinned. The girls saw them do it and smiled shyly, whereupon the boys touched their bedraggled old hats and promptly swung into the rack. The girls strolled on, now looking the other way harder than ever.

Paint looked at Pinto and vice versa.

"I'll be damned!" said Paint softly.

"Me too," muttered Pinto.

The three Mexicans grinned maliciously at the twins. A deep red crawled into the boys' faces wherever their freckles gave it room to show through. They dismounted and tied their ponies, Bacon and Beans, each giving the knot an extra jerk to ease his embarrassment. Without another word they settled their gunbelts on their hips and strode purposefully into the nearest saloon.

"Gimme a big dram of straight whiskey," Paint told the bartender.

"Same here and more of it," ordered Pinto.

The barman hesitated for a moment, fingering his big black mustache and frowning while his eyes jerked from one twin to the other.

Presently he said, "I'll swear I ain't had more'n six drinks today, but daggoned if I can tell one of you gents from t'other."

"Neither can we," drawled Paint, "but it don't bother us none 'cause they's times when it comes in right handy."

Pinto's long face was very solemn. He added, "That's a fact, barkeep. Like for instance—when he swallers it scratches my throat and vicy versy, so we get double action out'n our liquor."

The six other men in the Mesquite laughed.

"That bein' the case," said the bartender, "reckon I'll just give you one drink and charge you double."

Paint glared at his brother. "Now looky what you went and done."

The mirth that followed was suddenly silenced by a commotion on the porch. A moment later a horse walked through the front door with the richly-dressed Mexican in its saddle, followed by his two friends afoot.

He swept off his sombrero with a flourish, and sang out, "Greetings, gentlemen! Andreo Coos, his companions and his charger Bucephalus have come to drink with you. Bartender, set 'em up!"

NONE of the six Americans in the room answered the salutation or made a move to accept the invitation, and the twins kept silent. The big Mexican's olive face flushed. He looked scornfully and arrogantly down at the others for an instant, then swung his beautiful sorrel's head toward the bar.

Tapping its shoulder with his quirt, he commanded, "Up!"

The horse reared until its head almost touched the high ceiling, then gently lowered its front feet to the edge of the bar. The twins were forced to move out of the way and they saw at a glance that Coos intended they should, since there was plenty of vacant space for him to make his grandstand play elsewhere. Without exchanging a word, each knew how the other felt about it and approximately what he would do.

Pinto folded his arms and let his lanky frame sag back against the bar. He looked the Mexican in the eye, and drawled lazily, "Mistah, yo' hoss is a gentleman and we'll be mighty glad to drink with *him*."

Meanwhile Paint moved aside to where he had a clear view of the other Mexicans. Watching them, he told Coos, "But *you'll* have to wait until the hoss and us get through."

The big man's face darkened with anger, but his voice came soft and even, "I can see that you don't know who I am."

"Shore we do," declared Pinto. "We

read yo' brand the minute we seen you out there."

Paint nodded emphatically. "Right off I said to my twin, 'Yander is a thousand dollah thoroughbred a-packin' five hundred dollah riggin', straddled by three hundred dollahs wuth of clothes stuffed with two-bits of dog meat.' We know you, all right."

From the sides of their eyes the boys saw men moving out of the line of fire. Paint caught war sign in the faces of the two Mexicans.

He grinned at them, and drawled, "Go ahead, boys."

They relaxed.

Coos spoke to his horse. It lowered its feet from the bar. He sat still for a moment, one hand on his hip above the ivory handle of his six-shooter, gazing speculatively down at the twins. A frown of perplexity rather than anger came between his large, intelligent eyes. The boys gave him credit for holding onto his temper, a fact which made them realize that he was more of a person than they had at first thought him to be.

Presently he spoke in the same soft voice, "You carry two pistols apiece and they aren't ornaments."

"Dead wrong, Mistah," drawled Pinto. "We're just the Hawkins boys, a pair of driftin' hands lookin' for jobs and hopin' to hell that we don't find 'em."

The Mexican dandy's eyes flashed momentarily. His smooth voice sharpened, "Stop trying to make fun of me, gringos! Who's paying you to hunt me down and kill me?"

Coos put a world of scorn into that word "Gringos!" His barb sank home, for no man was any prouder than the Texas cowman of the Seventies and it didn't make a particle of difference whether he was worth a million or dead broke. In his own estimation he was as good as anybody.

PAINT didn't raise his voice, but his drawl thickened a little. He answered, "Nobody's payin' us a dime, greaser, but that won't noways keep us from smokin' you up if we take a notion."

Pinto added, "And I feel a notion a-comin' on. Get outa here befo' we shoot the silver buttons off'n them medicine show clothes of your'n. Git!"

For a brief moment it seemed as if Andreo Coos would take active steps to avenge these insults, notwithstanding his obvious suspicion that the twins were deliberately trying to pick a fight with him. In the end, however, his better judgment bridled his temper.

He bowed stiffly, and said, "Very well, killers! I'll not be so foolish as to play your game. Some other time, perhaps—who knows?"

Though his English was so stilted as to be almost comical, his looks and words carried a degree of menace that left the twins uncomfortably chilly on a hot day. At the moment they were of one and the same mind—what sort of a mess have we horned into and who is this Andreo Coos?

Without another word the Mexican rode from the saloon, his two bodyguards at the sorrel's heels.

The burly bartender was first to break the silence they left behind them. "Gents," he declaimed, "this here palace of mirth, murder and mayhem is celebratin' its miraculous escape from bloodshed. Congregate!"

They did. A wiry little man with long white hair and a heavy mustache to match it, pushed his way to the bar between the twins. They grinned down at him. He looked up at first one and then the other, turning his head in quick jerky movements.

"If I can get one of you speckled wildcats on each side of me," he said in a rasping voice, "then I'll know for sartin that I ain't seein' double and it's safe to go on with my drinkin'."

The boys saw at a glance that he was half tight, at least.

He shot out a hand to Pinto. "Couple onto Kingbolt Benton, boy, and tell me what to call you befo' strangers."

The lanky cowhand gave his name and introduced Paint. He solemnly added, "We're twins."

"Do tell?" snapped Kingbolt Benton.

He made the boys acquainted with the others. Then he downed his liquor, stroked his mustache, and declared, "You bespotted leopards may be a drunkard's nightmare to look at, but you're shore as hell a answer to my prayers."

"Cain't imagine it," drawled Paint.

"How come?" asked Pinto.

The old-timer squinted up at him. "You allowed you was lookin' for some jobs, didn't you?"

The twins became cautious.

Paint jerked his head at Pinto, and then drawled. "That's what he told the Mex, Mistah Benton, but you dassn't believe a word he says."

Pinto spoke to Kingbolt as if his brother wasn't there, "It all depends on the jobs, sah, all depends. No work and big wages is mostly what we're after."

"Then I got exactly what you want," declared the old man. "I'm a freighter; sixty mules and fo' wagons; bonded stuff or contraband, it don't make no difference to me; from Texas to Chiny or anywheres else and I guarantee not to come back light. Why, I mind the time when I loaded my wagons with sulphur and skinned my mules to hell, and damned if I didn't land back in Texas with a cargo of cinders and nary a scorched hair. Right now I'm needin' a couple of guards."

Paint shoved his old hat over one eye, scratched his straw-colored head, and allowed, "You must be figgerin' on another trip through hell."

"Nope, but where I'm goin' it's jest as hot and a sight more dangerous," asserted Kingbolt. "I'm bound for Mexico, crossin' at Eagle Pass, with a rich cargo in bond out of Indianola and some other freight from San 'Tonio, and three wimmen."

"Three wimmen?" inquired Pinto.

"Wimmen or girls?" asked Paint.

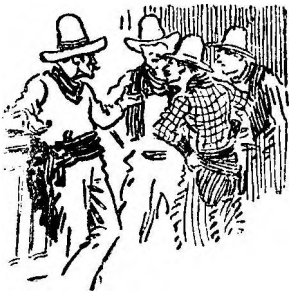
"One woman and two gals—dadblame their purty eyes!" growled the old freighter. "The Hernandez sisters with a aunt a-herdin' 'em close and a bandit drivin' their ambulance. They overtaken me here. You-all come mighty nigh gettin' acquainted with 'em out there awhile ago, mighty nigh."

The boys found themselves surrounded by dry grins. They squirmed uncomfortably.

The old-timer continued, "Like a durned fool I let 'em persuade me to carry 'em along so's to protect 'em, and now I ain't so shore but what I'm a-needin' protection myownself. That's where you fellas come in."

"Maybe," said Pinto.

"Protection from what?" asked Paint.



Kingbolt Benton bristled. He barked, "A fool question in this here country! From robbers and murderers and kidnapers and Injuns and bad weather, you blasted simpletons!"

"We might be able to he'p you out on the weather," drawled Pinto, "but we run from all them other things."

THE old man nodded wisely, "Ummm-huh, I done noticed how you run from Andy Goose—that Mex dude—and I need protection from him more'n anything else. Bandits don't come no smarter or meaner than he is and I gotta go smack through the middle of his home range."

The boys stared at Kingbolt as if he had taken their breath away. "D'you mean to say," inquired Paint, "that he's a bad man to monkey with?"

"Powerful bad and you-all monkeyed him a-plenty."

Paint looked at Pinto and vice versa.

"And you called him dog meat," growled Pinto.

"And you didn't have brains enough to run," retorted Paint.

Their eyes clung for a moment. Then each nodded to the other.

"From now on *we'll* be needin' protection," declared Pinto sadly.

"Yep, wuss luck," agreed Paint, "so I reckon we'd better ride with Mistah Benton and his sixty mules and three wimmen."

Whereupon the old freighter bought a round of drinks to bind the bargain and another to celebrate the occasion. Some time after that the twins took him to the wagon-yard and put him to bed with the aid of Juan Medina his caporal or boss driver, a slender middle-aged Mexican who won the boys' esteem by his evident devotion to "Capitan Benton."

Although Paint and Pinto had poked fun at Andreo Coos and made a joke of hiring out to Kingbolt, they realized that their new jobs might prove to be anything other than a pleasure jaunt with a wagon train and a pair of pretty girls. This conviction was strengthened by what they saw and heard before leaving town.

The freighter had been unable to persuade any of the local citizens to act as guards to the Rio Grande, notwithstanding his offer of one hundred dollars per man for a comparatively short trip. Soapweed significantly kept its mouth shut about nearly everything except the weather and the price of beef. But the twins did learn that Coos was thoroughly hated and feared in the community and generally blamed for a series of daring hold-ups and murders that had occurred on the trail to the Border during the past few months. His spies were known to be everywhere on both sides of the line, often in unexpected places.

He was even credited with a stage robbery almost in sight of San Antonio a few weeks back, when the road agents stole a shipment of precious stones valued at one hundred thousand for which the owners were now offering a reward of a thousand dollars.

Some folks believed, however, that Tobey Burns might have pulled that stick-up. Operating out of Mexico, he was a renegade American with a Mexican wife and there were rumors of a life-and-death feud between him and Andreo Coos. When the boys heard this they recalled the dandy's suspicion that they had been hired to get him. At any rate, they had listened to the old story of those troublesome times: not enough Rangers to police the frontier, many of the county sheriffs' offices vacant and going begging, lawlessness riding high, wide and handsome.

Paint and Pinto had concluded it would be wise for them to stay off the street that night, so they ate supper with Kingbolt's crew and remained at their campfire until time to turn in. They did very little talking and a lot of listening. Though the boys actually spoke Spanish more correctly than English, they hid this fact from the *mulateros* and privately agreed to continue the deception throughout the journey. Experience had taught them that there was no better way to catch onto things.

Astride one of his little Spanish mules the following morning, old Kingbolt Benton looked and behaved as spryly as if he had never gone on a spree and been put to bed in all of his sixty years. He supervised the hitching up and getting under way with the skill of an expert and a world of the picturesque profanity for which his kind was noted.

Each of the big, blue, white-covered wagons was drawn by ten mules hitched four-four-two with a driver on the near wheel mule and two of the wagons carrying an extra man—six in all, armed with Winchesters and revolvers. The remuda of nineteen spare mules was in charge of the caporal who would graze them along

the road, keeping within fairly close range of the train.

THE twins and Kingbolt dropped in behind the rear wagon as the caravan lined out on the trail. The old freighter looked back and saw the Hernandez rig trotting from the hotel to join them. He grinned slyly at the boys. They pretended not to see him, but forthwith took steps to muzzle him.

Said Pinto casually, "I'd shore hate to come out of a drunk up in Fort Griffin some foggy mawnin' and find that I'd gone and married me three of them filthy Tonkaway squaws."

Paint kept his long face quite sober. "Me too, and then I'd want to shoot myself if I went and got so tight that I told a pair of cussed twins all about it while they was tuckin' me in my blankets at Soapweed a year or so later."

"Ain't that hell on any man?"

"Hell a mile!"

Kingbolt reined his mule to a sudden halt. "Did I go and tell you spotted hyenies any ungodly lie like that last night?"

"I'll swear you did," affirmed Pinto seriously.

"Yes sah, Boss," declared Paint with boyish frankness, "and what I mean—we was plumb ashamed to listen."

The old-timer's keen eyes, slightly bloodshot now, looked through each of the boys in turn. "I got a idee that you young scalawags can lie faster cold sober than I can roarin' drunk, but damn yo' freckles—I dassn't take a chance."

He stole a glance at the approaching ambulance, cocked an eyebrow at the twins. "You ain't never met up with the Hernandez gals, have you?"

"Don't recollect 'em."

"Me neither."

"And you ain't never put a besotted old fool to bed?"

"Nope."

"Nope."

The Hernandez sisters—Amata a year or so older than Sofia—were prettier this morning in their black alpaca traveling dresses and bonnets than they had been the day before in colorful little frocks of some description. The twins decided *that* without talking it over. And the fat, smiling Mexican matron with them — Aunt Maria—had a pair of sharp and dancing eyes that bespoke a profound knowledge of the ways and wiles of courtship. The twins had learned to recognize that from previous unfortunate experiences with Mexican chaperons. The dark and squatty driver of the fine span of mules looked like a bandit, and the boys figured that he no doubt was whenever he had a chance; but they liked the girls and Aunt Maria, all of whom spoke perfect English, and they didn't give two whoops about this or any other bandit at the moment of introduction.

Aunt Maria did most of the talking, naturally. She shifted her little black satchel out of the way and slid her weight across the seat to where she could get a good look at the boys.

"We're grateful to you, Don Benton," she said, "for engaging two such brave gentlemen as our escorts. At the hotel last night we heard how they humiliated that terrible Andreo Coos. I trust they're being well paid."

"Huh!" grunted Kingbolt. "I'm a-payin' 'em a heap more'n they're wuth to anybody simply because you allowed that you'd stand half of it."

"Men like these can't be overpaid!" exclaimed Aunt Maria. "I must insist upon making them a slight present myself, say —a hundred dollars each when we have safely reached the Bravo. Is that satisfactory, gentlemen, and will you accept?"

THE twins pulled their eyes away from the girls.

Said Paint brazenly, "We'd be puffectly willin' to ride to the river with you-all for nothin', Miz Hernandez."

Pinto quickly added, "But a extry hun-

dred dollahs won't make the trip no harder on us and our ponies, Ma'am."

Amata and Sofia laughed with a freedom which suggested that they had no fear of their chaperon. Aunt Maria shook a chubby and bejeweled finger at the twins.

"You're a pair of devils," she said, "but brave men are usually devils and we Mexican women like devils. You speak Spanish, don't you?"

THE girls' pretty faces and quite satisfactory figures were a strong temptation to tell the truth, but the boys remembered in time that they had a job of work to do.

Said Pinto regretfully, "We don't savvy more'n half a dozen words of it, Ma'am, and we're plumb sorry to admit it."

Paint went on, "But we shore aim to pick it up soon as ever we l'arn to talk English right."

"That takes time," declared Kingbolt dryly. "I been at it fifty-nine years and I still got a long ways to go."

He trotted on to overtake the lead wagon. The twins remained with the Hernandez ambulance for another mile or so, then loped off to scout the trail ahead where it wound its way westward through the motts of timber and brush thickets with which the rolling country was liberally sprinkled. One took the north and the other the south, and for a quarter of a mile upon either side of the road they investigated every point where an ambuscade might be waiting for the train. Each of the boys soon made up his mind that he had tied onto an exciting job. Whenever he pointed his pony's snout along a cowpath through a thicket or a patch of timber, he half expected to feel the shock of a bullet or hear the whisper of a rope; and the farther from the settlement they went, the greater the risk became. Upon a few occasions they caught sight of riders on the horizon and wondered whether the strangers were outlaw scouts keeping an eye on the caravan. At length the twins swung in to the trail and met on the banks of Buck Creek where Kingbolt had said the train would noon.

"See anything suspicious besides them coyotes that's a-hangin' on our flanks?" asked Pinto.

"Nary a thing," replied Paint, "but my eyes hurt from lookin' and I'm as spooky as a green colt. Damned nigh throwed down on a doe back yander, and a old brindle bull come close to gettin' hisself shot when he hid in the bresh and I run onto him."

Pinto grinned at his brother. "I know. I come within a ace of cuttin' loose with both guns at a band of muskhogs. But I ain't a-blamin' us none. Two rich and pretty girls and fo' wagons loaded to the roof with silk is mighty fine bandit bait."

The caravan took the trail again at two o'clock, groaning off the campground to the accompaniment of cracking whips and yelling *mulateros.* As the boys started away, Kingbolt Benton called them aside. His face was grave now and he spoke with some seriousness.

"Five six mile west," he said, "we gotta go through a gap that I call the Devil's Chute. Been sorta dreadin' it with this here cargo and them gals, but they ain't no way 'round the place. More stick-ups come off in there than anywheres else between San 'Tonio and the Rio Grandy. Keep a eye peeled when you ride into it."

The boys promised to do so. It was arranged for the freighter to hold the train a safe distance away from the gap until they had scouted it and signaled him to come ahead, and he was to corral his wagons immediately if he heard any shooting while they were out of sight.

The Devil's Chute was nothing more than a shallow gash about a mile wide and half a mile long in a low ridge, having a comparatively level floor covered by a heavy growth of timber through which a narrow trail had been cleared. Riding an animal path south of the main road, Pinto halted in the fringe of the trees. The path crawled sinuously into the under

growth and he couldn't see very far ahead, but that which he saw drove home the conviction that here was dangerous ground. A man could never see a trap in there. To find it he'd have to spring it. Thinking of his brother, Pinto glanced north. He saw the dense bank of greenery reach out and swallow Paint and Bacon and he momentarily held his breath, listening for a shot or the sound of a struggle. He sure hoped old Paint didn't run onto something bad, and he sort of wished that they hadn't split up this way; then he rode into the timber.

Born and raised in a country subject to frequent raids by Indians and bandits and trained from childhood by a father who had made a name for himself as a frontier fighter, the Hawkins twins knew far more about scouting and woodcraft than did the average cowman of their day. Pinto now called upon that store of knowledge and wished that he had more of it. The character and density of the vegetation indicated that there were some small springs in the vicinity, and vines frequently climbed high and thickly into the trees to build hiding places over a rider's head while the undergrowth laid ambuscades at his feet. Pinto had long ago learned to rely upon his pony's superior senses and to interpret its sign language. In here, however, Beans discovered so many wild though harmless things as to render his warning signals of no particular value to his master. The grim-faced scout was forced to depend upon his own sharp eyes and keen ears.

THE animal path led through a thirty-foot opening in the timber. On the far side of this little park a mustang grapevine was doing its best to smother the life from a lofty hackberry, and high in the green tangle Pinto saw a patch of brown that looked out of place up there. He reined in suddenly, dropped a hand to his holster. While straining his eyes to make out whether the brown spot was bark or leather, he sensed rather than saw a movement a few feet away on his right and slightly behind him. He swerved his rangy body in the saddle, but too late.

A rawhide riata snapped taut about his arms!

The next instant a terrific jerk lifted him bodily from the saddle as his pony plunged away. Pinto fell hard and the six-shooter which he had instinctively drawn flew from his hand. It seemed to the tall cowhand as if a dozen men leaped from trees and bushes and landed on top of him by the time he struck the ground. At any rate the fight was short. A few moments later he struggled to a sitting position with his wrists tied tightly behind him, and glared up into the handsome face of Andreo Coos.

The bandit smiled, made a mock bow. "How do you do, my spotted friend! How are you?"

"Not so good," panted Pinto. "With my hands tied so damned tight I cain't smoke, cain't hardly spit."

Coos glanced around at his grinning followers, eight or ten in number. He said in English, "Hear that? He jokes about it. Remember what I told you? They have nerve, these twins. They're dangerous men. We must hang them with care."

"Huh!" snorted Pinto. "You won't never hang nobody while my brother is runnin' loose. He can lick hell out'n you and yo' gang without rufflin' up a feather."

From somewhere not far north in the timber there came the sound of a shot. The lean cowhand stiffened. He thought of Paint, listened breathlessly for more shooting. None came. A chill laid hold of Pinto.

Andreo Coos laughed quietly, smugly. "You Texans are fighters," he said in Spanish, "but you have no brains. It is a simple matter to outwit you. Your brother will presently join you here."

Pinto looked blank.

The bandit repeated his boast in English, adding, "Now I shall hang you both until you're quite dead, then tonight I'll take your bodies to Soapweed and leave them in a public place as a warning to

others who have heard how you insulted me yesterday, and a challenge to those who hired you to kill me."

The Mexican dandy spoke so calmly and confidently as to be convincing, and at the moment Pinto wouldn't have taken an oath that such a thing could not happen. He sat still, saying nothing, looking north, straining his ears, hoping that they hadn't caught Paint.

Meanwhile Coos issued orders in Spanish, telling his men to get their horses and be ready to attack the wagon train as soon as the others came with their prisoner. He didn't torment Pinto any more as most bandits would have done; merely treated him and his fate in the careless, off-hand fashion of one to whom such affairs were commonplace.

It made an impression upon the freckled cowhand, drove home the fact that his situation was a desperate one. He hoped to hell that Paint got away.

Andreo Coos fretted impatiently and swore that the train would pass the gap while he was waiting for the men whom he had stationed north of the trail. Pinto thought differently. He knew that old Kingbolt would have corralled his wagons and called in the remuda within a few minutes after hearing the shot.

The lanky twin was glad when he heard riders coming through the timber, for they would relieve the suspense one way or another; and a moment later he experienced both pleasure and pain, for he heard Paint's drawling voice—strong and plenty mean. A damned tough spot to be in, grimly reflected Pinto, but so long as the old boy was alive and had the strength to cuss a Mexican that way they'd manage to squirm out of this jackpot somehow.

When Paint and his captors arrived, Coos wasted no time in poking fun at the twins. He quickly designated a man to guard the prisoners, told him to tie them together with ten feet of rope and make them sit that far apart, and quietly promised to cut his throat if he let them escape. After that, he left in a hurry at the head of his gang.

THE guard, a stocky dark-faced fellow with a huge mustache, carried out his chief's orders to the letter and sat down facing the boys with his back to a tree and a pair of six-shooters in his lap.

"If you move more than an eyelid," he said in passable English, "I shoot first one and then the other very thoroughly through the heart, afterwards in the right ear. Understand?"

Pinto nodded soberly, "We don't savvy much English, but we get the idee all right."

Paint added politely, "We'll be-have. Jest go ahead and take yo' siesta."

The Mexican vigorously shook his head. "No, no, Senores! If I go to sleep here, I wake up in purgatory."

The twins turned their heads so that each looked the other squarely in the eye. Across the ten feet that separated them there may have passed a series of silent—perhaps unconscious questions and answers, though the boys always said that there was nothing to the mind-reading stuff of which they often were accused. At any rate, when they exchanged brief nods each had a fair idea of what the other thought they'd better do and knew that it had to be done mighty quick.

Paint's long bony face hardened in an angry scowl. "Devil of a mess you done got us into!"

"Me—the devil! It's *you* that went and got us hung!"

"Why in hell did you leave 'em ketch you? You'd oughta know better."

Pinto glared at his brother. "You ain't got no call to talk. They never would've nailed me if I'd a-had any idee that you'd be so all-fired easy to snare. I'm plumb disgusted with you."

"Shet yo' damned mouth or I'll—"

"No—you—won't!"

Paint jerked hard on the rope, whereupon Pinto gave it a vicious tug that upset

his brother. The Mexican's dark face split wide open. He folded his arms and settled back against the tree with the happily expectant air of a man in a box seat on the shady side at a bullfight.

The twins scrambled to their feet and each jerked the other down. After that they got together by rolling. They kicked, butted, spurred, bit, tumbled and cussed all over the little park like a pair of armless lizards in mortal combat. The Mexican laughed until tears trickled over the grease on his fat cheeks. The fight rolled near him. He gave the rope a playful jerk and offered some sarcastic advice to the fighters.

Suddenly Paint's bootheel caught him on the point of the jaw!

That ended the disturbance. The twins untangled themselves and sat there on the ground for a moment, panting and grinning at each other.

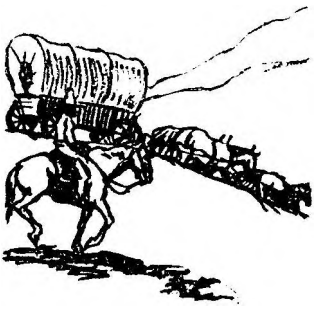
Said Paint, "You lied! We ain't hung."

"Not yet," admitted Pinto, "but we will be if we don't get away from here befo' old Andy Goose comes back."

The boys worked fast. It wasn't much trouble to get the insensible Mexican's knife, free themselves, tie and gag him, re-arm and mount, for the bandits had dropped their weapons there and tied their ponies to nearby trees.

WHEN they reached the fringe of the timber a stirring scene spread out before them. Kingbolt Benton had corralled his train some distance east of the gap—as well as one could form a corral from four wagons and an ambulance—and the remuda was already inside the enclosure. The Coos bandits had divided into two columns and were riding rapidly eastward, one north the other south of the road, with the obvious intention of surrounding the caravan. The fact that the outlaws were thus pressing an attack upon a train that had been forewarned and was prepared to defend itself indicated that they placed a high valuation upon it, as such raiders usually struck from ambush and avoided open battle.

Paint and Pinto instantly had the same thought—that will be a hell of a place for women when lead begins to fly. They didn't have time to talk it over, not a sec-



ond in which to make plans. Somewhat less than two hundred yards away Andreo Coos and his big sorrel were leading the band south of the road. The twins whipped their Winchesters from their saddle scabbards and hit the ground running. Each took a rest against a tree trunk and opened fire on the bandit leader. Their first shots dusted the Mexican dandy. One bullet knocked his huge sombrero over to the side of his head where its chinstrap held it, and they later learned that another gnawed at the cantle of his silver-mounted saddle. He reined in so viciously the thoroughbred sat down, then reared. His followers piled up around him. One glance at the smoke from the boys' rifles no doubt told him all he needed to know and his next move showed that the man could think fast when under fire.

Andreo Coos yelled at his men, bent low in the saddle and dashed onward at racing speed instead of turning back to fight the twins. In a matter of seconds his band would be out of effective rifle range and the boys would have to expose themselves to the fire of the raiders in order to attack them, since there was little or no cover to be had between the timber and the train. Again the twins acted in concert without exchanging a word. They clenched their teeth, shot the sorrel from under him. The

magnificent beast appeared to collapse in midair. The band thundered past it, slid to a halt. One man ran back to the fallen rider who, at the moment, had staggered to his feet and gone down again. Six or eight rifles cracked and bullets zipped through the trees around the boys. They answered with deliberation. One bandit slapped a hand to his side, then leaped from his horse and dropped in the short grass.

The man kneeling by his leader jerked half erect, sank into the grass and scrambled to safety behind the dead sorrel. Evidently Coos issued an order, for all the others spun their mounts and raced on toward the train.

"Damn his black heart!" growled Pinto. "He cain't ride, but he's a-settin' off his boys to tackle old Kingbolt anyhow."

"Yep, and the smart devil has got two cripples with him to help him keep us under kivver while the balance of 'em raid the wagons, and—"

"—by the time we can ride around him, his gang will get the dirty work done."

"Shore, 'cause the old man allows his drivers is plenty willin' to shoot, but they cain't hit nothin'."

Meanwhile the twins were standing behind their respective trees, reloading rapidly. Their eyes met.

"Charge old Andy Goose?" asked Paint quietly.

"Hell, yes," snapped Pinto, "after we lay it on him with a heavy dose of lead!"

The three bandits were keeping down behind the dead horse, but the boys glimpsed a pair of rifle barrels which indicated that at least two of the men were in shape to put up a fight. Lining their sights on the sorrel's carcass, they fired so rapidly as to pour a stream of bullets into it until their hammers clicked on empty chambers. No answering shot came from the outlaws. The twins couldn't even guess whether their fusillade had put any of the bandits out of action, but that didn't make a particle of difference to them. They ran to their ponies, put up their rifles, swung into the saddle and charged.

BACON and Beans were by no means racers, but they were extremely fast cowponies in the pink of condition and their riders knew how to get the last split-second of speed from a horse. The fiery little bays flattened in a run as soon as they cleared the timber, made a race of it, each doing his level best to beat the other to wherever they were going. The twins lay along their necks, riding loose, ready for a fall. They talked to the ponies, cussed them, urged them on as they had often done in friendly races, in the meantime fervently hoping that neither of the little devils got hit when the shooting started.

Apparently this sudden charge caught the bandits unawares. The boys had covered close to a hundred yards before smoke whirled away from the dead sorrel and a bullet snarled between the flying ponies. Others followed in swift succession, though only one rifle was working. A slug raked Beans' shoulder, and bored a hole through Pinto's chaps. Another cut a gash squarely between Bacon's ears, bit at Paint's cartridge belt and might have killed him had he been sitting erect. The twins rode with tight faces now. Their boyish enthusiasm for a wild ride through whistling lead gave away to the stern realization that death was reaching for them and coming mighty close. They savagely measured the distance separating them from the rifleman who had treated them to a surprise by the accuracy of his shooting. Each knew that a quick change of plan was necessary. If this kept up they'd at least lose a pony and these young horse-lovers didn't hesitate to gamble their own safety to save the lives of their pets.

Paint threw up his arm, yelled, "Hit the dust!"

The next moment each of the cowponies sat down as if he had a big steer on his rope. The boys leaped clear. A bullet gnawed leather from the fork of Paint's

saddle an instant after he left it and Pinto spun half around as a slug ripped into his right holster, glancing from the handle of his Colt. Within easy pistol range now, they opened a game at which they had few equals. Their six-shooters made a continuous roar for a few moments, drove the rifleman to cover. Running a zig-zag course toward the dead horse, they soon caught sight of the men behind it. They halted.

"Stick 'em up!" barked Paint.

Andreo Coos laid his rifle down and lifted himself to a sitting position, raised his empty hands. His aristocratic face was haggard with pain, streaked with blood from a scalp wound, but it showed no sign of fear. He stared unflinchingly at the twins and they had to admit that here was a Mexican bandit with guts. One of his companions rolled over and sat up, his right hand in the air, his left hanging limply. The other outlaw lay on his face, unmistakably dead.

"We surrender," snarled Coos, "because we're wounded and unable to carry on the fight. Murder us and earn your blood money, then my men will hunt you down and hang you slowly."

The sound of a shot rode down the breeze and smoke burst from beneath one of the wagons. A glance sufficed to tell the boys that they had no time to lose. The bandits would soon have the train surrounded and their first charge might break through Kingbolt's more or less feeble defense. They hated to think of what would happen after that.

During the space of ten seconds Paint and Pinto stood gazing down at the bandits without saying a word, tall gaunt men whose lean faces had been aged by the weight of a responsibility of which they were keenly aware. Not a vestige of mercy showed in either of them.

"Get up!" commanded Pinto. "Make 'aste!"

"I can't," answered Coos. "I hurt my hip when I fell."

The other Mexican staggered to his feet, a slender man with sharp features in which the boys saw both treachery and cowardice. Paint took knives and pistols from each of the bandits.

Pinto continued quietly, "Now, Coos, you tell this here fella to fork his pony and go and order yo' gang to leave them wagons alone. Tell him to burn the wind."

The outlaw leader glanced contemptuously from one of the twins to the other, said nothing.

Paint balanced and turned a knife in his hand. He said calmly, "If you don't do that, I may take a notion to mark you up for life and turn you loose lookin' like a scarecrow. You're smart enough to know that I won't kill you without givin' you a even break, but they ain't nothin' in my nature to stop me from whackin' off yo' ears and a inch of yo' nose and fixin' you so's wimmen will laugh at you the balance of yo' days."

Andreo Coos paled. The tall cowhand had shrewdly sent a blow home to his weakness. The handsome bandit might face death without a tremor, but the thought of becoming a loathsome object sapped his courage. He had no reason to believe that these boys were big-hearted fellows who couldn't carry out such a threat. Perhaps he had witnessed the cruelty with which some Border Texans punished the outlaws that fell into their hands.

While his decision hung in the balance, Pinto quietly added, "And by the Etarnal, we'll ham-string you so's you cain't ride or dance no more!"

The bandit clenched his jaws, and looked away.

A cold rage suddenly laid hold of the twins. They thought of the old freighter and his loyal and peaceful Mexican drivers, and they tried to close their minds against thoughts of Sofia and Amata and Aunt Maria in the hands of Border raiders. Paint moved closer to Andreo Coos. The young cowhand's lips clamped tightly, his nostrils turned white At the moment he was actually tempted to go through with

this thing, regardless of how repugnant the job might be, for the lives of his friends were at stake.

MEANWHILE Pinto leveled a fierce gaze at the other Mexican, whipped out his knife. "You dirty rat!" he growled. "You're the cuss that roped me back yander in the timber I'm a mind to slit yo' gullet, but you can save yo' capitan's purty face and yo' own wuthless neck by doin' what we want you to do."

The outlaw's olive face turned a yellowish green. His throat worked, but no words passed his lips. He rolled his eyes in an imploring look at his chief. Andreo Coos nodded, then lowered his head as if in shame.

Pinto released the man, said harshly, "Tell that there band of wolves that if they try to take yo' boss away from us we'll kill him fust off, then shoot it out with 'em. Now, git!"

A few moments later the twins watched the wounded man spur his horse toward the wagon train as if the devil were riding behind him. He reached the nearest of the band before the charge got under way and men clustered around him. An argument evidently took place. Guns were flourished. The boys lifted Coos, holding him erect between them so that his men could see him. Presently riders dashed off to right and left around the circle of raiders. The twins heaved sighs of vast relief.

Andreo Coos groaned, whether from pain or anger they didn't know. Afterwards he cursed them so poisonously as to cause a touch of apprehension, though they knew he was helpless.

He concluded by saying, "Unless you kill me now, I'll live to torture you!"

Each of the boys wondered whether it wouldn't be a smart idea for one of them to give him a gun and shoot it out with him.

After some delay the outlaws collected into one band north of the trail where another argument apparently ensued. There was much pointing toward the twins and their prisoner. Coos fixed his blazing eyes upon his men, muttering demands that they take the train and kill every person in it.

Paint snarled, "You better hope that they don't!"

"You're damned right!" barked Pinto, feeling the strain. "If they try it, we'll give you a six-shooter and make you fight us one at a time."

"I wish to hell you would!" snapped the outlaw. "I'd rather die than to have you make a fool of me this way."

"You'll die soon enough," declared Paint.

"And chances is that you'll die a fool," drawled Pinto.

All at once it occurred to the twins that they might help the bandits to make up their minds by showing them how utterly beaten their chief really was. Paint ran and got the dead outlaw's horse, which had gone to grazing a safe distance away from the fight. Out of consideration for the Mexican's injured hip they placed him in the saddle sidewise instead of forcing him to sit astride. Then they mounted and rode slowly toward the train, one leading the prisoner's horse, the other following. Coos clung grimly to the saddle, a pale and dejected figure, too sick with pain to be concerned about anything else.

A few moments later the gang went west in a cloud of dust.

OLD Kingbolt was waiting for the twins with a bunch of grinning drivers behind him. Nearby stood the Hernandez women, dark eyes shining, faces wreathed in smiles.

No one showed the slightest trace of sympathy for the injured bandit, with the possible exception of Adolfo—the ambulance driver. The boys looked hard at him. His shifty eyes moved away.

The little freighter folded his arms, and rasped out, "Now what in thunderation are you scamps a-draggin' home?"

"A hurt bandit," answered Paint soberly.

"A licked bandit," said Pinto dryly.

The old-timer squinted up at Coos, twirled the nigh side of his mustache, and drawled, "You're both right, by dogies! So now I gotta doctor and nuss and feed the thing. Daggoned if you ain't the aggravatin'est twins I ever seen! Why didn't you jest kill it and fetch me its scalp?"

Paint grinned at the girls. "'Cause the gent swears that he'll live to torture us, and—"

"—we're bound and determined to prove to the cuss that he's a liar," continued Pinto, also grinning at the girls.

The boys remained in their saddles for a few moments, one upon either side of their prisoner. Amata and Sofia glanced from them to Coos. The Mexican dandy was now at the point of death from shame, not to mention his injuries. The girls laughed in his face with a cruelty that somehow wasn't altogether unbecoming, considering the circumstances.

Amata said in her soft and caressing voice, "The poor bandit! He wanted so much to capture us."

Muscles knotted in Andreo Coos' jaws.

Sofia tilted her piquant face up at him, and said brightly, "Let me be his nurse, won't you, Auntie? With his face washed and his hair dressed he'll make an adorable patient."

The bandit lifted his head. His lips were blue, his eyes burned with a hatred that hid his shame. He looked for a long moment at each of the girls, and said hoarsely, "To be tortured by women is the worst fate that can overtake a strong man. But I can stand it. You won't hear me cry for mercy. Have your fun, Senoritas. I'll enjoy myself later, if these killers don't murder me."

The sisters kept silent, drew away from him, fear in their young faces.

He glanced sardonically at the older woman, "Now it's your turn to torment me."

Aunt Maria looked away. She said, "I'm old enough to know better."

Turning her attention to the twins, she declared, "You're brave boys and you have already earned far more than we're paying you."

"Fiddlesticks!" growled Kingbolt Benton.

"We ain't earned nothin' yet," gallantly objected Paint, "nothin' at all."

Pinto quickly interposed, "Don't pay him no mind, lady. What with the scare I had and my ripped hide and bruised bones, I figger I done earned all of five years' top wages."

He paused, glanced at Sofia, "And I'm needin' a nurse."

Paint cocked an eye at Amata, "Me too, powerful bad."

"Huh!" snorted Kingbolt Benton.

The twins carried Coos into the corral and laid him on a pallet of blankets. His right hip was partially dislocated. Having lived most of his life in a country where injuries to man and beast were common and doctors scarce, the old freighter had acquired a rough and tumble knowledge of medicine and surgery. He swore that he could fix anything short of a broken neck and he took steps to prove the assertion by hauling and twisting the bandit's bones back into place, aided by the twins and their brute strength. Coos endured the ordeal without a sound, but sweat literally streamed from him. At the conclusion of the operation they placed him on a buffalo hair pillow, propped him against a wagon wheel and Kingbolt brought him a tumbler of straight whiskey.

HE NODDED his thanks, gulped half the liquor and lifted his eyes to the three men. He tried to smile, then said in his precise English, "I'm very grateful to you, gentlemen, even though I have a suspicion that you are doing this for me because your code of honor will not allow you to hang a cripple."

He paused, shrugged carelessly, "Frank-

ly, I have no such scruples in disposing of an enemy."

Kingbolt Benton spread his feet, put his hands on his hips. He scowled down at the bandit, and said, "I'd do as much for you as I would for a mule and I don't aim to hang you. I ain't got no right to hang nobody. It's miles outa my way, but I'll carry you to Camp Clark and turn you over to the army. They'll hold onto you until the Rangers or some sheriff comes after you. Then you'll get hung—don't worry 'bout that."

Coos inclined his head politely. At that moment Aunt Maria and the girls joined the group. He lifted his glass to her, emptied it, and courteously told the freighter, "You're an honorable man, Senor Benton, but a foolish one. Thanks to your treatment I'll soon be able to ride and I shall most certainly escape before we reach Fort Clark. I feel obliged to tell you that."

"And I'm obliged to tell *you* that you'll play hell!" rasped Kingbolt. He called out to the caporal, "Juan! Fetch me a trace-chain and a pair of padlocks."

Chapter II

"I want those cursed twins alive!"

FOR two days and nights Andreo Coos traveled with the caravan, behaving like a gentleman. During all this time one end of a light chain was padlocked around his neck, its other end either secured to something heavy or held by a man with a gun, and Kingbolt himself carried the keys. Notwithstanding these apparently adequate precautions the twins scarcely drew an easy breath or slept a peaceful wink, for they were reasonably certain that the bandit had a card up his sleeve when he boldly promised to make his escape. They trusted no one, kept their eyes and ears open and racked their brains in an effort to discover what trickery the smooth outlaw was cooking up, and they counted the miles and hours that separated the train from Fort Clark and the army.

During the noon halt on the second day, Paint and Pinto found reason to be thankful that they had denied any knowledge of Spanish. While seated in the shade of the ambulance after dinner, smoking and improving their acquaintance with Amata and Sofia, they listened with one ear to a low-voiced conversation between Aunt Maria and the Hernandez driver on the other side of the rig.

They heard her say, "Adolfo, we are very lucky to have those twins for an escort. They certainly made a fool out of that Andreo Coos and tomorrow we shall be rid of him forever."

"Yes, Senora," answered the driver, "they got the best of the bandit. But I think they are very shrewd and dangerous men and we should not trust them."

"Why, they are only boys!"

"That is true, Dona Hernandez, boys who were men before they could shave and clever rascals before they could legally vote. Guard your jewels and your nieces, Senora."

The Mexican woman laughed. "Foolishness! Besides, jewels are easy to get and my nieces could do worse."

The boys could imagine Adolfo shrugging his big shoulders. "Nevertheless, Dona Hernandez, I think you should tell me to cut the throats of those twins tonight while they sleep."

Aunt Maria's voice was softer now, yet it had a razor edge, "If, by any chance their throats should be cut even a little bit, Adolfo, I shall behead you with a very dull knife. Understand?"

"Yes, Senora."

A few minutes later the twins tore themselves away from the girls and hunted up Kingbolt Benton. After leading him a safe distance from the wagons, they wasted no words in coming to the point.

"Boss," asked Paint, "what d'you know 'bout that there ambulance driver?"

The old man lifted his bushy brows. "Nothin'. Why?"

Pinto dodged the question. He said

"In this country, when you don't know nothin' 'bout a fella like Adolfo, the safest thing to do is to shoot him down or tie him up."

Kingbolt frowned. "That's a fact and come to think of it, I don't know nothin' much 'bout you rannies. Go on."

The boys grinned at him.

"Keep a eye on Adolfo, Cap'n," said Paint, "'specially when we ain't here."

"And likewise," continued Pinto, "if I was in yo' boots, I'd keep both eyes on them wimmen folks."

"What the hell?" snapped the old-timer. "You young scalawags don't never give me a chance to get within rifle-shot of the gals and the old lady ain't fit for a colt like me to look at. Now, I wanta know what you-all are drivin' at?"

This was no joking matter to the twins. They were deadly serious and it showed in their bony faces.

"Hard to tell," admitted Paint. "We got us a man-sized suspicion and that's all we got."

"And, Boss," added Pinto, "don't you forget that we're still a purty far piece from Camp Clark."

"Huh!" grunted Kingbolt. "We roll into there befo' sundown tomorrer if nothin' happens."

"Yep, if nothin' happens."

"*If* nothin' happens."

THE boys scouted far and wide that afternoon, sparing neither themselves nor their ponies. By four o'clock their nerves were raw, their tempers short and Bacon and Beans were pretty well ridden out, so they returned to the train to switch to saddle mules. A big surprise awaited them there. At the bandit's request and with the consent of the women, they learned, Andreo Coos was riding in the ambulance chained to one of the seats.

The twins called Kingbolt aside and politely suggested that Coos should be held in one of the wagons, away from the women and their driver. The old man carelessly brushed their warning aside. They tried to reason with him. He wouldn't listen, whereupon they figuratively jumped him with both feet.

In conclusion, Pinto said, "What I mean, Mistah Benton, you're a plain damned fool!"

The freighter exploded and tore up the scenery. He ripped out a big oath, demanding, "Are you mottled-faced weaners a-makin' out to tell *me—my* business?"

"Yes, sah."

"Yes, sah."

"You're fired, the pair of you forthwith and simultaneous. Git!"

During the space of five seconds each of the twins looked deep into his brother's eyes without the slightest change of expression.

Afterward, Paint said quietly, "Maybe we're fired, but from now until this here shebang of your'n rolls its wheels down the banks of the Rio Grandy we're a-ridin' herd on it, and I ain't talkin'."

The old freighter struggled for words, found none.

Pinto hitched his weight to one long leg and grinned dryly down at the fiery little man. "You see it's like this, sah. You and Miz Hernandez done hired us to guard you through and we aim to do it regardless. Besides, she don't pay us that extry money until we get to the river."

Kingbolt at last unsnarled his vocal chords. He barked, "I'll pay you every last dime of it jest to get shed of you. Go gether up yo' blankets and truck and show me yo' dust!"

Paint tried a little rough and ready peacemaking. "You'll cool off in a minute, Cap'n, and when you get some sense back in yo' head you'll be damned glad that we told you to go to hell."

Kingbolt's mustache and eyebrows fairly bristled.

Pinto cut in before he got started again, "We think we know some things that you wouldn't believe if we was to tell you, so we won't waste our breath; but you simply

gotta take our word that it's powerful dangerous to let that there bandit talk to them wimmen and their driver. Fact of the matter is, we're fixin' to take Coos away from the ambulance damned pronto. Give us the keys, will you please, sah?"

"Durned if I will!" growled the old man. "You cain't boss me around. You're fired! Git!"

Paint folded his long arms as if to make his hands behave. Although his lazy voice carried a whimsical note, there wasn't any mirth in his hard blue eyes. "Now, Cap'n, use yo' haid," he drawled. "If you don't go and start a ruckus nobody won't find out that we're sorta persuadin' you, but if we have to up-end you and shake them keys out'n yo' britches folks may suspicion that we done had some words."

Pinto promptly clinched the argument. "Go to kickin' up sand and you'll get a eye-full yo'ownself, but you won't dust nobody else. We mean business!"

Kingbolt Benton darted a vicious look from one twin to the other, rammed a hand into his pocket, produced a brass key. "Here, take it! Glad to give it to you 'cause I'll gamble that it lands you in a peck of trouble. Them wimmen pack knives. You go to pesterin' their bandit and I betcha they spill yo' guts. I'm a-hopin' and prayin' they do, and I'll have me a grandstand seat."

Paint took the key and the boys turned away without another word. Had they suddenly glanced over their shoulders they might have seen the twinkle that danced around beneath the old-timer's bushy white brows.

INASMUCH as the wind would carry the dust to the rear, the ambulance had taken its place at the head of the train as it prepared to get under way again. The twins trotted their mules up there and halted, one upon either side of the rig. Adolfo gave them a sly, poisonous glance. The women smiled and spoke, and Sofia offered to make room for them inside if they cared to join the party. Occupying the front seat with Aunt Maria, facing the girls, Andreo Coos carried himself with a dignity undisturbed by the chain around his neck.

He favored the twins with a superior, slightly indulgent smile, and said, "Don't you wish that you were cripples with three beautiful ladies to care for you?"

The boys dismounted.

Pinto grinned at the girls, and declared, "We shore do and we're powerful jealous."

Paint went to work on the lock which secured the bandit's chain to the arm of the seat. He drawled, "That's why we're goin' to take you away from here and put you back in a wagon where you belong."

"But you can't do that!" exclaimed Sofia. "We want him to stay here."

Paint opened the lock. From the side of his eye he saw Kingbolt Benton ride up and halt at the rear of the ambulance unnoticed by its occupants, but he didn't let on.

Amata spoke up, more calmly and yet more firmly than her sister, "Yes, we prefer to have Senor Coos ride with us. You may replace the lock."

Paint neither glanced at the girls nor gave any sign that he had heard them. He removed the chain, nodded to the bandit with a backward jerk of his head. Coos sat still. Aunt Maria leaned forward so as to look around him at the tall cowhand.

She said curtly, "Perhaps you didn't understand that my nieces wish to have Senor Coos remain here."

"Mighty sorry, Miz Hernandez," declared Paint, "but the boss wants him to go back to the wagon."

Pinto also pretended not to have seen the freighter. He added, "Orders is orders, lady, and we gotta take him away from you. Hate like the dickens to do it, too."

Kingbolt glared at the twins and shook his quirt at them. Neither of the boys so much as glanced in his direction. Paint took up slack in the chain, again motioning to Coos. The bandit looked inquiringly at Aunt Maria. A hardness came into the Mexican woman's face as she returned his glance.

Nevertheless, she said frostily, "Senor Hawkins, this is my carriage and Senor Coos is my guest at the moment. You will go away at once."

"And don't come back!" snapped Sofia.

"As I been sayin' right along," drawled Pinto, "orders is orders, ladies, and you'll have to talk to Mistah Benton."

"Coos!" commanded Paint sharply. "Pile out!"

The Mexican dandy answered in a silky voice, "When Dona Hernandez tells me to leave I shall go readily, otherwise force will be needed to get me away from here."

"Suits me," said Paint calmly. "We got more force than brains."

He hauled on the chain. Andreo Coos scrambled out with neither grace nor dignity, accompanied by a burst of Spanish from the three women—all chattering at once. Kingbolt Benton started to move away from there. Pinto signalled him to remain where he was, then ran around to Paint's side of the ambulance. As soon as the bandit got clear of the carriage he saw the freighter. He looked daggers at the old man, but said nothing. With Paint holding the chain and Pinto a yard in front of the outlaw, they sized him up carefully for a moment.

"D'you reckon we better comb him?" asked Pinto.

"Yep, curry him good," answered Paint.

"Stretch out yo' arms," ordered Pinto.

The bandit stood still.

"He don't savvy nothin' but force," said Paint dryly. "Give him another dose of it."

Coos held out his arms.

Pinto searched him methodically. From the pockets of his short brocaded jacket and beneath the wide red sash that encircled his narrow waist the young cowhand brought forth a double-barreled derringer, a stubby .38 caliber revolver and a short needle-pointed dirk that had a feminine look about it.

While these things were coming to light, Kingbolt Benton sat his mule like a man suddenly frozen stiff. At the end of the search, he let out a roar, "Carry him to Number Two wagon and strip him nekked and chain him up!"

After this outburst, the old-timer kicked his mule alongside the ambulance. Then he stepped down from the saddle with stern purpose in every movement and thrust his grizzled head into the carriage. The fierceness of him caused the women to stare wide-eyed and breathless.

Courteously yet firmly, he told Aunt Maria, "It goes ag'in my nature to talk rough to a lady, but to hell with nature where murderin' bandits is consarned! I cain't prove that you-all give the polecat them weapons. If I could, I'd chain you up—so he'p me! Anyways, I'm a-mind to tell you to trail alone from now on, 'cause this here outfit ain't got no room for skullduggery no matter how purty it happens to be."

THE girls burst into quick tears and the older woman was at once the picture of indecision and dismay. They pleaded with him not to place them at the mercy of Indians and bandits by turning them adrift in this wilderness, and they swore by all their saints that they were innocent of any desire to bring trouble to the caravan.

The old-timer melted in a hurry, though he obviously tried hard to keep up the ap-

pearance of being plenty tough. The twins hung back with their prisoner to hear what Kingbolt had to say. He thoughtfully fingered his mustache, frowned up the trail ahead and squinted at the horizon.

Pretty soon he said gruffly, "Aww-ll right, ladies, you can traipse along with us. When a woman or a mule cries for help I'm as soft as 'dobe in a cloudburst."

He shook a finger at Aunt Maria, and rasped out, "But don't you go and bank on that too far! If you dast look twice at this here bandit I'll chain you hand and foot—the three of you—and carry you that away clean to Monterrey."

He picked up his reins, then suddenly thought of something else. Two long strides carried him even with the driver's seat. He snarled up at the Mexican, "And you, Adolfo! Make jest one crooked move and I hang you, damn yo' sneakin' hide! Fact is—I'd do it now if I could spare a man to drive this here rig, so take keer!"

The twins chained Andreo Coos in the wagon as ordered to do, but they allowed him to keep his clothing. Afterwards they joined Kingbolt at the rear of the train when it got under way. He scowled at them, snorted into his mustache, then set his jaw like a man preparing himself for some bad news.

Paint handed him the key, remarking casually, "Here she is, Boss. Much obliged."

"Keep the thing!"

"Nope. We gotta go a-scoutin' for bandits."

The twins shook their reins and then started ahead.

"Damn yo' speckled livers!" roared the old-timer. "Come back here!"

They slowed down.

He pushed his mule between them. "I told you that you was fired, didn't I?"

"Yes, Cap'n," drawled Pinto, "but we didn't take it to heart."

Kingbolt grunted, and said, "Well, you're hired again. I done found out that I'm the damned fool you allowed I was."

Boyish grins momentarily relieved the fatigue in the young cowhands' drawn faces. Each thanked him politely.

The old man looked quizzically from one to the other. "Reckon it's jest a waste of breath to ask how you guessed what was comin' off on yander in the ambulance, ain't it?"

"Yes sah, Boss," declared Paint, "'cause we don't know nothin' for shore—yet."

"And we won't never find out anything here," growled Pinto impatiently. "Let's go. Keep a eye peeled, Boss."

THE trail now wandered through open country, at points somewhat broken, and heavy timber was found only along the widely separated watercourses. As far as safety of the caravan was concerned, however, this region was fully as dangerous as the wooded area through which it had recently passed, since there were many small canyons where a comparatively large body of men could lie low and escape discovery unless a scout stumbled upon them by accident.

The twins sighted a sufficient number of individual horsemen to warn them that the train was continually under observation. They therefore drove themselves and their tough little mules without mercy during the remainder of the afternoon so as to cover as much of the adjacent country as possible. The train went into camp at Lipan Springs shortly before sundown. The boys came in dog-tired and hungry as wolves, wouldn't take time to eat, switched their saddles to fresh mounts and rode wide circles around the camp until darkness overtook them.

Kingbolt met them at the east entrance to the wagon corral when they returned. Looking past him, they saw the three women coming from a small tent which was always put up in the middle of the enclosure for their accommodation. Andreo Coos was sitting on the ground near a wagon on the right, chained to its wheel, playing solitaire. He glanced up, smiled

sardonically, went on with his game. *Mulateros* were lounging at random about the corral, each with a six-shooter buckled on and a rifle near at hand. Through the open flaps of the tent the boys saw a candle burning and four lighted lanterns were hanging from wagon wheels.

The twins slid stiffly from their saddles and staggered when their feet reached the ground. More than thirty-six hours without sleep, almost continuous physical exertion and a terrific mental strain had left their long bodies gaunt and almost numb with fatigue, their eyes sunken and their cheeks haggard.

"By the Etarnal!" exclaimed the old man. "You fellas is dead on yo' feet. You're goin' to throw a bait and roll in and sleep till sunup. Don't argy!"

Pinto drove his tired and bloodshot eyes around the corral. "Too damned many lights. Put 'em all out!"

Kingbolt offered no objections. On the contrary, he said, "Good idee. We got a full moon anyhow. Blamed if I ain't been keerless as hell ever sence you wildcats went to scoutin' for me."

Notwithstanding the fact that the boys had lately rubbed tobacco into their eyes to keep awake, Paint's lids drooped and his head sagged as he stood there holding onto the horn of his saddle.

His voice came thick and sluggish, "Better put out plenty guards. Wake us up at midnight."

Pinto mumbled, "Watch Adolfo and them wimmen. I'd chain him if I was you."

"Don't you bother yo' heads 'bout them," said the old man kindly. "Go turn in befo' you die on my hands. Scoot!"

He yelled at the caporal to spread the twins' blankets under Number Three wagon. They took their rifles from their saddle scabbards and shambled over to the wagon, walking like men asleep on their feet; and they failed to notice the three women or to hear their friendly if somewhat timid greetings when they passed. From the moment they lay down until far into the night, the boys were wholly unaware of what went on around them. Eventually they were aroused by a commotion in the wagon above them and due to lifetime training, they came out of a deep sleep almost entirely awake and on the alert.

Kingbolt Benton slept in Number Three. The twins heard him cursing, followed by, "Where in hell is my britches?"

Instead of tickling the twins' sense of humor, this amusing question aroused their fears for they remembered that the old man carried his keys in his pants pocket. They crawled from beneath the wagon in a hurry, rifles in hand, and met Juan Medina as he climbed down from the front opening in the cover. The slender caporal's face was worried, his low voice grave.

"Senores," he said, "Andreo Coos has escaped."

The twins muttered under their breath.

Juan continued. "He was asleep in Number Two when I relieved Capitan Benton two hours ago. Just now I found that he was gone. His chain had been unlocked. It must have happened while I was outside with the guards. I was away an hour, no longer."

The freighter thrust his white head into view, snarling, "And some thief was slick enough to steal my britches without wakin' me up."

"Shore!" grunted Paint, "so's to get yo' keys."

"Is Adolfo gone?" asked Pinto.

"No. Senor," answered Medina. "I just looked. He's snoring under the ambulance."

The twins stared grimly at the tent. It was dark and no sound issued from it Each wished that he might go in there and shake the truth from those women. Afterwards their sunken eyes swept the camp and its surroundings, aided by a moon that hung in a cloudless sky and drenched the earth with its light.

For purposes of defense the campsite had been well chosen—a slight elevation

with no timber near, other than some trees at the spring one hundred yards east down an easy slope and the dense growth of willows that bordered the creek as it wound its way southward. The tinkle of a bell announced that the remuda was grazing somewhere down the valley, no doubt guarded by a sleepy nighthawk. Several animals were picketed near the wagons and the twins were pleased to discover Bacon and Beans among them. They'd need those owl-eyed ponies before long. The coals of the campfire showed red just outside the corral and a huge coffee pot sent its aroma to remind the gaunt cowhands that they were weak from hunger.

Paint told the caporal, "While we grab a mouthful of grub and a cup of coffee, will you go see if any of that stuff on picket is missin'?"

"And if you don't mind," added Pinto, "have one of yo' boys saddle our nags for us. We got some ridin' to do."

Medina bobbed his head and hurried away.

A FEW minutes later, Kingbolt joined the twins at the grub-box near the fire where they were gulping hot coffee and wolfing cold food. The old-timer was in a rage and obviously very much ashamed of himself.

"Damndest thing that ever happened to me," he growled. "I'd a-swore that no human could steal my britches when they're less'n a yard from my head and not wake me up."

"That there Adolfo is more'n half Injun, I betcha," declared Paint, "and Injun thieves ain't noways human. It's a wonder he didn't cut yo' throat."

"The way I'm feelin' now, I wish to hell he had!"

Pinto gnawed ravenously on a broiled calf's rib. "Calm yo'self, Cap'n," he said. "Juan found out about it soon enough, pervidin' our luck is good. If Coos is a-hoofin' it he won't go fast with his game hip. If he stole him a mule it'll still take time for him to find his gang, even if they are a-hidin' out som'eres close by—which we're dead shore they are. We'd oughta be able to get fixed for 'em befo' they jump us."

"Jump us!" exclaimed Kingbolt softly. "They won't do that. Andy Goose will have sense enough to know that we're wide awake by now."

Paint emptied his tin cup, reached for the coffee pot. "They'll jump us, all right. Coos knows that you'll figger he won't, so that's exactly what he'll do."

In response to a question the old man said that one guard was stationed in the trees at the spring east of camp, the other on a small knoll two hundred yards due west

Pinto helped himself from a pan of stewed dried apples. "If I was you," he suggested, "I'd call 'em in."

"But we gotta have guards out!"

"We'll be out," said Paint quietly.

Kingbolt was launching a vigorous objection when Juan returned with the ponies. The twins glanced up inquiringly. Medina's honest face reflected a feeling of guilt.

"Alicia, a fast bay, is missing, Senores," he confessed. "Her picket rope had been cut."

The freighter ripped out a big oath.

Paint snapped a question at Juan, "You allowed you spent a hour with the guards. How come you didn't see him makin' off with the mule?"

The caporal lifted his shoulders helplessly. "I first visited Tony at the spring and stayed with him but a very little while, not more than ten minutes. Then I came back through camp and went to Ricardo up there on the hill. The mules are staked close to the spring—Alicia was nearest to it—so they are almost three hundred yards from the hill. Coos could have taken her without being seen by either Ricardo or myself, but I can't understand why Tony failed to catch the bandit."

The twins' eyes met for a moment in the red glow of the fire. Afterwards they got

stiffly to their feet and picked up their rifles.

Pinto jerked his head toward the spring. He asked Kingbolt, "D'you wanta come along?"

The old man gruffly declared that he did, adding, "Tony is one of my best men. You won't find *him* a-sleepin'."

The twins stalked on in silence.

At the rim of the pool the three men halted and peered ahead through the trees that towered beyond it.

Benton called out softly, "Tony!" He waited, then louder, "Tony!"

Above their heads leaves gossiped in faint whispers as if afraid to speak aloud. At their feet cool clear water bubbled up from somewhere deep in the earth to go murmuring happily over clean sand on its journey through this new world that looked so bright and peaceful, and wasn't. The moon pointed with a silvery finger through the gnarled branches and sparse leaves of a dying hackberry at a thing that lay in the edge of the creek. Water piled up against it, rippled around it.

"You go," grimly said Paint to his brother. "I'll stay here in the open and kivver you."

The old man glanced inquiringly up at them, followed their gaze. Muttering an oath he hurried on ahead of Pinto. It was Tony's face that lay in the water. His throat had been cut, evidently from behind so that he no doubt died without uttering a sound.

The twins carried the dead *mulatero* back to camp. Struck speechless by rage and sorrow, for he was genuinely attached to his men, Kingbolt trudged half the distance in silence.

At length he rasped out, "Damn me to hell! It's all my fault for not chainin' that there Adolfo like you allowed I'd oughta do. But how d'you reckon it could've happened to Tony? I'll swear that he wa'n't sleepin'."

Pinto answered, "It's plumb simple, Boss. He wouldn't be watchin' the camp, so Coos had no trouble sneakin' up on the pore fella from that direction. More'n likely Tony was a-settin' with his back ag'in a tree, lookin' the other way. The bandit jest reaches around and cuts his throat and he don't get no chance to holler."

The old man gazed dejectedly at the corpse. His shoulders slumped, his feet were heavy. He muttered, "Ain't had much trouble for quite a spell and I been gettin' keerless—powerful keerless. I'll hang Adolfo!"

"Don't do it, Boss," objected Paint. "I wouldn't even let on that you suspicion him, now that the dirty work is done. Jest watch him close. You may find out somethin'."

"What about them wimmen?" snapped Kingbolt.

"As long as Coos ain't around," answered Pinto, "they'll be right gentle and easy to manage."

Having urged the freighter to build breastworks under the wagons with everything he had to stop lead, the twins mounted and left camp. Of course they realized that it would be a simple matter to stay there and await the attack, but the boys doubted whether they would have enough men to fight off the raiders. In their minds the situation called for strategy, even though it might involve dangerous risks to themselves.

Their immediate problem was to guess the direction from which the main body of outlaws would attack and a bad guess might prove disastrous. It occurred to them that Coos would undertake to gather in the remuda before striking at the camp, since Kingbolt worked the finest mules he could get and they'd bring good money anywhere. Accordingly, they rode south along the creek toward the tinkle of the bell.

Careful not to surprise the nighthawk and thus start him to shooting, the twins overtook the remuda less than a mile from camp. They told him what had happened. With the excitability of his kind, Gaspar

wanted to haze the mules back to the corral at once.

Whereupon Pinto drawled, "If I was you, I wouldn't do that. I'd jest drift 'em up this side of the creek slow and easy so as to make it look natural-like, and—"

He went on to suggest that even though Gaspar might hear the outlaws coming, he should not make his dash for the camp until he absolutely had to do it in order to escape.

"So's to give us time to set our trap," explained Pinto, "pervidin' it turns out that we got ary trap to set."

"Cut loose with yo' six-shooter when you start yo' run," added Paint, "and take 'em across that there ripple up yander south of camp."

The *mulatero* soon had his little band moving slowly northward. For several minutes thereafter the boys sat their ponies in the shadow of some tall willows, listening to the peaceful voice of the bell and straining their ears to catch warlike sounds from the south. They had little to say, each feeling the strain of waiting and wondering whether they were doing the right thing. They fought down an urge to go hunting for the bandits, realizing that it would be foolish to get too far from camp, since the attack might come from any direction. No doubt sensing their masters' state of mind, the ponies themselves were on the alert. Instead of dozing as they often did when on nightguard, they stood with their small heads up and sensitive ears swiveling to all points of the compass.

Presently Bacon pointed his ears to the southward, stared fixedly in that direction. Beans tossed his head, blew softly through expanded nostrils. The twins stopped breathing, listened. In a moment each sighed with relief.

Said Paint, "We done guessed right."

And Pinto, "Uh-huh, so what in hell are we goin' to do about it with nary a place to hide?"

They gazed grimly toward the faint sounds of approaching horsemen. The moon made of their long gaunt bodies silver statues, while their hat brims cast shadows over the deeper shadows in their sunken cheeks. Lightning bugs winked at them from the willows near which they were standing, floated in and out among the branches like tiny ghosts and one swooped low over the surface of the water. A fish leaped with a splash. The boys jerked their eyes to the rapidly widening circle of ripples.

Paint remarked quietly, "It's sorta deep down there."

Pinto agreed, "Shore is, and the banks is fairly high and the willers hang out over the water purty good."

Silently they turned and rode upstream to a point where the banks were low. There they entered the creek and went back to the pool, dismounting in water that came to their thighs. The boys lead their ponies under the overhanging willows in single file, close against the bank on the shaded side.

Paint called back softly, "If these cussed nags be-have they'll never spot us in here."

"No they won't, but I hate like hell to think of what'll happen if they do stumble onto us."

Having been raised from colts by their present masters, Bacon and Beans were highly trained pets with a lot of horse savvy and chock full of deviltry. They had been taught to stand or lie like stone ponies and would do it readily when in the mood, otherwise they'd pretend not to get the idea and cut a few capers before obeying orders. As the sound of many voices talking in undertones moved steadily nearer, accompanied by the jingle of rigging and the shuffle of hoofs, the boys tried hard to impress upon the little bays the fact that this was no time for foolishness.

Pinto blindfolded Bacon with his bandanna. Then he placed a hand on the pony's nose, all ready to clamp down, and he whispered to it in a language it understood, "*Stand,* damn yo' tick-ridden hide, *stand!* If you don't stand I'll cave in yo'

bloated paunch, so help me. And *be still!* One peep outa you and I'll strangle you and get me a man-sized hoss."

Meanwhile Paint took similar precautions with Beans. Fortunately the ponies were tired and not very frisky tonight and the twins were beginning to think that they had made a good gamble when suddenly they were confronted by a wholly unexpected menace against which they had no defense.

Mosquitoes!

Cut off from the breeze by the bank and willows, countless numbers of the voracious insects settled upon men and horses like something out of a nightmare, a white-hot and clinging mass that offered no resistance to the touch, yet it couldn't be swept away. Paint whipped off his vest, wrapped it around his pony's head. Pinto did likewise. The savage pests drove beaks through their thin cotton shirts, set their bodies afire. Their eyelids and lips were pierced in many places and their nostrils sucked in the things. Their faces, necks and hands burned as if suddenly sprayed with vitrol. But they used their palms to brush mosquitoes from the ponies necks and took their own punishment in silence.

The twins' quick action in protecting their tender ears, eyes and muzzles made it easier on the horses. However, they twitched their skins, trembled, tried to toss their heads, to twist and to turn; and their tails swished violently in the water, a sound that luckily blended with the whisper of the breeze in the willows above them. Now less than fifty feet distant, the outlaws trotted slowly along the bank against which the boys were hidden. Grimly, silently, they did everything they could to keep the ponies quiet, at the moment insensible to the fact that they themselves were being eaten alive.

Voices reached them clearly, speaking in Spanish.

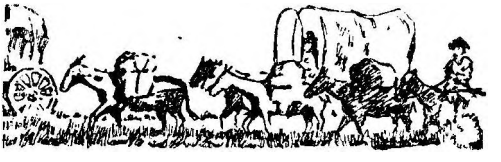
Said Andreo Coos, "Evidently the *remudero* is grazing his mules back toward camp."

Another suggested timidly, "Perhaps he has been warned that we are coming."

"Who would warn him, fool?"

"I do not know. But, Capitan, why are you so sure that the caravan will not be prepared to receive us dangerously?"

The bandit leader was passing within ten feet of the twins when he answered. He laughed, and declared, "Because, hombre, I know how the gringo mind works. They will be awake and thirsting for my blood, certainly, but they think that all Mexicans are cowards and will not expect me to return so quickly. Understand?"



And the last the boys heard from Coos, was, "Now, remember, you men! I want those cursed twins alive. I do not care how painfully they are wounded, but they must not be permitted to die before I hang them."

Paint and Pinto cursed him in their thoughts, battled mosquitos. At the instant it was safe to do so, they left the pool and hurried to the bank, the breeze, and relief from their tormenters.

Paint threw back his head, drew a deep breath, and then exclaimed, "Good God-amighty!"

Pinto swung into the saddle. He barked savagely, "He wants us alive! Let's go!"

LIKE long lean wolves they took the bandit's trail and hung onto it, riding up as closely as they dared. Scarcely a word passed between them, for each knew what he had to do and was in a mood to do it. Upon coming in sight of the gang the boys swung to the left across the creek so as to be partially screened by its willows and pushed ahead until they were but a short distance behind the outlaws. The leisurely tinkle of the bell announced that Gaspar was still grazing his mules along

slowly, thus decoying the bandits up the east side of the stream and giving the twins time to get into position. A few minutes later the roar of a gun ripped through the night. The bell burst into a frantic clatter. Hoofs pounded. The raid was on!

The boys lifted their mounts into a gallop so as to keep pace with the outlaws. Gaspar's well-trained mules were now flying to the only home they knew—the wagon corral, and they led the pursuit up the far side of the creek to a ripple where the banks were low. There they dashed across and quartered off toward camp. Paint and Pinto called for more speed. The leg-weary little ponies laid back their ears and then stretched in a run which carried their masters almost abreast of the bandits. The boys reined in just below the crossing where the willows were high, leaped to the ground and darted ahead through the shadows.

Coos and his gang had slowed down to make the turn into the creek. Tightly bunched at the ford with the leader somewhere in the middle, they were evidently intent upon the escaping remuda to the exclusion of everything else. In one lightning glance Paint and Pinto measured the odds against them. Hair crawled on their necks. If they failed to stampede the raiders by the time their guns were empty, there'd be no chance to reload and this would mark the end of their trail. They clenched their jaws and went to work.

Before the excitable Mexicans realized what had struck them, the twins' six-shooters were blasting the closely packed riders into a tangle of frenzied horses and frantic men. First they shot down the leaders. Men and horses fell in the path of those behind them. The charging mob piled up in the bed of the stream and four guns hurled death into the melee at short range. Through the steady roar of gunfire came the unearthly scream of a crippled horse, the cries of fallen men being crushed to death, curses and yells in Spanish.

"Ambuscade! A trap! Escape!"

A few of the bandits had the presence of mind to fire at the flashes in the willows. Bullets cut leaves and branches over and around the twins. They shot even faster. The fight ended in a matter of seconds. Riders burst from the tangle and fled. The boys caught a glimpse of Andreo Coos among them. They emptied their guns at him. His horse faltered. A companion rode close and took him aboard behind his saddle. They faded into the shadows.

Paint growled an oath. "Makin' a clean getaway!"

"But he'll come back!" rasped Pinto hoarsely.

The boys ran to their ponies and struck out for camp. They didn't look behind them. They didn't want to see what their guns had done. Kingbolt would take care of the wounded and bury the dead.

Up yonder the moon picked out the white-covered wagons, placed them against a background of black and silver and made of it a beautiful scene. Paint and Pinto thought of the old freighter and his grinning *mulateros*, the women folks—too, and they felt a little better about the fight.

Chapter III

They Fought in the Shadows

THIRTY minutes after the fight and before the caravan left Lipan Springs, the twins fell asleep in Number Two wagon. When they awoke for the first time sixteen hours later, their rolling bedroom was motionless and the camp noises that penetrated their foggy senses were familiar and unchanged.

Pinto pried open the swollen lids of his right eye with his fingers. He stared groggily at his brother, and demanded, "Who in hell are *you* and how did you get in here?"

Paint's right eye flatly refused to work. His left, however, grudgingly gave him a narrow and fuzzy slit through which he glared at his twin.

Ignoring the question, he declared, "In my day I done woke up and found some

powerful ugly varmints in my blankets, but you top 'em all. Which end of you is pizen?"

"Are you lookin' for a fight?"

"Shore, as far as a fella can look with half of one eye."

"No need for you to look no farther. Pitch in!"

Paint couldn't grin very well with the lips the mosquitoes had given him, but he did his best. "What say we put it off until after breakfast? I'm nine times as hongry as a buck Injun at a dog feast."

"Breakfast? You mean supper. We done slept all day."

"I mean *breakfast!* From the way I feel, I know damned well that we ain't been asleep more'n a hour."

PINTO let go of his eyelids. They went shut again. He tentatively tried out a stretch. It hurt. He grumbled, "I'm too stove up to argy with a mule-headed caterpillar like you. But it beats me why Kingbolt has left his wagons a-settin' here all day."

Said Paint sarcastically, "Maybe he went a-fishin' so's to ketch hisself a mess of perch for breakfast."

"Supper!"

At this point the argument stopped suddenly.

Kingbolt Benton thrust his head and shoulders over the tailgate, and growled, "Quit yo' clawin' at each other and pile outa there! The gen'r'l allows he wants to powwow you freckled monstrosities 'bout bandits."

Paint sat up, squinted with his usable eye. "What gen'r'l?"

"The head man here at the fort."

"What fort?"

"Fort Clark."

Paint lay down. "Tell the gen'r'l to go to hell."

Pinto hauled himself up onto one elbow. He propped an eye open, and said, "You tell the gen'r'l that we'll come in a high trot soon as ever we get us some supper."

"Anyways," grunted Paint, "it'll taste like breakfast."

Pinto chuckled. He drawled, "Old Texas shore is a fast-movin' country. Slides clean from under a fella if he don't grab a-holt and hang on. He lays him down to sleep in one place and wakes up som'eres else."

"What I mean," growled Paint, "things is movin' too damned fast for me when supper goes to ketchin' up with breakfast."

By the liberal use of cold water and hot profanity, the twins got their eyes open shortly before sundown. Afterwards they painfully shaved their swollen faces and, with three sympathetic women hovering around them, they sat cross-legged on the grass while the *mulatero* who was doing the cooking fed them until they couldn't eat any more. Then they saddled up and rode the three hundred yards to the fort.

The "gen'r'l" proved to be a colonel. He offered them jobs as civilian scouts, no doubt on the strength of what Kingbolt had said about them when he turned four wounded bandits over to the post earlier that evening. The boys declined the army jobs and went back to camp.

Clothed in a heavy air of secrecy, the little freighter was waiting a safe distance from the wagons. He squinted up at the tall cowhands, and inquired, "Did you-all land them army jobs that I fixed up for you?"

"Nope, don't want no part of no man's army."

"Too tough a outfit for us," drawled Pinto, "allus drinkin' and fightin' and carryin' on."

The old-timer sadly shook his white head. "Too bad, too damned bad."

"Why?" asked Paint.

"'Cause you're due to need a army for protection."

"How come?" demanded Pinto.

Kingbolt sent a cautious glance around through the twilight. He jerked a thumb at the little settlement that clustered near the fort, and said, "One of my boys jest got back from a saloon over yander with a

jug of rotgut and bad news. The word is goin' around that they's a bounty on yo' hair—five hundred apiece alive, two fifty dead. He heard that every last gun-slinger between San 'Tonio and hell is a-oilin' his six-shooters, and folks is a-bettin' money on how long you won't live."

The old man teetered back onto his heels, twirled both sides of his mustache, and drawled, "Fact is, I sorta calc'lated that the gen'r'l would hold you so's to collect that there bounty hisself. A thousand dollahs is a middlin' big jackpot to a poker-playin' army man."

Paint looked at Pinto, and vice versa.

"Hear that?" growled Paint. "And you got us into this here mess!"

"You're a liar!" snapped Pinto. "I was dead set ag'in us gettin' tangled with a wagon train and sixty mules and three wimmen. You persuaded me when I wasn't lookin', so here we are!"

KINGBOLT eyed the twins with a twinkle of amusement. He must have known that they were showing off for his benefit, that this new danger made their jobs all the more interesting, but he pretended to take it seriously.

"I been thinkin'," he said, "that with the way old Andy Goose is puttn' up rewards for you pore fellas, I hadn't oughta hold you to yo' bargain. We still got more'n fifty miles to go and a thousand dollahs can do a heap of dirt in fifty miles of tough country. So I'm willin' to pay you off here and now and let you burn the breeze for home befo' he lifts yo' scalps."

With their red and swollen eyes and puffed lips, the twins were mean-looking customers and Kingbolt's proposition made them look a lot meaner.

"Mistah," said Paint quietly, "you can go clean to hell."

"And what's more," added Pinto, "we'll send Andreo Coos down there to keep you company."

The old-timer chuckled, "Damned if you ain't the stubbornest critters I ever seen and I been workin' mules for better'n fo'ty years."

THE train rolled out at five o'clock in the morning. Mile after mile the big wagons swayed and groaned down a trail that traversed a region ill adapted to a surprise attack, practically level and untimbered, and the boys had little scouting to do. They rode near the caravan most of the time, anticipating a trick of some description rather than a raid. About two hours after leaving the fort they loped ahead to the crest of a gentle rise to see what lay beyond, halting in tall grass with the sun at their backs.

A wide valley spread out before them. In the distance a line of trees marked the course of a stream and beside it nestled a small town—Pigeon Creek, they assumed, where Kingbolt had said the train would make a halt. Less than halfway to the settlement a cloud of dust boiled up on the trail. The boys sat motionless in their saddles, watching it come steadily toward them, and pretty soon they were able to estimate the number of riders—six at least, maybe more. They turned and trotted back to the caravan, making plans. Kingbolt was riding in the lead. Falling in beside the old-timer, they told him what they had seen.

He snorted, "Huh! If them fellas was up to deviltry they wouldn't be ridin' in the open thataway. Innercent strangers, I betcha."

"Maybeso," admitted Paint, "but this here job has dealt us so daggoned much trouble we're plumb spooky."

"And likewise, Boss," said Pinto, "we figger that the safest thing to do with strangers is to get the drop on 'em. If they turn out to be innercent, give 'em credit; if they don't, give 'em hell."

After a brief exchange of sharp words, Kingbolt consented to stop the train at a point designated by the twins and to make a pretense of repairing the lead wagon. There a five-foot gully gouged in close to

the trail, overgrown by a thick clump of tamarisk. Paint and Pinto tied their ponies behind the rear wagon, ahead of the ambulance where they were not likely to be seen, and settled down in the shrubbery to await the arrival of the strangers.

Kingbolt met the newcomers in front of the lead team so that they halted abreast of the twins. There was nothing about the seven men in the bunch, four Americans and three Mexicans, to distinguish them from the average run of border cowmen since everybody went heavily armed in that country; but, judging by the way in which they looked the caravan over, the boys quickly decided that these fellows were not hunting cows. They crouched in the tamarisk and grimly waited to see what happened.

ONE of the strangers—a lean and leathery person with a drooping red mustache and a hawk nose, apparently the leader, spoke civilly enough, adding, "Buck Winters is my name. I'm a deppity sheriff and these here boys are my posse."

Kingbolt replied in kind, inviting the posse to get down and make themselves at home.

"Much obliged, Benton," said Winters, "but we got business to attend to, important business."

The old-timer grinned at the posse, and told Buck, "Pullin' a cork now and then never did hurt no man's important business. I pack a jug of right good whiskey."

Winters didn't respond to Kingbolt's suggestion. Instead, he declared sharply, "We come after them twins of your'n."

The old-timer's bushy brows went up, his eyes opened wide and innocent. "What twins?"

"Them freckled, gun-slingin' twins."

"Oh, *them*." Kingbolt shrugged. "They ain't mine."

The hawk-nosed man's face hardened. He snapped, "Whereabouts are they?"

The little freighter appeared cool and not greatly interested. He drawled, "Hard to tell. They ride off on a scout for bandits, but I'll gamble that they're cookin' up dirty work wherever they are. What you got on 'em, Sheriff?"

"Murder!"

"Is that all? Huh! I got wuss things than that on them aggravatin' devils."

Buck Winters' cold eyes narrowed dangerously. "Don't you go to gettin' funny with me! I'm packin' the law. We'll search this train and if we don't find 'em, you'll unload every last wagon in it."

The old-timer looked hurt. "That'd be one devil of a job on a hot day, Sheriff. Whereabouts is yo' badge?"

The lean man tapped his holster, said nothing.

Kingbolt thoughtfully stroked his chin. He inquired calmly, "Got ary warrant on you?"

"No, but we can throw lead just as fast as if we had a dozen of the things."

A few of the gang laughed.

The weazened old freighter folded his arms and faced them with fire in his eye. He said quietly, "The fust one of you skunks that makes a move to search this here outfit will be blowed clean to hell. You're a passel of bandits, that's what you are!"

Buck Winters' bony shoulders slouched, his sharp face thrust forward at the end of his thin neck. His voice came flat and emotionless, "Old man, you're in my way. Grab iron!"

During the space of a long breath no one moved or made a sound, then the tamarisk rustled as if in answer to the command. The outlaws jerked their eyes toward it, stiffened in their saddles and stared amazed into the muzzles of four six-shooters. An instant later six *mulateros* scampered from beneath the lead wagon, carrying rifles in place of the tools with which they had pretended to be working. Trapped cold and obviously aware of it, the outlaws took elaborate care to keep their hands in sight.

Kingbolt grinned up at Winters, and

drawled, "Mistah, it's *yo'* turn to grab iron. Hop to it!"

"Don't be a damned fool, Benton!" snapped Buck. "You're resistin' an officer."

"Oh, shore," grunted Pinto from the bushes, "a officer in old Andy Goose's bandit army."

Fifteen minutes later seven disarmed and dejected outlaws sat their ponies in single file beside the trail, each with his wrists tied behind his back and his feet hobbled under his pony's barrel. The animals were fastened head-to-tail with one of Kingbolt's extra drivers proudly astride a mule, leading the first in line.

While the twins and the three women stood nearby, amused and interested listeners, the old freighter gave his man some orders, "Lead 'em back to the fort. Give 'em to the gen'r'l. Tell him that they tried to stick us up, bushwhacked us and killed two purty fair men and three damned fine mules. Tell the gen'r'l to go ahead and hang 'em, and then I'll come by on my way back from Monterrey and testify ag'in 'em. Tell him that this here slab-sided Buck Winters is a-bossin' the gang for Coos and he'd oughta be hung fust and foremost. And mind you, Ricardo, if you see a bunch of men comin' while you're on the trail jest shoot these here polecats and run like hell. Adios!"

The *mulatero* started away with his prisoners.

They hadn't moved five steps before Sofia, round-eyed and excited, cried out softly, "Why, Don Benton! There was no fight. They didn't kill anybody."

Kingbolt looked her in the eye with a perfectly straight face, twirled his mustache, and declared, "Maybeso, Miss, but I believe in hangin' a man for what he'd do if he got a chance. It's a good law, and thataway you never get behind with yo' hangin'."

He trudged off, bellowing orders to his drivers.

The girls made no effort to hide their amazement and even Aunt Maria looked perplexed.

She asked the twins, "Will those men be hung?"

"More'n likely, Ma'm," answered Paint, "sooner or later for somethin' or other—cain't never tell."

"But the army won't hang 'em," continued Pinto. "They'll hold 'em for a spell then turn 'em loose if no law officer comes after 'em. Kingbolt's got the right idee, though."

"He shore has," agreed Paint. "Now, take for instance that there Adolfo—"

He broke off suddenly. The boys gazed hard at Aunt Maria for a moment, then stalked away to get their ponies.

The caravan rolled down to Pigeon Creek shortly after ten o'clock. The freighter went into camp on the south bank of the stream, close to town, announcing that he'd graze his stock until two or a little later and then make Sweet Springs in a four-hour drive. In this fashion, wagon trains regulated their travel between waterings whenever it was possible to do so, often without regard to daylight and darkness. At the twins' suggestion Kingbolt took the same precautions he would have taken in a hostile region far from a settlement—corralled his wagons, placed an extra heavy guard on the remuda and ordered the caporal to hold it close to camp.

The boys themselves behaved like gaunt panthers who had caught the scent of a hunter. Realizing that Andreo Coos was playing for big stakes, not the least of which were a burning desire to take vengeance and the necessity for redeeming himself in the eyes of his admirers, they knew that each hour that carried them closer to the Border also brought them nearer to a final showdown with a dangerous enemy. More or less taking things into their own hands, they stood guard over the camp and warned every member of the caravan to stay away from town.

While Pinto and Kingbolt were down at the creek washing up, Adolfo announced

his intention of going to a store. Paint cornered him inside the corral, not far from the women's tent.

"Better stay here," said the tall cowhand. "It's a heap safer."

The husky Mexican shrugged his big shoulders. He said with a suggestion of a sneer, "You may be afraid, but *I'm* not."

Paint hung onto his temper. "Jest the same, you stay here," he said quietly. "Everybody's got to."

Adolfo settled his gunbelt on his hips. He demanded insolently, "Got to?"

"Yes."

Without the slightest warning the Mexican whipped out his six-shooter. Though caught unawares, Paint acted by an instinct born of long training. His bony fist slashed up in a short blow that crunched beneath the point of Adolfo's chin, snapped his head back, dazed and staggered him. Nevertheless, he let go a shot. The recoil jerked the pistol from his weakened fingers. A bullet gouged at the ground between Paint's feet, gunsmoke enveloped him.

He charged through it. His tightly-strung nerves sang with a savage joy, for here was something he could fight with his hands. He gave no thought to any weapon other than his fists. He didn't want to shoot the man, an easy thing to do. He wanted to beat this treacherous Mexican until he howled for help.

Paint swarmed over the big man in a vicious attack that employed a scientific brutality learned from the old-time pugilist who taught him and his brother to fight. He knew how to hit to hurt, and he did it. His knobby fists snapped home with a twist that cut and slashed, never landing a merciful knockout blow, and no part of the Mexican's heavy face could escape them. The fellow groped for his knife. Paint kicked it out of his hand, drove him back against a wagon and beat him until he sank in a heap, his face buried in his arms, blubbering something in Spanish.

The tall cowhand stood over him, bloody fists still clenched. "Get up, you damned coward, and make me a fight!"

Adolfo rolled his head from side to side on his arms. Paint turned away in disgust, breathing hard. He met the admiring glances of three drivers, and the whimsical grins of Pinto and Kingbolt. They, too, were panting, for the shot had brought them on a run from the creek. In the door of the tent stood the three women, lips ajar, faces colorless.

The old-timer looked critically down at the beaten Mexican, stroked the stubble on his chin, and allowed, "Purty fair job of work, I'd say."

Pinto grunted, "Uh-huh, but I could a-done it better—a heap better."

The boys took Kingbolt aside and urged him to cut the nooning short so as to get the caravan away from Pigeon Creek as soon as possible.

PINTO went on to say, "You see it's like this, Boss. We been suspicious of Adolfo right along and didn't want him to get a chance to do no talkin' away from the outfit. That's why we tried to keep everybody in camp today. He was so dead set on goin' to town, we figger that he's expectin' to get word from somebody over there. This ain't no safe place for us. We'd oughta be rollin' our wheels."

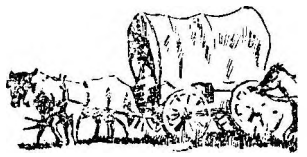
"Then we roll 'em," agreed the old man. "You been right every time yet and I ain't in a mind to argy with you no more. What'll we do with Adolfo, pervidin' we don't hang the cuss?"

"Leave him be," suggested Paint. "By tomorrrer he'll be able to drive and we got a idee that mebbe the skunk will try somethin' foolish and give hisself away. Cain't never tell."

The train left within the hour and four hours later it wound its way down a long hill to the campground at Sweet Springs. There was no settlement here, so the twins breathed a little easier. Nevertheless, they dcided to go without sleep and remain on guard all night, inasmuch as no more than

eighteen or twenty miles now separated them from the Border and they clung to the conviction that Andreo Coos would strike again.

Ricardo returned from Fort Clark before midnight and talked to Kingbolt in the



presence of the twins. He reported the safe delivery of his prisoners, adding that he had been questioned at some length by two men who were in consultation with the Commanding Officer when he arrived. The colonel had told him to answer their questions, and had showed him a paper bearing their photographs in proof of the fact that they were employed by the stage company to investigate the big robbery in which the shipment of precious stones was stolen. The *mulatero* admitted that he truthfully described all that had happened since the train left Soapweed.

Grinning apologetically, he continued, "It was hard to lie to those men, Capitan, especially the tall one, but I finally did it because I feared that I had told too much truth. When he said that they would visit our train, I told him that we would leave the main trail this side of Pigeon Creek and go to Rancho Leon to deliver machinery. That will take them many miles out of the way as it is raining behind us to hide our tracks from the sharp-eyed one. We should be safely across the Bravo when they arrive."

Kingbolt chuckled, and asked, "What did them fellas look like?"

Ricardo talked with gestures, "One was very tall and thin and red headed, having a face like an angry eagle. The other was so very broad and his hair so black and curly, he might be taken for a buffalo."

"Hell!" exploded the freighter. "Pelican and Buff'ler! I know 'em. They're more or less bandits theirselves and I betcha they're a-workin' for the stage company jest to get square with old Andy Goose for somethin' or other."

The twins' eyes met in the moonlight. They, too, knew Buffalo and Pelican—knew that they were the undercover Rangers, Badger Coe and Blizzard Wilson—and the knowledge that these great manhunters were on the trail of Andreo Coos brought a measure of satisfaction. They could have kicked Ricardo for sending the Rangers astray.

When the caravan prepared to take the trail at five o'clock in the morning, Adolfo resumed his place in the ambulance. Kingbolt wanted to disarm the man, but the boys insisted that it would be a mistake to let him know that he was under suspicion. The old man shook his head and climbed aboard his mule.

Paint and Pinto walked to the carriage with the women, which gave them an opportunity to spring a previously arranged trap by warning Aunt Maria to look out for trouble today.

She halted in her tracks, exclaiming softly, "More danger, Senores? What should I do?"

Pinto grinned down at the girls, and drawled, "It'd be sorta unhandy for Paint and me to pack yo' nieces in our saddlebags, Ma'm, but if you got any other valuables it might be a pious idee to let Kingbolt or us carry 'em from here to the Border."

THE girls laughed, then sobered as a sudden anxiety clouded the older woman's round face. Her fingers closed tightly on the little black satchel that she always carried. She stared at Adolfo's battered profile. The Indian blood in her took control. Her eyes narrowed, her lips drew tightly together and anxiety gave place to a fierce hatred. A moment later she turned to the twins, now a secretive and suspicious woman.

"Thank you, Senores," said Aunt Maria, "but my valuables amount to almost noth-

ing, only a little money and the rings I wear."

Sofia seized her arm, whispering excited Spanish, "No, no, Auntie! The stones! If they are lost Uncle Tobias will be furious!"

Amata declared quietly, also in Spanish, "These boys are honest. Trust them, Auntie."

Aunt Maria quickly recovered her poise. She smiled indulgently at the girls, and replied in her native tongue, "I do not trust them a little bit. They are very clever thieves. Although I have guarded you most carefully, the rascals have stolen your hearts."

Never before had the twins tried harder to look dumb and, somehow, they managed to keep their long faces utterly blank under the probing gaze of the Mexican woman's sharp black eyes.

After what seemed a long time to them, she remarked politely, "You must excuse us for speaking Spanish in your presence, knowing that you don't understand it. My nieces are excitable and timid girls, and they want you to ride in the carriage with us today. I told them that you have work to do."

"Yes'm," said Paint dryly, "we got things to do."

The ambulance took the lead so as to escape the dust. Kingbolt rode at the rear of the train, Juan Medina held the remuda closer than usual and the twins ranged on ahead. They had agreed, however, that the Hernandez rig should always be kept in sight of one or the other and they'd ride together as much as possible today.

As the huge wheels of the caravan rolled slowly over mile after mile of comparatively level country, blessed at intervals with a brush thicket to break its brown monotony, nothing occurred to disturb the tranquility of a beautiful morning. Perched in the chaparrel, birds lifted their voices in salute to the new day. Occasionally the boys would catch a glimpse of a coyote or a wolf fading into the brush after a late return from its night-time prowl, and the antics of the numerous bands of fleet little antelopes didn't escape their notice, for the behavior of wild life told these young frontiersmen much that they needed to know.

Birds would not sing with men in hiding beneath them. Wolves and coyotes would avoid a thicket contaminated by the scent of men in ambush. Pronghorns would flee from a man at first sight and later return to look him over, drawn by an irresistible curiosity that made them fall easy victims to a hunter's rifle.

AT LENGTH the twins halted on a slight elevation northwest of the trail. Their eyes swept the country south and west toward Eagle Pass and saw nothing alarming, no place near the road. Where a large body of men could take cover and no strangers in sight.

"It beats me," said Pinto. "We ain't more'n ten miles from the Border now and I know damned well that Coos is bound to spring somethin', but I cain't eemagine where he'll do it."

"Me neither," growled Paint, "and I'm gettin' swaybacked from waitin' for it to happen."

He glanced up the trail at the caravan, now two hundred yards behind them and about the same distance to their left. Everything appeared to be moving as usual, except that the ambulance had widened the distance between it and the lead wagon.

"Dadblame old Kingbolt!" he snapped irritably. "He's gone back to the ramoother and Adolfo is edgin' away from the train. We gotta tell that there Mex to slow down."

At the same time Pinto's attention was attracted to a small thicket in a sag southwest of the trail. A band of five antelopes were running away from it, the white hairs on their rumps flashing danger signals. After circling a short distance they stopped and turned to look back. A few moments later they went mincing daintily toward the thicket, holding their heads high, staring as if overpowered by curiosity. Presently

they halted, spun around and raced away again.

Pinto pointed. "Looky yander! Them pronghawns is a-actin' up. No tellin' how long they been at it. Let's go take a look see."

"Shore," agreed Paint, "but that there patch of bresh won't hide more'n three fo' men."

The boys had no more than started before a woman's scream jerked their eyes to the train. The Hernandez rig had left the trail and was tearing at breakneck speed toward the thicket! Adolfo plied his whip. The little mules laid back their ears and ran, the ambulance careened over rough ground threatening to capsize at any moment. Aunt Maria pitched her satchel into a clump of chaparral as the carriage sped past it and the twins gave her credit for using her head.

They sank home their spurs. They cursed under their breath, relieved to know that here was the showdown—the treachery they had forseen and awaited with anxiety, a last-resort device that Coos had no doubt arranged while a prisoner with the caravan and in contact with Adolfo. The boys quickly saw through the trick, for the antelopes had warned them. They were supposed to chase the ambulance to the thicket where they would be blasted from their saddles by men in ambush, leaving the women without protection. Knowing what to expect, they didn't know how to avoid it. Their ponies' hoofs flew swiftly, their thoughts raced madly. Not a sign of life was visible in the thicket as yet. A dark green tangle of thorny vegetation, it seemed to crouch there on the brown earth like some deadly thing lying in wait for them.

Bacon and Beans gave all they had and the twins soon saw that they might overtake the ambulance when it was at least one hundred yards from the thicket, maybe more. Adolfo had miscalculated, made his break when still too far away. Although one hundred yards was an easy range for a rifleman such as Coos had already proven himself to be, the boys thought it likely that he would want to make certain to get them by holding his fire until they were closer or perhaps came to a complete stop while halting the runaway ambulance.

This gave Pinto an idea—a daring plan, but it might work if they could catch a glimpse of the men in ambush so as to know exactly where to find them. He strained his sight to pierce the eight-foot bank of greenery. A moment later he saw a flash of color in its northern fringe, a short distance west of its eastern edge. A quick glance at his brother told him that Paint had seen it, too.

The twins' eyes clung for an instant.

"Smoke 'em out?" barked Pinto.

"Hell, yes!" snapped Paint. "I'll take Adolfo."

"I'll slow up the mules and watch the thicket. Let's ride!"

They talked to the ponies, got a little more speed and thundered down upon the ambulance. Coming in behind it, Paint took the right side upon which Adolfo was sitting and Pinto passed to the left which placed him nearest the brush ahead. He caught the glint of sunlight on steel in the thicket. His nerves tingled. His muscles involuntarily hardened to resist the shock of a bullet. None came. Maybe this was a smart gamble, he thought. Coos *might* hold his fire.

Adolfo stole a glance over his shoulder. Whipping out a gun with one hand and hanging onto the lines with his other, he dropped down on the seat. Paint yelled a warning at the women. They had to cling to the bows supporting the top to keep from being thrown out, but the girls and their aunt did manage to crouch with their heads below the seat backs. By taking time to get the women out of the way, the cowhand himself took a dangerous risk. His cry was answered by the roar of Adolfo's six-shooter. Paint flinched, swayed in the saddle. A bullet had gashed his scalp above his ear, beneath his hat brim. Again the

driver fired. A second bullet seared a fiery welt on Paint's side. He jerked his left-hand Colt and shot the Mexican through the head.

The lines slipped from Adolfo's dying fingers. The team ran wild, but the twins dared not try to stop it now. Pinto was compelled to do a thing he detested. He shot the near mule in the paunch, a wound that wouldn't knock it down and thus wreck the carriage, though it would soon cause the unfortunate little beast to lag and pull its teammate into a safe stop.

And now the young cowhands took the final plunge in their big gamble. Instead of halting to rescue the runaway ambulance as Coos was no doubt waiting for them to do, they swerved sharply to the left and made a dash for the east wall of the thicket. Caught unaware, the assassins were forced to take snap shots at swiftly moving targets. Rifles cracked. A bullet tugged at Pinto's hat as he lay along his pony's neck. Others split the air above him and Paint during the brief moment that elapsed before the brush hid them. They sent Bacon and Beans darting past the end of the thicket and around to its south side where they hoped to find the bandits' horses. Four were tethered deep in the chaparral near the entrance to an animal path, a dark tunnel into the solid bank of greenery. The twins sprang to the ground, their ponies trotted away with closed reins hanging on their necks. They held their breath and listened for a brief moment. Low but excited voices came to them from the far side of the thicket.

Paint whispered in his brother's ear, "Let's make 'em fetch the fight to us."

Pinto nodded.

Aloud Paint growled, "We'll unloose 'em and stampede 'em so's them dirty so-and-so's cain't run!"

BEYOND the brush somewhere a man ripped out an oath in Spanish, followed by the rustle of men moving cautiously to both right and left around the thicket. The boys ran to the horses, cut them loose and sent the panicky beasts snorting and plunging away. Afterwards they backed as far as possible into the impenetrable chaparral and crouched with drawn guns, Pinto near the animal path and Paint ten feet west. Watching and waiting with savage impatience these hard young fighting-men gave little thought to the fact that the odds were two to one against them and that they'd get no help from Kingbolt, since the freighter would have corralled his wagons at the first sign of trouble. On the contrary they were grimly satisfied to know that this had to be a fight to a finish—everybody afoot, nobody able to make a getaway.

Furtive sounds in the brush soon gave warning that the bandits had worked their way around to the south side of the thicket, though no one of them had as yet showed himself. The boys momentarily fell victim to the strain of waiting. Beads of perspiration crawled over their lean bodies, their palms were wet, their mouths dry and their nerves jumpy. A thorn stabbed Pinto in the back and his flesh quivered as if it were a knife. An angry wasp dived past Paint's head buzzing viciously and for an instant he imagined it was a bullet. A few moments later violence suddenly broke the suspense, converted the twins into cool and confident fighters again.

Guns crashed on both sides of them. Leaves and twigs fell upon and around them as if invisible knives were slashing at them. Smoke boiled up from the chaparral and in it Pinto caught a glimpse of a man. With all the remarkable speed of which he was capable, he snapped two shots at the thin blond face and three more at a point in the greenery below where the head vanished from sight. The man jerked erect, his long body stiffened, he fell backward.

Pinto holstered his empty pistol, drew his other and shifted it to his right hand. Meanwhile, Paint's six-shooters and outlaw guns had burst into a deafening roar

behind him; but he didn't look around and he gave no notice to the animal path, the dark hole that yawned in the bank of chaparral at his left and slightly ahead of him. Crouching on one knee he kept his eyes riveted upon the spot where the first bandit appeared, confident that another attack would come from that direction. With things happening at split second intervals in this bloody drama there was little time for conscious thought, and the speed and certainty of a man's reflexes determined whether he died or went on living.

From the tail of his eye Pinto caught a movement near the mouth of the tunnel. Before he knew what he was doing he ducked his head, dropped to one hand and made a motion to whip his six-shooter up. A thorny vine seized his wrist, bit into it and wrenched the weapon from his fingers. The blast of another gun was lost in the roar of those already in action, smoke burst from the brush full into the young cowhand's face. He literally plunged through it, diving headforemost into the tunnel, and he went down with Andreo Coos.

They locked in mortal combat, a strangely contrasting pair. Coos, a man of luxury—born in it, perhaps, living it to the extent that his nomadic life would permit; Pinto, a product of danger and privation, a stranger to luxury, a rough man toughened by hardship. Coos was a fastidious person who avoided contact with anything that would disfigure him, or otherwise mar his appearance; Pinto would fight in a mudhole clothed in his best, or stark naked in a briar patch. Coos would politely inflict punishment upon a woman or a weaker man; Pinto would bluntly and profanely refuse to do such a thing. Coos would cut a throat openly or by stealth, quickly and cleanly so as not to soil his hands or clothing; Pinto would rip out an enemy's jugular with his teeth, if he didn't have a knife.

These utterly dissimilar men fought in there on a narrow strip of ground that lay in darkness from the birth of leaves in spring to their death in winter; fought with the savagery of the wild beasts that opened the path and nearly the strength of the wild cattle who enlarged it; fought to the death beneath a canopy of thorns and between walls of thorns that from time to time joined in the conflict, stabbing and ripping the flesh of the combatants with devilish cruelty and strict impartiality. And they battled in silence, save for the whistle of breath and the thud of blows. Steel at length flickered in the shadows, up and down—again and again, then the tunnel gave forth a fearful groan as if the thicket itself had received its death wound.

Pinto crawled from the path and staggered to his feet, the bandit's gun in one hand, his knife in his other. Half naked and leaking blood from a dozen superficial wounds, dazed and confused, he looked about him like a man in unfamiliar surroundings. When he dived into the thicket a battle was raging outside, now it was deathly still. He had left Paint shooting it out with two bandits; where was Paint? Something came tearing through the brush around the western end of the thicket. Pinto lifted the dead outlaw's gun. It was Paint coming in search of his brother, grave anxiety showing through the blood that streaked his face.

"Howdy, fella!"

"Howdy, boy!"

That was all they said, but each voice reflected a world of relief.

"Whereabouts is yo' bandits?" asked Pinto.

Paint pointed. "One of 'em put up a right smart fight. He's down there in the bresh. The other'n made a run for it. He's out yander a piece. What'd you do with your'n?"

Pinto gestured with his left hand, jerked his head toward the tunnel.

The ambulance, Paint said, had stopped three hundred yards west with one mule down. He caught up their ponies and went to take care of the women while Pinto rode back to where the caravan was corralled,

halting on the way to recover Aunt Maria's satchel.

LATER that day, Kingbolt and the twins stood on the east bank of the Rio Grande and watched the wagon train wet its wheels in the shallow water of the border river. Aunt Maria had paid the boys with money and profuse thanks, Amata and Sofia had begged them to go all the way to Monterrey, and the ambulance was now on the Mexican side where the cavalry escort awaited the caravan.

As the last of the big blue wagons waddled up the far bank, old Kingbolt Benton put out his hand. His voice was even harsher than usual, "So 'long, fellas. Next time I got me some fightin' to do, whereabouts had I better go to look for you aggravatin' devils—bless yo' hearts?"

"In Texas," answered Pinto.

"In jail in Texas," drawled Paint.

The twins turned their backs on the Border and jogged up the main street of Eagle Pass toward a sign that said, "Cold Beer." The money that now burned in their jeans pockets added heat to the fires that flamed in their freckled throats, and, moreover, they felt the need of relaxation. The sign wasn't very far away when they spied a giant black horse and a lanky roan leading a cloud of dust down the trail into town. The boys swapped grins, and loped right past the sign to meet their Ranger friends where it would be safe to talk.

After the four had exchanged greetings and comradely insults, big jovial Badger Coe shoved his old hat to the back of his curly head and demanded, "What in hell have you spotted imps been gettin' into down here on the Border?"

"Nothin'."

"Nothin'."

Whereupon Sergeant Blizzard Wilson let his six-feet-six sort of sag down on top of his tall roan and fixed his fierce gaze upon the twins. He snapped, "Whereabouts is that there Benton train?"

"In Mexico," answered Paint solemnly.

The lean redhead looked all the way through each of the twins in turn. "And whatever become of them three wimmen?"

"In Mexico," replied Pinto innocently.

Blizzard's long eyes narrowed dangerously. "D'you know what you-all went and done?"

The twins looked perfectly blank.

"You done stomped the liver out'n the law and beat Old Lady Justice over the head with a gun!" barked the sergeant. "Listen to this. Tobey Burns robs him a stage and gives the boodle to his wife and purty nieces to carry to Mexico. Old Andy Coos has a spy by the name of Adolfo planted in Tobey's gang and Adolfo wangles the job of drivin' the wimmen to the Border. Then you come prancin' along, bound and detarmined to make double-bar'led he-roes out'n yo'selves. So you fit, bled and mighty nigh died a-helpin' Missus Tobey Burns to make her getaway with a hundred thousand dollahs wuth of diamonds and stuff. We done gethered old Tobey in, but the boodle is gone to glory. I'm a-mind to send you after it."

Paint looked at Pinto and vice versa.

Said Paint, "And that's how old Andy Goose was able to bluff the wimmen."

Pinto nodded. "Uh-huh, he threatens to give 'em away."

The twins turned their solemn faces to Blizzard, as penitent as a pair of spotted pups in disgrace.

Paint apologized, "We're powerful sorry but how in hell was we to know that—"

Pinto drawled on, "—Aunt Maria would have a leetle deerskin sack in her satchel chock full of jewels. She's taken the sack over the river to Mexico, all right, chock full of good old Texas pebbles. Here's yo' dadblamed boodle!"

He pulled a knotted bandanna from inside his shirt and tossed it to the sergeant.

Badger exploded in a roar of mirth. He jerked both six-shooters, and chortled, "I'll assassinate the aggravatin' scalawags for you!"

Blizzard grinned. "I'll buy."

Antarctic Crevasses

IN THE Antarctic there are many, many dangers which explorers must guard against. Some of these dangers lurk around and grapple one without any warning. Take snow blindness; it comes on you without any pain. Then there is the painful "frost bite" which comes over you like taking an anaesthetic. Also getting lost on the trail during a blizzard which will come up in a few minutes time and completely fog out all trail markings, since in the Antarctic there are no trees nor prominent landmarks to guide by, only small yellow bunting trail flags which are put out by the first men breaking the trail. There are ever so many dangers which confront one and you meet these face to face in the Antarctic regions.

However, the most dangerous of all perils are the innocent looking crevasse areas. One can never tell when he is over one of these awesome breaks in the glacier areas which go down for hundreds of feet, then end all of a sudden in the salty waters of the Ross Sea. These crevasses are not marked but are camouflaged by nature with light coverings of snow, called snow bridges. These bridges will support only a few pounds and will give way without any warning should the weight of a man be applied on them. When they do give way, there will open up a crack in the glacier ice which will be from twelve inches to eighteen feet wide, some being big enough to drop a good size convoy truck. And when a man falls into one of these large crevasses he is a long time gone unless someone sees him go down.

These crevasses are caused by the great Ice Glacier of the Antarctic breaking during either the summer thaw when the temperature rises as high as twenty-eight degrees above zero, or these breaks may occur during the winter months when the temperature falls to seventy degrees below zero. The glacier varies in thickness, being from two hundred feet on up to five thousand feet in thickness and extends from the high Polar Plateau on down to the Ross Sea. It is moving towards the Ross Sea at the rate of a few feet a year.

It is with this movement and the variable temperatures that this world's greatest glacier disintegrates, and these cracks are covered over with driven snow during the common sixty mile an hour blizzard.

It was during our cruise south from Boston en route to the Little America Base that we new members of the last United States Antarctic Expedition under the command of Admiral Richard E. Byrd, were warned time and again against these dangers. We were given strict orders never to travel over new territory unless two men were together; also we must wear skis and carry Alpine rope, as a semi-safety measure of insurance against the deadly crevasses.

But like every other danger in life, many

of us disregarded these safety measures after a few days and become careless. I myself did, and how lucky I am to be here today!

Being a motion-picture cameraman, I was more or less reckless of danger, and since I had a very important job, and that was to make a "production film" around the activities of the expedition, it was impossible to carry an extra man with me every place I went. So it happened that after a few days I kicked off the bundlesome skis and started running around with only my mukluks for foot gear. This made it easier to get around and carry the heavy sixty-five-pound movie camera, with which I had to travel all over the bay ice and barrier to make different angle shots of the operations.

Now on this certain morning I was working alone on a special movie set which was located on the bay ice and I was shooting a sequence around a mother husky and her baby. Everything was all ready to go; at the set I had a pen built, the pup was in the pen, the cameras were all ready and I was waiting for one of the dog men to bring me the mother dog from "dog town" which was located up on top of the barrier. The barrier at this point rose almost a hundred feet above the bay ice.

After waiting a short time one of the dog men came by with a load on his dog sledge and told me that there was no one idle who could bring Shunka, the mother dog, down to me and that I would be forced to go and get her myself.

So I started on up to dog town, following the hard packed trail which was made by the heavily loaded cargo sledges going across the bay ice, then around the edge of the barrier and on top to dog town. In getting up there I realized that I had made almost a three-quarter circle, and that the distance I had traveled must be all of two miles. As I untied Shunka from the dog line I looked down onto the bay ice and discovered that my movie set was only a short distance if I returned straight across the edge of the barrier, which didn't look so high at this point.

Now Shunka was a good-sized Siberian husky and very strong. Also she was full of energy when I took her away from the line, for she knew I was taking her to see her baby down on the bay ice. She struck out in one big hurry like all mothers who are anxious to see their babies, and had I not had the leash secured around my left wrist she would have got away, but I kept her in hand.

WE WENT down the regular trail a short distance, then I decided to cut across and take the straight line to the set as the going looked smooth. As it was down grade I felt we would get there in short order, so I made off with Shunka going in leaps and bounds before me. With each slip I sank ankle deep in dry snow, but with Shunka's power ahead of me, I was soon pulled out. We were now down wind from the set, she could smell her baby and she was setting a fast pace.

All of a sudden without a bit of warning there came a fluttering sound and before I could realize what had taken place, Shunka had disappeared before my eyes. The next thing I knew I was stretched out with my right foot dangling into a bottomless crevasse, my left foot still holding on the back edge and my right arm and shoulder on the front edge. The weight on my left arm told me that Shunka was down in the crevasse and this was verified by her giving a scared cry.

I was dazed for a few seconds and then realized that I was in a very dangerous position. Steadying my head on the snow in front of me, I very carefully in easy stages pulled Shunka to the surface. Once she was on the snow, I pushed her out in front and when I gave the command "Yake" she gave a lunge and by perfect timing of my legs I was yanked over the crack and out. When we were once out

she gave me a questioning look as if I were to blame.

We started off again and had made only a short distance when once again, without the least warning, I felt the surface under my feet give away. I started falling, but this time Shunka had made the jump and was on the front edge. Well, I went down to my armpits and was saved from going all the way by throwing out my arms and catching on both sides of the crevasse in that manner. In the meantime Shunka was pulling, and soon she dragged me out of the crevasse.

This made me a bit panicky because where an area is full of small crevasses they all lead to a big one as do creeks to rivers. I was in a ponder where the big one might be, and I could tell that Shunka was frightened. This was due warning to me, so I decided to take it slower, and had gone but a few steps until we repeated the first fall. This crevasse, however, was a bit larger and it took more skill to get freed, but once Shunka was on top she did the rest of the job and I was out.

Now I was beyond my own control, panicky and scared, standing there trying to gather my wits when there was a hoarse crackling noise over the barrier. The surface under my feet started to tremble and seemed to move towards the Ross Sea, and this I immediately realized was a "Glacier Movement." At any minute all things on the surface might change and awesome crevasses open up in all directions.

Shunka sensed this danger and gave a cry as warning, then gave a lunge and a pull and was off, me trailing the best I could. By this time I was so panicky that I threw all caution to the winds and followed blindly—falling, stumbling, being dragged, jumping, and, to the best of my memory, we must have done some flying because when we landed on the bay ice, we had been across some real crevasses. By now the movement of the glacier had shaken down all the snow bridges and the fearful crevasses were exposed. There in the path we had taken was one big enough to swallow the world's largest elephant and have room for ten more like it.

So, all in all, I owe it to Shunka for this rescue and also for creating dog-man flying in the Antarctic regions; I think we were the first two to fly without wings or gasoline motors.

Ennis C. Helm.

$15 For True Adventures

***UNDER** the heading* **Adventurers All,** *the editors of SHORT STORIES will print a new true adventure in every issue of the magazine. Some of them will be written by well known authors, and others by authors for the first time. Any reader of the magazine, any where, may submit one of these true adventures, and for every one accepted the author will be paid $15. It must be written in the first person, must be true, and must be exciting. Do not write more than 1000 words; be sure to type your manuscript on one side of the paper only; and address it to: "Adventurers All," Care of Editors of SHORT STORIES, Inc., 9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York, N. Y. Manuscripts which are not accepted will not be returned unless accompanied by a stamped, self-addressed envelope for that purpose.*

That Inviting Back Door

WITH the relation of the Americas—North and South—so much in the news these days, with the Havana Conference so lately in everyone's mind, with stories of saboteurs and subversive elements on everyone's tongue, a new thrill comes with Frederick Painton's novelette in this issue. Its telling is in Mr. Painton's own dynamic style—detailed reports of plans for disaster, which he used in "Unfinished Business" and "Cold Facts"—and everyone who reads these yarns cannot help feeling intensely how great is the drama all about us in the unprecented times in which we are living.

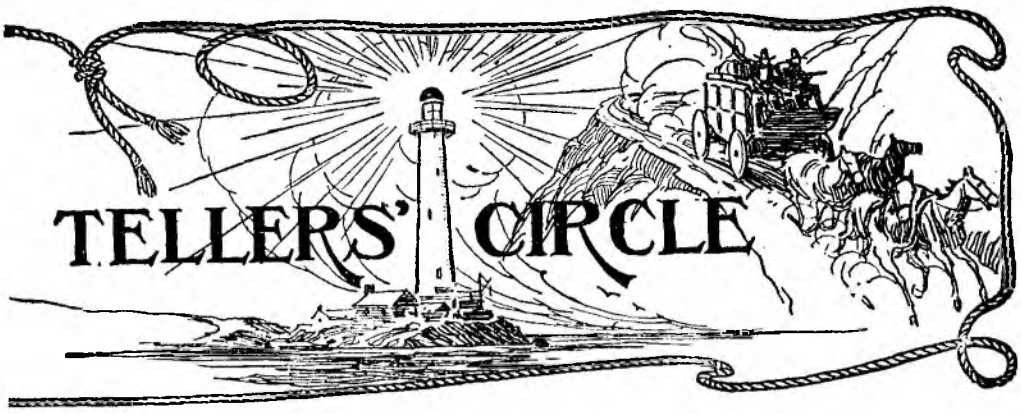
Paint and Pinto and Watermelon Seeds

CADDO CAMERON can always be depended on to have some intriguing fact or reminiscence or legend behind his stories, and he writes us the following interesting letter in connection with his story, *Them Aggravatin' Twins,* in this SHORT STORIES:

There is a beautiful grove of old pecans down here in San Antonio where you can go and sit on a red bench at a red table and eat red watermelon while red squirrels play over and around you as if you were nowhere on earth. I like it there because of the trees, the squirrels, the watermelon, and particularly the old-timer who bosses the place. If he isn't too busy and you can get him to talk, you'll learn that he went to Bracketville on Los Moras Creek out west in Kinney County in the 70's and lived there for more than forty years as a civilian employee at old Fort Clark. Eat your watermelon slowly—eat two or more slices, for it is always good and the old-timer's stories are better.

He has a sense of humor, of course, and you'll swallow melon seeds while laughing at some of his descriptions. See if you can't get him to tell you the one about the wagon train that rolled into the fort with no driver of slasher on Nos. 1, 2, and 3 wagons, the entire crew having congregated in No. 4 to drink beer while the wise little Spanish mules leading the No. 1 team pointed the train down the trail and turned off at the Bracketville camp ground. It's worth punishing your stomach with too much melon just to hear him tell how the wagon boss staggered up to the lead team and argued with the mules about where they were and whether it was time to camp. Maybe this is where I got the idea for the argument between Paint and Pinto when they woke up in Fort Clark.

This old-timer will also repeat to you stories that he heard and remembers. He may tell you about Manuel Telamantes, a Mexican who lived at Eagle Pass on the American side of the Rio Grande where he



enjoyed a fine reputation and the friendship of many good Texas citizens. Manuel was a handsome fellow, a flashy dresser and a free spender, always ready to give to those who needed it. Folks minded their own business in those days and neither the source of Telamantes' income nor his frequent absences from home aroused anything more than friendly curiosity on the part of his many friends. The big surprise came in 1879. A band of thieves was captured between Fort Clark and the Rio Grande with a herd of cattle which they had received in exchange for horses and mules stolen in Mexico and smuggled into Texas. Manuel Telamantes was among the prisoners. Moreover, it developed that he was the organizer and active leader of a large aggregation of bandits who operated back and forth across the border in that fashion.

They hung Manuel and the boss of the watermelon patch told me about it.

Caddo Cameron

Gold Is Where You Find It—Not Where the Other Fellow Does

IN Reece Hague's story in this issue, *Mike Haggerty's Whiskers*, there is a case of gold being discovered at a spot where hundreds of men had trodden over the vein—namely at a portage. It does happen, as Mr. Hague writes:

With regard to the incident where gold is discovered at the commencement of a portage which had frequently been traveled before, at a period of exceptionally low water. Exactly that happened in Northern Manitoba a few years. The discoverers, two brothers on their first joint prospecting expedition, pulled their canoe into a camping place which had been used for years by Indians and occasional white trappers and prospectors. The water was extremely low and a rock usually hidden revealed spectacular gold-bearing quartz.

Unfortunately the vein petered out, but before it did so the prospectors managed to make a few thousand out of companies that optioned the original find and adjoining claims. I ran into one of the brothers in Vancouver the other day and learned with amazement that since our last encounter he had acquired a wife and was now the proud if somewhat harassed father of six children. I was not surprised to learn that he was contemplating a prospecting venture in the Yellowknife section near the Arctic circle, one of the most inaccessible regions in Canada. He'll need to find something more than a rich pocket next time to keep a family like that.

Reece H. Hague

Vancouver, B. C.

In Your Next Issue of Short Stories

[for October 10th]

Hashknife and Sleepy hear some ghost stories!

Listen to the one about the cowboy, for instance:

He visited a ghost town, and left there so violently that about half a mile from town he caught up with a cougar on a narrow road chasin' a jack-rabbit. The fool cougar wouldn't turn off the trail so the cowboy leaped over him and kept on goin'. Fifty yards further on he made a one-handed pickup of that rabbit, flung him back to the cougar and kept on. Then he caught up with and passed three coyotes and one lobo wolf and finally reached Galena City.

"Well," said Hashknife, "that will bear investigatin' "—so he and Sleepy set to work in a grand novelette. . . .

"HORSE OF A DIFFERENT COLOR"

by
W. C. TUTTLE

and

WILLIAM BYRON MOWERY
An ill flavored business venture in the Caribbean
"Dark Wings"

BERTRAND W. SINCLAIR
Rough fishing in British Columbia waters
"Jinx Ship"

JAMES FRANCIS DWYER
Chicago gangsters think Africa is an easy lay
"Gunmen Versus Leopard Men"

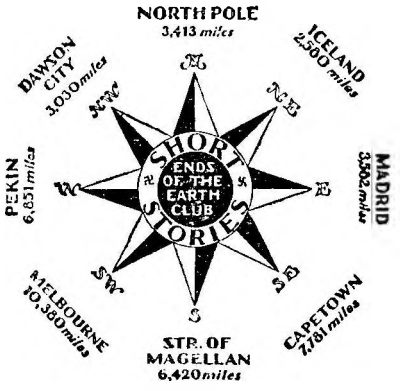
R. V. GERY
Kappie De Vries girds his loins for action in a world gone mad
"The Dutchman Goes A-Hunting"

Besides other top-liners in the action-adventure field

Short Stories FOR OCTOBER 10th

OUT SEPTEMBER 25th

THE ENDS OF THE EARTH CLUB



HERE is a free and easy meeting place for the brotherhood of adventurers. To be one of us, all you have to do is register your name and address with the Secretary, Ends-of-the-Earth Club, c/o Short Stories, Inc., 9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York, N. Y. Your handsome membership - identification card will be sent you at once. There are no dues—no obligations.

Good news for Philatelists

Dear Secretary:

Enclosed you will find a letter I wish to have published in your SHORT STORIES magazine. I have been a member of your club since April 18, 1938. You haven't heard much from me, but I have been a true follower of your magazine.

The enclosed letter might not mean much to you, but I am sure cover collectors all over will be pleased. You see, the post offices of different cities doesn't give the average collector just what he wants. Some might be interested in triangular designs on his covers, others want them boxed off, but the post offices set them according to their set rule, as the job is a tremendous one for them. However,

since I just live a few blocks from the Fair I won't be going through any trouble. I know I'll enjoy servicing these covers, and make many Philatelic friends. I hope you'll let me have this little pleasure I am asking for, will you? As you can see, I ask for no profits, just putting my spare time to good use. Please try to squeeze it in an early issue, so that collectors all over the country, and maybe the world, will have time to notify me. Can you please write and tell me whether you will do as I ask? I am sure though, you understand. Thank you.

Very truly yours,
Bob Thorpe
32-06 100th St.,
Corona, Queens Boro, N. Y.

A stamp collector from Africa

Dear Secretary:

I shall be very much pleased, if you will be kind enough to register my name in your club, so that I may enjoy the privileges extended to members.

I am a stamp collector, and would promptly comply with rules and regulations.

Thanking you for your kindness, I am,
Very truly yours,
K. Jefferies Adorkor
Monrovia,
Liberia, Africa.

From Senior Scout Leader and Librarian-Troop 52 of the Boy Scouts of Portugal

Dear Secretary:

I am specially interested in corresponding with Boy Scouts in all countries, especially Rovers or Senior Scouts, to exchange photos, etc.

Thanking you,
Jacinto Dos Reis Moniz Silva
Miragaia, Angra do Heroismo,
Ilha Terceira—Azores,
Portugal.

ENDS OF THE EARTH CLUB MEMBERS

WITH hundreds of letters from new members coming in every day, it is obviously impossible to print all of them in the columns of the magazine. The editors do the best they can, but naturally most readers buy SHORT STORIES *because of the fiction that it contains. Below are more names and addresses of Ends of the Earth Club members. Most of these members will be eager to hear from you, should you care to correspond with them, and will be glad to reply. Note these lists, if you are interested in writing to other members. Names and addresses will appear only once.*

Milan Lavercik, 2101 Walton Ave., Cleveland, Ohio.
Corp. Carl K. Lawson, Panama Detachment, Fort Rosecrans, Calif.
Robert G. Lindsay, 183 Fenno St., Revere, Mass.
Lloyd McEwen, 72 Dube St., Montreal, East P.2, Canada.
Chester March, Co. 2945, CCC, Heppner, Oregon.
Jackson Novac, 2043 East 21st St., Oakland, Calif.
Eugene L. Ogolo, Ogolo's Compound, Opobo Town, Southern Nigeria, Africa.
Gildo A. Pellizzari, Box 211, Schumacher, Ont., Canada.
Silas S. Pepple, St. Paul's School, Opobo Town, Nigeria, W. Africa.
Robert G. Provost, Box 45, Ancon, Canal Zone.
Lamont Pry, 603 Center St. N. Mauch Chunk, Pa.
Robert S. Rankin, 19 Shepard St., Cambridge, Mass.
Ike Rea, Shaw, Miss.
Oscar A. Roeszler, Company 2761, CCC, Sidney, Montana.
Max Rynearson, R R 4, Auburn, Indiana.
Bernard Samilow, 345 S. 9th St., Brooklyn, N. Y.
Fay Santiago, 500 West 146th St., New York City.
George Schmid, 988 Columbus Ave., New York, N. Y.
Robert W. Schoene, USS Trenton, c/o Postmaster, N. Y. City.
Felix N. Selma, 188 P. del Rosario, Cebu City, P. I.
Frances Seyfert, 47 North Bleeker St., Mount Vernon, N. Y.
Oscar Shearer, Medical Detachment, Fort Clayton, C. Z.
A. T. Sherrington, Brassey St., Doomben, Brisbane, Queensland, Australia.
Luis A. S. Soares, Gas Works, Caixa Postal 571, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.
R. Stratford, 1028 Nelson St., Vancouver, B. C., Canada.
Mary Jane Switzer, Blue Springs, Missouri.
John Szymczyk, Station Hospital, Fort Lewis, Wash.
L. R. Tippie, Box 396, Stettler, Alberta, Canada.

James Hanover,
SHORT STORIES,
9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York, N. Y.

I enclose these four coupons from SHORT STORIES.

Please send me a list of Ends of the Earth Club members interested in stamp collecting.

Name.....

Address.....

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Law for Business Success

And it isn't necessary to practice law to get this Success. In fact probably most of the men who study law today have no idea of taking the bar examination or becoming lawyers—they want law training to help them master men and situations in business. You know that—

(1) the man with legal training is a leader—not a follower.
(2) legal training keens your mind—clears away the problems that stump the ordinary fellow and makes you master instead of man.
(3) knowledge of law simplifies the complications of executive work.
(4) Many top executive places are filled by men who have studied law.

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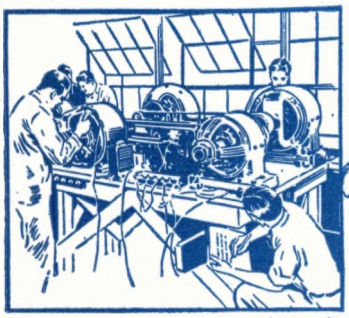

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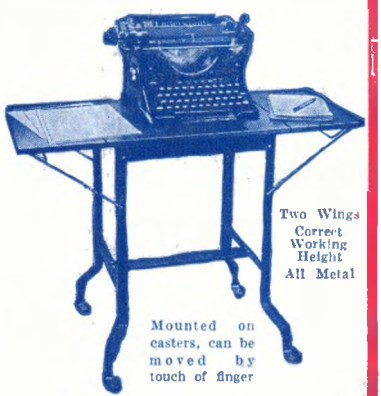

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