

**KUTTNER
TIMES
THREE**



HENRY KUTTNER

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THE OLD ARMY GAME

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BAMBOO DEATH

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THE WOLF OF ARAGON

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NOTE: These stories are being reprinted here for the first time, dubious spelling and punctuation included, as originally issued. Underlined words were in italics in the original.

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INTRODUCTION

HENRY KUTTNER died 30 years ago, February 3, 1958. This booklet is a brief personal toast to mark that anniversary--a minor tribute to a major author who has entertained me for so many hours, for so many years.

THE OLD ARMY GAME is the only Hogben yarn which has never been reprinted. Dated, and certainly formula, it still gives an insight into the hillbilly family which would amuse us a few years later.

BAMBOO DEATH is his second published story. He's still feeling his way here, and a bit clumsily at times. (How many of us have thought: "I could have written better than that." How many of us did?)

THE WOLF OF ARAGON is not quite what you might expect from Kuttner. A favorite of mine, it should be worthy of more than just this first reprinting. One correspondent has led me strongly to suspect this story may have crossed over from the inventory of STRANGE STORIES after that magazine died.

(Pseudonym fanciers might note the use of the name "Kenton" in BAMBOO DEATH. Kuttner uses the name "Kent" in JUNGLE GEMS and THE TIME TRAP, and perhaps in other stories.)

These stories are by no means sparkling gems of the type Kuttner wrote for the science fiction and fantasy magazines in the 1940's. He might wish all three stories were forgotten, but from what little I know of his personality, I think he'd have fun re-reading them. I hope you will, too.

Virgil Utter
February, 1988

ERRATUM:

Henry Kuttner's Date of Death
should read February 4, 1958

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The Old Army Game

I USED to think there warn't much to this army life--just marching round totting a firearm and wearing khaki. First off I was glad to get out'n the Kaintuck hills, figuring that I'd see the world and maybe some excitement.

Things has been awful dull in Piney since the last of the Fletcher boys was killed off, and Uncle Aylmer was allus talking about how he shouldn't of plugged Jared Fletcher, 'cause that ended the clan and there wasn't anybody left to fight with. Uncle took to drinking corn likker serious like after that, and we had to keep the still running overtime to keep him supplied.

Anyhow, the teacher up at Piney allus told me to start a yarn at the beginning, so I guess I will. Only I don't know when the beginning happened. Might have been the day I got a letter that said Huet Hogben on the front, or so Paw said, and he's got a mite of book-learning.

"Yep," he said, "that's an aitch, all righty. Guess it's for you, Saunk."

They call me Saunk because I'm kinda short and runty, as the Hoggens go. Maw says I ain't got my full growth yet, but I'm nigh twenty-two, and hardly over six feet at all. I been kinda touchy about my runtiness all along, so I used to sneak off and chop kindling to give me strength. Anyhow, Paw took the letter over to the teacher to get it read, and he come back ranting and raving.

"Fightin'," he yelled. "There's a war goin' on! C'mon, Aylmer. Git yore shootin' iron."

UNCLE AYLMER was sitting in a corner drinking corn and weaning the new baby with it. "War's over," he mumbled, kinda mad like. "Them damyankees was too much fer us. Gen'l Lee's dead, I hear."

"They's a war," Paw said stubborn. "The teacher says Saunk's gotta go."

"Mean to say we're secedin' ag'in?" Uncle Aylmer asked him, tilting the jug. "I allus said them damyankees couldn't make us stay in their Union."

"I dunno 'bout that," Paw told him. "I couldn't make haid nor tail out'n what that blabbermouth teacher was sayin'. My idee is thet they's a war."

Maw was getting her old muzzleloader out of the closet. "C'mon, Aylmer," she said. "We'll all go. Dunno what good a runty li'l shote like you can do," she said to me, "but you can shoot straight, kinda."

"Shucks, Maw," I said, noticing the teacher coming up the path on his mule. "I can fight good."

"Them Bowyer boys near licked you," Uncle Aylmer cackled. "An' they was only six of 'em."

"They jumped me from behind," I argued. "Anyway, when I got my wind back I licked 'em good."

"Jabberin' like jaybirds," Maw said. "Let's git goin'."

So we all went out the door, kinda tromping on the teacher, but it was his own fault 'cause he didn't get out of the way fast enough. Maw's got a soft heart, though, so she come back and picked him up. He was mumbling somethin' 'bout gorillas and buff'lo, but he come to when we poured some corn down his weasened, after a little scrap with Uncle Aylmer who didn't want to give up the jug. The teacher jumped up sudden and stuck his head in a pail of water on the table, but we ignored him polite-like, bein' he's a furriner.

"First you stampede all over me," he says, kinda bitter, "and then you revive me with molten lava. God!"

"Don't you use that kind of language," Maw tells him, jerking her head toward me. "We got a growin' boy here."

"If he grows any more, they'll build a penthouse on his head," the teacher says, which I don't understand.

"Well, we're in a hurry," Uncle Aylmer growls, getting the jug back.

"There isn't any war," the teacher yells, clawing at his hair. "Mr. Hogben ran away before he understood."

WELL, he kept talking and talking, and after awhile we understood what it was all about. Seems like some clans are feuding in Europe, and it's up to us to oil our fire-irons, case they get too rambunctious and start taking pot-shots at us. Oncommon good sense, Maw said, and we'd all jine up.

"You can't," the teacher said, red around the gills. "It's just Huet that's drafted."

"Might's well draft the baby," Paw snapped. "Saunk ain't got his full growth yet."

"He's over twenty-one. You're too old, Mr. Hogben."

Paw started for the teacher, but Maw grabbed him sudden like. "Calm down," she snapped at him, so he subsided, still growling. "You ain't a chicken no more."

"Just how old are you, Mr. Hogben?" the teacher asked.

"I lost count back in '87," Paw said thoughtful.

"I'm a hundred an' three," Uncle Aylmer cackled, but everybody in Piney knows what a liar he is. The teacher shut his eyes up tight and said, in a funny voice:

"The President of the United States signed a bill drafting men between the ages of 21 and 35. Huet's supposed to join the army for a year unless he's exempt."

"He's too runty," Paw said jealous-like. "They won't take him."

But Maw was looking thoughtful. "You got to do what the President wants, Saunk. Now you jest sit down with the teacher and see if you can figger out what's in his mind."

So I did what she told me, and we filled out the paper the President had sent me. There was a bit of trouble, 'cause Uncle Aylmer kept interrupting, but after awhile the teacher kinda grabbed the jug and swallowed some corn.

"Whoosh!" he said, busting out in a sweat. "Desperate ills require desperate measures. Let's see, Saunk. What's your income?"

"I traded ol' Langland some corn for a pair of britches once," I said, hesitating.

Smack! Maw hit me over the head with her broomstick. "Where'd you

git thet corn?" she asked. "Stealin' it from the still?"

"Shucks, no, Maw," I said, ducking. "Uncle Aylmer give it to me for not tellin' about the time he--"

"Shet up!" Uncle Aylmer yelled, kicking out at me.

"Income!" the teacher said, kinda screaming. "Cash! Hard money!"

"I found a nickel last May," I said.

I never saw a man lose his temper so quick. But I made allowances, 'cause the teacher's a furriner, and after he'd guiped some more corn he felt better. Anyway, he took the paper away and said he'd tend to it. So nothing more was done till one day the teacher told me I'd have to go to the draft board.

EVERYTHING was kinda mixed up in my mind till suddenly I found myself in a room with Uncle Aylmer and a few other men I didn't know. They talked funny. They told me to take off my clothes and go into the next room, which I did, and a little feller in there yelled something about a bear and ran out, leaving the door open. I looked around, but I didn't see no bear.

So I waited till he came back, with a big man who was grinning all over his face.

"Okay, Doc," he said. "That's no bear. That's Huet Hogben, according to the files."

"He's--uh--hairly," the little runt said.

"I didn't get to shave last week," I explained. "We was slaughtering the pigs an' the razor got lost somewheres. Anyway I ain't hairy. You ought to see Paw. He's got a pelt like one of them things the teacher calls a yak."

The doctor was hitting me on the chest, but I didn't feel it. After a mite he said: "Sound as a bell. Pick up that weight, Hogben."

He pointed to a chunk of iron on the floor, with a handle on top, so I hefted it. It looked heavier than it was, and it got away from me somehow and went sailing up against the wall. Plaster came spurting out.

"Good heavens!" the doctor said.

"Shucks, I'm sorry," I told him.

"You'll be sorrier," he said, "when you get to camp and start taking orders from a top-sergeant. You'll spend your time in the guard-house, or I don't know top-sergeants."

There was a kind of rumpus then, 'cause Uncle Aylmer had found out they wouldn't let him jine up, and he took off his peg-leg and sailed into 'em. I finally wropped my arms round him, trying not to listen to his language--which wasn't anything for a growing boy like me to hear--and tied him on the mule, which I smacked on the rump and sent home. Last I see of Uncle Aylmer was his face bobbing up and down under the mule, while the poor critter's hide was rising in blisters from his unrestrained cursing. Then I noticed everybody in the street was staring at me, and I remembered I didn't have nothing on. I never been so embarrassed.

The teacher says that when a lot of things happen you don't want to tell about, you just put a line of little stars on the paper. I can't do that, but my buddy's writing this down, and he'll make the stars.

* * * * *

ALL that means I got dressed again, went through a lot of rigamarole, and finally found myself in camp, a regular soldier. The doctor wasn't

speaking true when he said I'd be in the guard-house all the time, though. Maw allus told me to obey orders--at least till I got my growth--so I did.

Sometimes people would get mad without having any reason for it, like the time we was at shooting-practice, and after plugging the bull's-eye on my target I shot out the centers of all the other targets too. Then they got rambunctious when I cut holes in my shoes so's my feet would have room, and the time I stepped on a feller's face--but that was jest an accident. I kinda stumbled and he got tromped on. But he was picking on my buddy, and hit me on the nose when I told him to stop, and they carted him off to the hospital and put me in the calaboose.

My buddy's name was Jimmy Mack, and he was eddicated beyond all reason. He was a skinny little feller, just over the weight limit, and I guess we stuck together 'cause we was both runts. He said his grandpaw had more book-learning than he did. Grandpaw Eliphalet Mack, his name was, and he invented things. Everybody thought he was crazy, but Jimmy said that he wasn't. He was working on a gadget to make airplanes fly better--an alloy, Jimmy called it.

Seems like if a plane was made of this stuff it could be awful big, and carry enough gas to fly awful far. Only Grandpaw hadn't invented the alloy yet, but kept blowing himself up instead. He lived not far from the camp, and we visited him once on leave, but only got blowed up a mite when he tried to show us how his stuff worked. We left him crying and combing his whiskers, which had got burned a trifle, but Jimmy said Grandpaw would win out yet.

The camp was right near a big woods, and I'd sneak off there whenever I got the chance, to tend to some business I had. It was kinda private, so I didn't even tell Jimmy. And that got me in trouble. One day they brought me up before a room full of brass-buttoned officers and asked me questions I couldn't figure out.

The major kinda liked me, but he looked awful mad. He kept fumbling with a crumpled paper he was holding and staring at me.

"Private Hogben!" he said, sudden-like. "Where were you this afternoon?"

"Shucks, Major," I told him, "I jest went for a walk."

"Outside the camp?"

"Well--yes, sir," I said, not wanting to lie.

"That was out of bounds. And it wasn't the first time. You've been seen going into the woods more than once."

"I jest like to tromp round the hills, Major," I said.

A man with a white mustache made a noise like he'd swallowed the wrong way, and looked at me very mean. "Expect us to believe that?" he asked.

"Shucks, I do like to tromp round," I said.

"That wasn't the reason you've been going into the hills. What's the explanation of this paper the inspecting officer found in your pocket?"

The major showed me the scrap, which was burned at the edges.

"I found it," I said. Jest today, when I was back in the woods. It was fluttering along, so I picked it up."

"Know what it says?"

"I couldn't read it very well. I thought I'd get Jimmy to read it to me."

"Jimmy?" the mustache asked, and the major said:

"Private Mack. He's above suspicion."

"Nobody is! Especially with this code message mapping the camp and estimating--well, information."

"Listen, Colonel," the major said, "Private Hogben's not a spy--I'm sure of that. I think someone was on the hill, mapping the camp and following our maneuvers, and then Hogben came along and frightened him. He tried to burn the paper, but it blew away before he finished the job."

"Somewhat far-fetched, Major," the colonel growled.

"These weren't secret maneuvers anyway, sir. Why should a spy want--"

"They're thorough," the colonel said, and I wondered who "they" were. "Work like machines. Cover every detail. Even if it seems unimportant. We can't risk a spy in camp. Private Hogben, you are under arrest."

"Till we investigate further," the major told me, friendly-like, but I shook my head.

"Can't it wait till tomorrow, sir?" I asked. "Jimmy an' me got leave to visit his Grandpaw. He wrote his invention's all finished, an' he wanted to show it to us."

"Your leave's cancelled," the colonel snapped. "Whom have you been meeting in the woods?"

"It ain't true," I said. "Sir, I jest promised to go with Jimmy, an' Maw told me never to break a promise."

"Guardhouse!" the colonel said, awful loud, and I was took away by the O.D., feeling mighty bad. After a while I found out Jimmy had already left, leaving word for me to catch up with him on the road. He didn't know I was in the guardhouse, I guess.

FAR as I could figure out, I hadn't done anything wrong. And I'd promised Jimmy. So when it got dark I squeeze out through the window, after bending the bars a little and skinning my knuckles on 'em. The moon was just coming up over the hill, and the sentry saw me. He was the feller who had tried to pick on Jimmy a while before, and he had it in for me. I tried not to hurt him, but I figured he'd duck when he saw my fist coming. He kept moaning sort of feeble-like after that, and I got worried about leaving him out in the open, 'cause it was pretty chilly.

Finally I shoved him into the cell I'd squeeze out of, and laid him out peaceful. I took a loose tooth out of his mouth so he wouldn't swallow it by accident, and left him. It was risky getting past the guards, but I managed it, picking up a jug of corn on the way, and then heading for the road.

It was a nice night, bright as day, with jay-birds hollering in the moonlight and cars ripping past on the highway and the snow piled up on the trees. I felt good enough to spit. So I tilted the jug, swallowed some corn, and started out.

Might have been half an hour when a car came rattling past like a bat out of hell. Jimmy's Grandpaw, Eliphalet Mack, was driving it, his whiskers flapping, but he didn't hear me when I yelled.

I crawled out of the ditch, where I'd jumped as he came at me, took another drink, and jumped back again, as a big black sedan swooshed past. It was full of men.

One of 'em yelled something like "Dumkopf!" at me, but that didn't seem to mean anything. I drank some more corn and got ready to hide in the ditch again as another car came racing along.

It stopped when it saw me, though, and I saw Jimmy was at the wheel, with a little bald-headed man beside him. "Saunk!" my buddy yelled.

"Jump in quick!"

"What's all the fuss about?" I asked, strolling over. "I jest saw yore Grandpaw."

Jimmy dragged me into the back of the car. The little bald-headed man got out, said: "You can have the bus," and ran off up the road.

Then we started off again, faster'n I'd ever rode before in my life.

"Shucks," I said, crawling into the front seat, "Take it easy, Jimmy. What's the rush?"

"Fifth Columnists," my buddy said. "They've been hanging around here trying to get army information, I guess, and they found out about Grandpaw's invention. When I got there they were trying to make him give 'em the formula."

"Huh?" I said.

"Spies!" Jimmy yelled at me. "Foreign agents! We had a fight, and Grandpaw got away with the papers. They followed him in their car, and I commandeered one myself when I woke up. Sweet little bus, isn't it?"

JIMMY'S a mechanic. He's always talking about engines and things.

"That bald-headed little guy--who was he?" I asked.

"This is his car. He's been begging me to let him get out for miles, but I didn't dare stop."

We swung around a turn, skidded on slush, climbed halfway up a bank, swiveled around, and came down again. I crawled back into the front seat and drank more corn.

"You ain't jest right in the haid, Jimmy," I said. "What's all this about?"

"I've been trying to explain it to you, numbskull," he yelled. "Those men are trying to get Grandpaw's formulas away from him. The warplane alloy secret. The method's perfected now--"

"Why didn't yore Grandpaw call the police?" I asked.

"There aren't any around this farm. He's heading for camp, I'll bet. It's the closest place where he can get help."

A touring car was trying to hog the road in front of us. Jimmy blew his horn and swung out. I heard a scraping noise and some yelling, but when I opened my eyes again the touring car was gone. Looking back, I saw it 'way on a hillside, wedged in between a couple of pines.

"There they are!" Jimmy said.

We were getting close to the camp. The road was pretty straight for a ways, with hills on both sides, and the woods looking pretty in the moonlight. Grandpaw Eliphalet's car was 'way ahead, but suddenly it started swaying, ran off in the ditch, and fell over.

"Blowout!" Jimmy groaned.

The black sedan was ahead of us, too. I saw Grandpaw climb out of the wrecked car, look back, and then start running up the slope into the woods. The sedan stopped and men jumped out of it and took after Grandpaw. They were shooting at him.

"I see now," I said. "They're feuding with yore Grandpaw."

A bullet whanged off the front of our car. Two men were waiting for us, the others having gone off into the woods. Jimmy ducked and jammed on the brakes. Being as I was, drinking from the jug, I didn't notice anything wrong till I went sailing through the windshield.

I landed pretty hard, and there was a chunk of glass in my scalp that was hurting me, so I sat up and picked it out. I was tangled up with the remains of Grandpaw Eliphalet's car, which we'd hit, and two

fellers were tangling up with Jimmy. He could fight for a runt his size. But one of them got behind him, grabbed his arms, and then the other let fly a punch that hit by buddy right in the jaw.

"Quit that," I said, angry-like. "Let him be, hear me?"

Jimmy slumped down in the snow and didn't move, but the two men whirled, surprised. They were big, husky fellers, and both of them had little toy shooting-irons that they aimed at me.

"Another soldier!" one of them said. "Kill the schweinhund!"

WELL, Maw allus told me guns warn't meant to play with, so when they started to shoot I kinda scrooged down behind what was left of Grandpaw's car. The engine looked pretty shaky, and it was, for when I sort of leaned against it, it busted right off from the rest of the machine. I ducked just in time, but a bullet nicked my ear. The two men were walking toward me, firing.

"He's not armed, Hans," one of the fellers grunted. "You circle to the right--"

That's what they call a flank attack in the army. I knew better than to let somebody with a gun get behind me, so I thought I'd act fast while they was still together. I picked up the engine and heaved it at those fellers, though it was uncommon heavy.

"Gott!" said one, and the other said, "Der Teufel!" They went back into a snowbank with the engine on top of them, so all I could see was their feet sticking out. The feet wiggled for a minute or so and then stopped, so I kinda figgered they wouldn't give no trouble for a while. But poor Jimmy was slumped down with his eyes shut. I looked around for the jug to revive him, only it had been smashed, and the snow was sizzling a mite where the corn had spilled. A jaybird was splashing around in the puddle and squawking fit to be tied.

I picked up Jimmy and started back for the camp, where I'd another jug of corn cached away. Grandpaw Eliphalet was yelling 'way back in the woods, but Maw allus told me it ain't polite to go busting into another clan's feuds. It was different with Jimmy, 'cause he was my buddy. But I remember last July when the Goodwins ganged up on Jem Martin, who walks with a crutch, and after I'd roughed up the Goodwins, old Jem took after me shooting and yelling for me to mind my own business. Maw said it served me right as she picked buckshot out'n my hide.

But all of a sudden I noticed that the yells were coming from a hill where a big blasted pine stood up all alone, and then I changed my mind. I put Jimmy down carefully in the ditch and ran up the slope. My feet hurt, so I took my shoes off and left 'em in a holler log, and then I kept on running.

I ain't much given to new-fangled contraptions anyhow.

There's a wash--a sort of gulley--that splits the hill, and up near the edge of that, under some pines, was Grandpaw Eliphalet scrapping with the four men. But he wasn't no match for them. They got him down and held him, whilst he cussed fit to singe his whiskers.

"Ach!" said one of them, a big husky feller with a mustache. "A verdammnt soldier!"

"Hold on," I said. "Don't point thet shootin'-iron at me, mistuh. You mind your business an' I'll mind mine."

"He is not armed, Kurt," another of the four whispered. "Perhaps--"

Kurt looked around. "Are you alone?" He kept the gun pointed at me.

"Sure," I said. "I jest want to say you ain't got no call to be traipsin' all round here. You better clear out 'fore I make you."

MEANTIME Grandpaw was squealin' like a stuck hawg. "Help!" he kept yelling. "Murder!"

"I cain't help you," I told him. "Maw always said to keep out'n other people's feuds. What do you--all intend to do?" I asked Kurt.

"We--we're just leaving," he said, looking at me funny-like.

"All right, then," I said. "Long as you're leaving. I'll be runnin' 'long myself then."

But jest as I turned a gun went off, an' something whammed me 'longside the head. Lucky I'd turned when I did, or my brains would of been spattered all over the country. Even as it was, the bullet knocked me out for a mite, and when I woke up I was standing in the snow, tied to a tree. I couldn't have been on sensible long, I figgered, but Grandpaw Eliphalet was tied near me, to another pine.

"You ain't right friendly," I said reproving. "I ain't aimin' to bust into your feuds."

"Silence, schweinhund!" growled Kurt. "Now we must work fast--we have little time. Where did you hide those papers, you old fool?"

Grandpaw jest shook his head, looking mad. Kurt grinned.

"Take off his shoes. Give me the matches. While you're at it, Fritz, see if that imbecile soldier knows anything."

"Shucks, I'm jest a buck private," I told him, but he didn't listen. Grandpaw yelled and cussed fearful while they was unlacing his shoes, but he only was practicing, I guess. When they lit matches under his feet his profanity was an eddication. I tried to remember some of it to tell Uncle Aylmer, though I knew if Maw ever found out about it she'd skin me.

Meantime they was putting matches up against my feet too, and I thanked 'em kindly, being as I'd been barefooted in the snow for a mite.

"His soles are made out of leather!" Fritz mumbled. "Ach! He is like a dinosaur--he doesn't know when he's hurt."

I was going to tell him that if he wanted to hurt me, he should try kicking my shins, but I thought better of it. After a while Grandpaw Eliphalet groaned:

"In the ravine, damn you! There's a cave there--I shoved the papers into it."

"Ja!" Kurt said, mighty pleased. "I hope you are not lying! Come! Fritz, you stay here and guard these two."

"Shall I--"

"Wait till I have the papers. Then you may kill them."

"You're right onfriendly," I told him. "Hey! Grandpaw! Did you say the cave in the wash?"

He jest groaned, and Kurt and two others started down the bank. Fritz whirled his gun by its trigger-guard and grinned.

I YELLED after Kurt: "You stay out'n thet thar cave, hear me?"

He shouted back: "Shoot the soldier, Fritz, if he gets troublesome." Then he was gone.

I figgered, shucks, it was time to do something. So I started to work on the ropes that tied my arms back of me to the tree. Fritz noticed what I was doing, and told me to stop, but I didn't pay him no mind. He circled around back of me and hit my hands with his gun, talking to himself. I jest kept on working.

So he came round in front of me, stepped up close, and shoved the pistol-muzzle into my stummick. "Very well. I shall shoot you," he said. "Heil---"

He couldn't have knowed very much about feuding, or he wouldn't have come so close. I slammed my head down hard, hit him on the forehead, and got an uncommon splitting headache right then. I heard the gun drop on my toe, and Fritz wavered round a bit, grinning silly-like, and fell over after a while. He had a fearful lump starting on his hairline.

Anyhow, I didn't need to pay him no mind now, so I jest worked myself free and picked up his gun. Grandpaw Eliphalet was shouting at me to set him loose, but I was in a hurry. Kurt and his friends were already way down the wash. I ran along the bank, kicking up a flurry of snow, till I caught up with them. They was right near the cave, ploughing away at a great rate, and sometimes splashing in the stream where it wasn't all ice.

"Hey!" I yelled down at them. "You stay out'n that cave!"

But they only shot off their guns, not aiming very careful, and talking in some furrin language. I fired back at 'em, missing my aim 'cause I'd never handled this kind of pistol before. I plugged one of 'em in the arm, but it was the left one, and I felt bad. Maw would of whaled me for that sort of shooting.

Finally my gun was empty, so I threw it down at Kurt and jumped after it. The drop was only twenty-five feet or so, and I landed right on top of one of the men. It was the feller with the busted arm--at least, it was only his arm was busted 'fore I fell on him. After that he jest lay with his head in a snowbank and his feet kicking feeble-like.

That left three of them, but they'd been shooting so wild two fellers had to stop to reload. The one with the gun fired at me, creasing my ribs as I rushed him. Using strategy, I fell down and rolled a mite till I could grab his legs.

The others were rushing in, ready to finish me, but I jest stood up, holding the gunman's feet so he would of been dangling down if I hadn't started to swing him around. He yelled, and the pistol went sailing off into a bush. I sort of braced myself and kept swinging him rapid, figgering he'd knock Kurt and the other man down. It worked out that way, too. After a mite I let go, and the feller shot across the wash and kind of caromed off a big rock there. He vanished out of sight behind it, and I didn't hear nothing more from him.

KURT had scrambled up and was running toward the cave, but the other man was wriggling around and bringing his gun to bear on me. There wasn't time to persuade him proper, so I jumped and came down heavy on his stummick. He didn't want to let go the fire-iron, though, but he did after I'd trompled him a speck.

"Ach!" he said, "Der blitzkrieg!" But them was his expiring words.

Kurt was already inside the cave when I caught up with him. He was bent over, stowing some papers in his pocket, but he swung round and shot at me, missing bad. I didn't have no gun, and I couldn't be bothered looking round for one, so I stooped down and packed up a clod of snow. Jest as I threw it one of Kurt's bullets whanged into my shoulder, and my whole left arm went numb. But I got good aim--even Maw admits that--and the snowball spattered all over Kurt's face. There must of been some dirt in it, too, from the way Kurt acted.

I ran and grabbed the gun, but he didn't want to let go. He kicked me in the shins, which allus makes me lose my temper. So I kept hold of

his wrist and swung him around a trifle, sort of battering him 'gainst the walls. He stopped screaming after a bit, being kind of bashed up, and when I let go he sailed out'n the mouth of the cave and never once stopped till he ran into a pine tree 'cross the wash. After that he rolled down into the stream and didn't make no more remarks.

I was bleeding a trifle, but shucks, I still had work to do. So I drug the four fellers out of the ravine and back up to where I'd left Grandpaw Eliphalet. I took a jug of corn with me, and after we'd got Grandpaw untied, I revived him a trifle while I waited for him to simmer down. But then Jimmy came staggering up the slope, leading the hull army, with the colonel and the major in the front, and I had to hide the jug under a bush.

There was so much going on I kinda lost track till I was back in camp in the tent with Jimmy, lying on my cot and wriggling my toes comfortable-like. It made me laugh to think of the fuss they made over my shoulder, what with bandages and medicine. Maw would of slapped a poultice on it, poured a gallon of corn down my throat, and whopped me for getting into trouble. Only, as I figgered it, I hadn't got in trouble. Jest the opposite, from what Jimmy explained to me.

"They were spies--foreign agents, Saunk," he told me, puffing at a cigarette as he pulled off his shoes. "You'll get a medal for this, I'll bet."

"Shucks," I said, "I was jest safeguarding my rights."

He looked at me kind of puzzled, but went on talking.

"Grandpaw's alloy is really good. The colonel's sending him to Washington tomorrow with his formula for the stuff. And you saved it from those dirty spies, Saunk. Bravest thing I've ever seen."

"I jest couldn't let 'em go in thet cave," I said, and then shut up, seeing as I'd said too much. But Jimmy looked surprised, and pestered me with questions till I had to tell him, after I'd made him promise to keep it secret.

"Where do you think I git my corn?" I asked him. "It ain't sent in from Kaintuck. I got me a still."

Jimmy's jaw dropped. "You don't mean--"

"Sure," I said. "It's in thet cave. Mind you don't tell about it, now, or I won't give you a swaller. An' thet's mighty good corn. Uncle Aylmer showed me how to make it."

Jimmy was laughing fit to bust, but he finally sobered down.

"Okay, Saunk," he told me. "You've been running an illicit still back in the woods. I won't squeal. Besides, you're still a hero. You captured those spies, didn't you?"

"Shucks," I said. "I thought they was revenooers."

BAMBOO DEATH

JOAN clutched at the arm of the broad-shouldered young man beside her as the scream came again, shrill with agony, lancing through the lush vegetation that fringed the narrow trail. Knife-edged with an ecstasy of pain, it rose higher and higher, until it died away at last in a choking sob. Lee Dean's mouth tightened as he put his arm protectingly about the girl.

"That sounded human!" Joan whispered, her dark eyes wide, but Dean shook his head. He put down the suitcase he was carrying and wiped the sweat from his palm.

"No, it's an animal. I heard a dog scream that way once in the trenches when a bullet blew its hind legs off. That's a dog screaming, Joan."

The agonized cry came again, and a shudder racked Joan's slender body. Dean picked up the suitcase.

"Come on," he said briefly. "It's not far now, I guess. Nice trip, isn't it?"

Joan smiled bravely. "I don't mind. After all, if Uncle Wayne left me his money, the least I can do is visit his estate."

"But what an estate! Way back here in the Florida Everglades--no wonder he seldom visited it! We must have come nearly four miles from the bayou. I don't blame the guide for not coming along." He plucked at his tattered sleeve.

"That wasn't it," Joan said somberly. "He said Quentin was a devil."

Dean's chuckle died away as they came around a bend in the trail and saw a level path stretching before them to an old-fashioned, two-story frame house that loomed ominously against the flaming sunset. But it was not at the house that Dean was staring, his eyes wide.

The expanse of ground before them was covered with beds of bamboo, some of the plants twenty and thirty feet high, others just pushing their green, slim sprouts through the black loam. Over several of these beds were erected curious contrivances of woven bamboo that resembled nothing more than mesh cages set on stilts. The bamboo was growing lushly through the interstices in the little cages, and in one of them was an impaled, bloody carcass that alternately moaned and whined in agony.

"Ye gods!" Dean said tonelessly, and Joan shrank back, her face suddenly pale. The suitcase thudded to the ground as Dean sprang forward.

HE stood beside the cage, staring down at the gory, dreadful thing that had been a dog. The bloodstained tips of several of the slender bamboo shoots had already grown entirely through the lacerated flesh, and were protruding from punctured wounds on the animal's back. The tips of the

bamboo were covered by slender, needle-pointed metal caps.

Dean began to fumble with the cage, seeking a way to open it. There was a crude arrangement of hooks which he quickly unfastened, flinging the woven bamboo lid aside. And from Joan came a sudden cry of warning!

Dean snapped erect, but he was not quick enough. A pair of thick bare arms, corded with muscle and bristling with red stubble, were flung about his waist, pinning his arms to his sides. He felt himself swung off the ground, and as his ribs cracked under the agonizing pressure he kicked back desperately, feeling hard flesh grind under his heel. There was an inarticulate, growling oath, but the pressure did not relax. Through bulging eyes he saw Joan running towards him, a jagged stick of bamboo in her hands.

Choking for air, with a red haze swimming before his eyes, Dean twisted his foot about his captor's leg, seeking to trip him. It was impossible.

The man stood immovable as a rock, and Dean, although he was no weakling, felt cold terror surge through him. A scorching pain was stabbing through his chest, and he realized he was helpless as a child in the grasp of his opponent.

A shout came dimly to his ears above the thunder of racing blood. He felt the great binding arms relax, and, sick with pain, he collapsed on the ground. Joan came racing up, her bamboo splinter held menacingly, just as a stocky, bronzed man pounded up from the opposite direction.

Dean staggered to his feet, fell back against the bamboo cage. He felt the warm stickiness of blood against his hand, and the tortured dog moaned. Through pain-misted eyes he viewed his attacker.

The man was gigantic. Over six feet tall, thewed like a bull, his massive physique was plainly revealed by the cotton singlet that covered his torso. A bristling thatch of red hair stuck up defiantly, and piggish, bloodshot eyes glowered defiantly at Dean from little pits of gristle. The lower part of the man's face was entirely concealed by a black cloth mask.

The newcomer was panting from his run.

"Quentin!" he snapped, thrusting himself between the giant and Dean. "Get out! Quick!"

Quentin shook his head angrily. His voice was strangely indistinct, muffled by the mask and sounding almost as though the man had a split palate.

"He was trying to take the dog out," he rumbled, and Dean had to strain to make out the words. "He's spoiled the experiment. Look--the dog's dead!"

Callously the giant clutched the furry, blood-dripping carcass in one hamlike hand and dragged it from the impaling needle-points. He shook it angrily in Dean's face, and red drops splattered on the latter's coat.

"That'll do," the stocky man commanded sharply. "Take it away. Quick!"

MUMBLING to himself, Quentin obeyed. His bulky figure swayed darkly against the red sky as he marched along the path to the house. The stocky one turned.

"I don't know what to say," he apologized. "You're Joan Masson, aren't you? And this is Lee Dean, your fiancé?"

Joan nodded, white-faced. "But we're not--"

The man broke in. "In that case, Quentin's all yours. I've been

having a devil of a time. Old Wayne Masson let him pretty well run the place. I'm your cousin Jeff Kenton, by the way."

"Oh," Joan's voice shook a little. "But I--we--"

Kenton waved a bronzed hand. "Come on in the house. Can you make it, old man? Good. It's only a few steps."

Although a searing pain was throbbing in Dean's chest, he managed to accompany the others along the path. Kenton led them up the sagging, squeaking steps of the porch.

"It's a dilapidated place," he observed. "Must be over forty years old."

Once settled in the musty, gloomy living room, they watched Kenton kindle a fire. Joan moved closer to Dean on the old-fashioned sofa, shivering a little. The flames hungrily licked up the bamboo Kenton used for fuel, but the fire could not dispel the odor of damp that pervaded the room. Kenton lit an oil lamp, and appreciatively accepted the cigarette Dean offered.

"You hardly expected to see me here, did you?" he asked after a time, his bronzed, craggy features wreathed in bluish smoke. "The last time I saw you you were a little kid in rompers. Well, I found out from Uncle Wayne's lawyer that you intended to visit the place. And I thought I'd better be here, in case-- Well, you saw what happened."

Dean winced as he tentatively hunched his shoulders. Kenton nodded grimly. "Quentin's a husky little playfellow, isn't he? He's all right, though, unless you interfere with his pet idea."

"Idea? You mean--" A horrible surmise flashed through Joan's mind. She brushed back her hair with a nervous gesture, tried to smooth down her dress, torn by the thorns of the trail.

Kenton's eyes darkened. "He's a bit crazy, you know. He was wounded at the Argonne--that was when he saved Uncle Wayne's life, and the old fellow kept him on as caretaker of this place. He hardly ever visited it, and Quentin could do pretty much as he wanted. Uncle Wayne had a soft spot in his heart for the fellow, and even imported bamboo when he begged for it--the swift-growing kind from tropical India. I don't think he knew what Quentin wanted it for. I--rather hope not."

Even Dean was a bit pale under his tan. "I've heard something about that kind of torture in the Orient. Don't they--"

"They do." Kenton shot an apologetic glance at Joan. "The natives tie a man down over a bamboo shoot, so he can't move, and the bamboo grows right through his body. It grows--well, about an inch an hour, some varieties. The man dies--eventually. It's about the nastiest death one can imagine."

"And you let Quentin torture that dog!" Joan's palms were pressed flat against her cheeks.

"I didn't know it. I was back in the everglades when I heard the howling, and came back as quickly as I could." He saw Dean's sharp glance at his boots and smiled a little. "Yes, they're clean. The everglades aren't all muck, you know."

His face grew grim. "About Quentin, though. He's got some crack-brained idea he can cross plants and animals--interbreed them. His injury in the war put a kink in his brain, and it's taken that--"

He paused as the doorknob rattled, and then Quentin's huge figure came stamping into the room. He dropped the suitcase with a thud. "You forgot this," he mumbled indistinctly through the mask. "I brought it in."

"Thanks," Dean said curtly, for his chest still pained. "Too bad

you couldn't have been as courteous before."

Quentin growled something under his breath and retreated, slamming the door behind him. Dean turned to find Kenton's eyebrows raised quizzically.

"You can't do anything with a brute like that," he observed, and Joan stood up suddenly.

"He ought to be put under medical care," she snapped, an unusual fire in her dark eyes. Kenton watched her flushed cheeks and parted lips with unconcealed admiration.

"Don't think he'd take to it," he said. "It'd be better to shoot him." His chuckle took the callousness out of the words, but his eyes still watched the girl. Abruptly she became conscious that her blouse was torn, revealing a triangle of white, softly rounded flesh. She sat down hurriedly, pulling her coat about her.

There was a faint shuffling from beyond the door. Kenton started and his heavy eyebrows drew together.

"You shouldn't have said that," he frowned. "About putting him away. The man's mad, you know. Dangerously mad." He got up, paced back and forth, scowling. "I wish you hadn't come, Joan," he said presently. "You too, Dean. You see, Quentin is obsessed with what he calls his experiment. He's got those cages all over the place. There are several big ones, large enough to hold a human body. And he's always talking about the day when he can experiment on something worthwhile. He says the lower classes of life aren't suitable."

Dean had sprung to his feet, his jaw muscles tense. "Look here," he snapped. "Do you mean Joan's in danger--really in danger--from that brute?"

"Well, you saw what he did with the dog. I rather wish you two could get back along the trail tonight--but of course you can't. It's bad enough in daylight, what with quicksand and deep sloughs. And the alligators, too. I've been here two days myself," he finished soberly. "And I'm afraid myself sometimes. But I knew if I hiked out before you came--" His glance at Joan was expressive, and she smiled gratefully.

Abruptly a sound came from beyond the door, a frightened, shrill cackling. Dean sprang up, reached it in a stride, and swung it open. Quentin, just outside in the hall, paused, obviously taken aback. He was wearing a long waterproof cape that shrouded his huge body, and a black rain-hat concealed his red hair. His piggish eyes were glowing malevolently above the mask, and from his hand dangled a fluttering, squawking chicken.

Dean became conscious that Joan and Kenton had come up behind him.

Kenton said quietly, "The ax is in the kitchen if you want to kill the bird, Quentin."

The giant's angry mumblings were almost unintelligible. "I don't want it," he growled. "This time I'll do it. I know I will. My new bamboo--"

"Give me that chicken!" Dean snapped, making a snatch for the fluttering bird, but Quentin swung it behind him. His other hand flung up and clutched Dean's shirt in a vise-like grip. The black mask fluttered as he spoke.

"No! You fool! What's a chicken or a dog compared to my experiment? Less than nothing! I'll succeed this time--then I'll be rich! You'll see." His piggish eyes glittered with unconcealed greed.

"YOU'RE not going to torture that bird!" Dean barked, twisting to free

himself from the iron grip on his shirt. Kenton cut in coldly, "Put the chicken back in the coop. Do as I tell you!"

"You're not my boss," Quentin growled. "Captain Masson's my boss. Anyway, I'll do it tonight for sure--I've watered the bamboo for weeks with chicken's blood."

Dean felt Joan tremble as she pressed against him. "Look here," he said desperately. "Just what do you expect to gain by this--this experiment?"

The bloodshot eyes grew cunning. "Money. It's the Fountain of Youth--didn't Ponce de Leon say it was in Florida? That's what I'll have--eternal life. People'll pay for the secret. Look here!"

He swung up the squawking chicken, still clutching Dean's shirt with his other hand. "People die, don't they? Sure. But plants--the big ones, the trees--live for a long time. Some of the redwoods are nearly a thousand years old. That's the chlorophyl in 'em--the stuff they use for blood. And they don't move, either--they're rooted to the ground. It's when you move that you waste energy."

"Why not just inject chlorophyl into the bloodstream?" Kenton cut in ironically, but the giant glowered at him, a contemptuous chuckle shaking the big frame. "Think I don't know that? It'd kill you--I know! You've got to grow into a plant--but it's worth it! Eternal life--thousands of years, anyway. I've got it all worked out." His eyes flickered with insane cunning. "And this chicken will do the trick. You'll see."

Abruptly Dean wrenched himself free, his shirt ripping, and ducked under the big arm, reaching for the bird. With an inarticulate bellow of rage Quentin swung around, keeping the chicken behind him. His fingers closed on Dean's shoulder. Dean felt a ligament tear under the crushing grip, and desperately jabbed a sharp blow to the giant's black-masked face.

The result was surprising. Howling, Quentin let go of Dean and the chicken and fell back against the wall, paving at his face. The bird, clucking frantically, fled into the darkness of the hallway. And still bellowing those inarticulate screams of pain, Quentin's clutching fingers tore the mask from his face, so that its full horror was revealed in the light from the open doorway.

Joan, suppressing a scream, fell back against Kenton.

For the giant had no face! Below the eyes it was a hideous, gaping wound of healed scar-tissue, a horrible cavity from which blood was dripping. Dean involuntarily fell back a step.

The reason for the giant's mumbling speech was hideously apparent now. The explosion at the Argonne that had warped Quentin's brain had made his face a mangled horror that had to be kept masked for sanity's sake. Now he stood mouthing obscene, half-intelligible oaths, blood dripping darkly on the black slicker.

DEAN felt a clutch on his arm, and Kenton drew him through the doorway.

"Come on," he whispered, shutting the door and bolting it securely. "It'll be safer with a locked door between us for a while. I should have told you--"

Joan was sobbing hysterically. "That awful half-face," she gasped. "I'll dream about it forever! Oh, Lee."

Dean took her into his arms. Kenton, standing by the door, listened to the pain-racked moanings in the hall. Suddenly they ceased. There was an ominous hush. Then, without warning, a heavy body hurled itself against the door. The panel splintered.

Dean sprang away from Joan as another resounding blow came, and this time the door gave. A red-stubbed hand came thrusting through the splintered gap, fumbling for the bolt. A quick blow by Kenton would have stopped it, but he backed away, his face a sickly yellow. Dean sprang forward, but he was too late. The door clicked open, and he almost collided with the blood-smeared figure of the giant.

One glance at the bloodshot, glaring eyes told Dean that it was war to the hilt, and hesitation would be fatal. Without pausing he sent a sledgehammer blow to Quentin's stomach, and felt a swinging fist graze his head. Snarling, Quentin bent over, clutching at his midriff. Then he snapped erect, surprisingly agile for his bulk, and lunged for Dean, his face a horror of misshapen, bleeding flesh.

Dean sent another blow at the giant's face, but the deformed head rocked aside and the blow missed its mark. Instantly a great arm was clamped about Dean's waist, although he flung himself desperately aside, and a huge paw closed over his throat. Vicious fingers dug in remorselessly, and abruptly Dean's breath was cut off. He was borne to the floor by the weight of his opponent, clawing frantically at the leering gargoyle face above him. Slim silk-clad legs came flashing into his range of vision, and he saw Joan fling herself on the berserk giant.

Roaring, Quentin flung up an arm and sent her flying across the room. Her head thudded against the wall, and she slid to the floor in a crumpled, unconscious heap.

Past Quentin's shoulder Dean saw Kenton, a heavy vase poised in his hand. Would the man never strike? A moment more, he knew, and it would be too late. Crimson-streaked darkness was swimming up to engulf him as he strained for breath, and suddenly the iron fingers clamped on his throat seemed to expand until they clutched his whole body. There was a soundless explosion within his head, and the room flared up and was gone in an incandescent blaze. Darkness took him...

He came back to life slowly, each breath a rasping effort, throbbing agony in his neck. His arms hurt, and he made a movement to ease them. The motion was arrested, and he opened his eyes and kept them open as he stared.

He was a prisoner. He was seated with his back against a clump of tall bamboo shoots, his arms tied behind him so that they embraced several of the tough plants, holding him captive. His legs, however, were free, and he dragged himself painfully to his feet. With bulging eyes he stared at the fantastic scene before him.

HE had been unconscious for hours, for the sun was high, and its rays were beating down furiously upon the bamboo bed before him, and the coffinlike cage of woven bamboo that stood supported on poles waist-high above it. There were wide interstices between the narrow bamboo bars, and within the cage lay the nearly nude body of Joan, her disheveled dark hair veiling her bare shoulders. Her eyes were closed, but by the regular rise and fall of her breasts Dean knew that she was alive.

The cage held her tightly in a remorseless clutch, and Dean saw that her arms were bound to her sides with adhesive tape. Beneath the cage were dozens of tall, slender bamboo sprouts, some of them with their vicious tips, capped with needle-pointed metal, almost touching the girl's body.

A chuckle came from behind Dean, and a huge, lumbering figure shambled into view.

"Quentin!" Dean whispered through parched and cracking lips.. "You

devil!"

The man had not troubled to change his clothing, and still wore the shrouding, blood-smeared black slicker and hat, while the mask, again in place, fluttered as he breathed. He stood regarding the bound man malevolently.

"Do you think you can get away with this?" Dean asked, with an attempt at self-control. The other man chuckled. "You'll see," he mumbled. "If you're rich you can get away with anything. And she'll make me rich." He turned to regard the unconscious girl with a lascivious stare. "Wait till she's half plant," he gloated. "She'll thank me for it."

"You can't mean--" Dean gasped, straining forward against his bonds. "Let Joan out of there! We--we'll get you some animals for your experiments!"

The giant shook his head, his eyes glinting under the shadow of the hat-brim, not deigning to answer. As a sudden thought came to Dean he glanced around quickly. "Where's Kenton?" he asked. His captor shrugged.

"Maybe dead--I dunno. I left him in the house. I knocked his head against the floor." His voice trailed off as he bent to examine the cage in which the girl lay. He was apparently pleased, for his mumbling voice was jubilant as he went on. "Watch, now. If it doesn't work with her, you'll be the next. I've got a cage ready for you." With a wave of his hand he indicated another bamboo frame on the ground beside him. "But it'll work--you'll see!"

Staring, horrified, Dean saw that the sharp metal caps that tipped the bamboo were prodding into the white flesh of Joan's back, stretching up hungrily with a dreadful, imperceptible growth. Abruptly Joan moaned, shuddered. Her eyes sprang open and she stared blankly at the bamboo bars of the cage within a few inches of her face. A little gasp escaped her, and Dean saw that a few drops of crimson were slowly creeping down one of the vicious bamboos.

Joan turned her head and saw Dean. A dawning apprehension and horror grew in her eyes. "Lee!" she cried, and her teeth clenched suddenly. Another tiny rill of blood began to crawl down one of the bamboo shoots. The black-garbed giant watched the girl with gloating, triumphant eyes.

AS a hopeless, faint moan came from Joan a mad rage surged hotly within Dean, and he flung himself forward against his bonds. They held, and he was snapped back against the limber stems of the bamboo. If he could break them--

They were too tough. Although he strained and flung himself forward again and again he succeeded only in bruising his back and lacerating his wrists. He could not reach the knots of the ropes that bound him; they were tied too deftly for that. Doggedly he threw himself forward, feeling the bamboo creak and sway under the impact of his weight.

There was a splintering sound, faint enough to be unperceived by the giant, but a thrill of hope sprang into existence within Dean. He felt a sharp edge cut into his wrist, and by exploring with his fingers he discovered a dry bamboo stem among the limber green ones. It was this brittle bamboo that his frantic plunges had split.

Hastily he maneuvered his hands until the rope was rubbing against the sharp edge, keen as a knife blade. As he felt it cut through the strands Dean redoubled his efforts, then forced himself to pause as the

giant glanced at him. But a stifled shriek came from Joan, and her captor stared down again to where she lay just above the waist-high bamboo.

Blood was trickling slowly down several of the slender stems now, and she tried to arch her body away from the vicious metal needles. But there was no room to move within the bamboo coffin, and she dropped back, sobbing with pain.

Dean could stand no more. He flung himself forward, his feet braced against the base of the bamboo, and put all his strength into one desperate surge. And the rope parted!

Already almost severed, it snapped and sent Dean plunging, head down, at the giant, who had swung about startled and alert. As Dean came rushing at him, off balance, the giant aimed a swift blow at his attacker's head--a blow that would have pulped Dean's face had it landed. But it didn't.

Dean, realizing he could not recover his balance, made a virtue of necessity and dived at his opponent's legs. The two went down together, amid a great crashing of splintered wood, on the bamboo cage which had been intended to imprison Dean. A knifelike point of bamboo dug into his arm, but he could not pause to pluck it out.

A vicious kick crashed against Dean's shoulder, and his grip relaxed momentarily. His opponent wriggled free and sprang to his feet, but Dean was almost as quick. The two men stood facing each other, breathing heavily. Joan cried out suddenly, and Dean's eyes flashed to where she lay in the cage.

That glance was almost his undoing. The giant aimed a kick at his groin, and Dean only saved himself by twisting his body desperately aside. Off balance, he whirled to face his opponent, but the giant was backing up, his hand fumbling in his pocket. Dean guessed his intention and plunged forward.

Sunlight flashed on bright metal, and as the gun roared Dean felt a hot agony sear his side. Then his fist came up powerfully with all the weight of his body behind it, and crashed home upon the black mask that shrouded the giant's face.

Under that vicious, sledgehammer blow the man spun half about, his knees buckling, and fell forward heavily upon the splintered wreckage of the bamboo cage. He did not move, and Dean leaped to rescue Joan.

HURRIEDLY he extricated the girl's nearly nude body from the cage. She sagged against him, her eyes dull with pain, as he pulled off the adhesive tape that bound her hands. Quickly his anxious fingers explored her back. Then he breathed an explosive sigh of relief.

"Joan! You're sure you're all right?"

She sobbed a little as she clung to him. "I think so, Lee. The bamboo didn't--didn't have time--"

"They're only flesh wounds," he said. "Here." He tore a few strips from his tattered shirt and made an effectual bandage. "The bleeding's stopped anyway. And his bullet only grazed me."

Joan's eyes lit on the supine body that lay face down among the broken cage. Her eyes went wide with apprehension. "Lee!" she said quickly. "Hadh't you better--"

There was a strange look on Dean's face. "I think we're in for a surprise," he said. "When I hit him, I felt--" He rolled the prostrate body over on its back and stripped away the mask. Joan gave a surprised little cry.

Dean, looking down at the bamboo splinter that protruded from the man's eye socket, said grimly, "Well, your cousin won't bother you again."

For it was the body of Jeff Kenton....

"Padding did it," Lee explained as he dressed the wounds on Joan's back while she lay on the sofa in the old house's living room. "He padded his shoulders and arms to make himself look bigger, and the long slicker added to the illusion of height. And, of course, with the mask and the hat pulled over his eyes, and with Quentin's mumbling voice to imitate, he figured I'd never recognize him."

"But why, Lee, why?" Joan asked, wriggling. "Oh, that smarts."

"Just a minute, now. Money, of course. If you died, he'd get Uncle Wayne's money. The way I figure it, he knew about Quentin's experiments, and made his plans accordingly. It was you he wanted to kill--not me. After the bamboo had finished you, he'd have slipped back to the house and discarded his disguise. Then, as Jeff Kenton, he'd have come to my rescue, telling me a cock and bull story about just recovering from his knockout, and managing to stun Quentin and tie him. Of course Quentin was tied up in the cellar, where we found him, ever since Kenton knocked him out with the vase during the fight last night."

"But you said he'd intended the other cage for you," Joan objected.

"He just said that to help build up the case against Quentin. It was you he wanted to kill, remember. It was very important that I be left alive to testify against Quentin, who'd be convicted of the murder, while Kenton would inherit the estate."

"Quentin played right into his hands, didn't he?" Joan commented, shivering a little.

Dean nodded. "Yeah. Quentin isn't homicidal, though, unless he's in a rage. Kenton cleverly put that thought in our minds. But he'll have to be put under medical care. It'll be the best thing--for him and for the poor creatures he's been torturing. The funny thing is," Dean grinned, slipping an arm about Joan, "the funny thing is, even if Kenton's plan had succeeded, he'd not have inherited the estate anyway."

"Oh--oh, you mean--"

"Exactly. You tried to tell him twice, but he didn't give you a chance. He didn't know we were married in New York just before taking the train!"

The Wolf of Aragon

THE steel-clad horsemen of Aragon and Castile had thundered forth, bringing the cross of God into heathen lands. Fra Junipero wandered through Nueva California and swift hoofbeats rang upon the Mission Trail, from the northern fogs southward to the pines of Monterey and still farther south into a warm and sunlit land, laved by the blue waters of Mar Pacifico.

Yet the din of sword-clash was not everywhere. After the vanguard came the settlers and the agriculturists. The knights of España, some of them, forsook the spear and blade to eat of the lotus of sleepy Mexico. Hatred was fading and only the priests remembered how Montezuma had died.

Laughter came again to old Mexico. In their white haciendas, courtly, bearded men sipped their Amontillado and ruled with gentleness. Only from the coasts and from the south came the muffled thunder of battle, now fading, now blazing forth again. But the wars were over. Conquered Mexico shrugged, settled down to its eternal siesta and waited to destroy the invaders--mañana.

The ranchero of Don Philip Vasquez lay amid sunlit fields and hills. Eastward the peaks rose and from the west came sea-winds. Long ago Don Philip had ridden through Mexico with a red sword, but that time had long since passed. The black eyes of an Aztec girl had turned his heart from war and so he had asked Fra Francisco to wed them.

Now Don Philip slept beneath the cross and the padre was old and brown and shrunken in his little mission, miles from the hacienda. The Aztec girl, too, was dead. But the son of Don Philip was a man, equally at home with sword and guitar, on his great black stallion or serenading in the moonlight. Eventually he serenaded one girl only. Fra Francisco was to wed them in the little chapel a week hence.

Then a summons came to Juan. Silently in the night he rode eastward on the stallion.

It was a fine figure of a man he made, cantering at ease, slim as a sword-blade, with a keen, bronzed face and eyes like a hawk's. But his lips were not as hard as Don Philip's had been and he smiled often, flashing his white teeth. Yet he did not smile now. His mouth was grim as he mounted the slopes and paused at last at the mouth of a mountain cave.

FRA FRANCISCO would have given much to have discovered this place. He would have called it unholy and a home of devils. Juan, however, dismounted without trepidation.

From the cave strode a giant of a man, without ornament save for a single feather in his sleek black hair. He did not look old, but his eyes were incredibly ancient. Juan had heard of this man, who had been born, it was said, in Montezuma's time.

"You are Ixtal?" he asked.

"I am Ixtal." The voice was deep and sonorous, yet friendly enough. The giant beckoned Juan into the cave. "Come. We must not talk here."

"Why have you sent for me?"

There was no answer. Juan followed Ixtal into the black hollow. The native took a torch from the wall and kindled it, then went on. They walked for perhaps ten minutes before a blaze of light blinded them. Juan paused on the threshold of a cavern.

A geyser of natural gas, blazing with blue brilliance, spouted up from the rock floor. Beyond it was a pyramid, crumbling with immemorial age. It was not large and was almost a ruin, yet a sense of vague awe crept over Juan. Atop the structure was an altar, on which a small fire flamed.

Ixtal paused near the blue geyser, his face blue-bronze in the strange light, his muscular body that of a chiseled statue. His beak of a nose thrust forward as he stared at Juan.

"Why have I sent for you?" he repeated. "I have heard of your marriage."

"What is it to you?" Juan demanded.

Ixtal gestured toward the pyramid.

"The Spaniards have conquered Mexico and brought their God to rule. But we of the Aztec have older gods and their worship has not died. Hidden in secret places, from Sonora to Xochimilco, the old lore is still taught by such priests as I. A few have remained faithful among the people. We do not like to lose these few."

Juan blinked. The blue fire hurt his eyes.

"But I--"

"Your father, Don Philip, came from Castile. Your mother was a full-blooded Aztec. She came of the old race and knew the old worship. Her blood is strong in you, Juan. You intend to marry a Spanish girl. We do not desire that. We have no power to command you." Ixtal's uplifted hand halted Juan's angry protest. "Yet, because of your heritage, we ask you to wed an Aztec maiden. The ancient line is fading and dying. We wish to preserve it, so we ask this single favor of you."

Juan did not answer immediately. He could not but respect the grave old savage who faced him.

"I cannot do this," he said at last. "As you say, my mother was Aztec, but I am partly Spanish and owe you no allegiance."

"We ask for none. It must be given freely, or not at all."

"I love Rosita and must marry her. That is my answer."

Ixtal nodded with visible sorrow.

"The Aztec passes. The priests of the Feathered Serpent die one by one. Our power is gone." His head turned, his somber eyes resting upon the pyramid. The blue pillar of flame pulsed and throbbed, with a faint hissing sound. Slowly it sank and then rose again. Ixtal whispered: "Night falls on Mexico. I think doom will come upon you, too, Juan Vasquez."

"You put a curse on me, then?" cried Juan.

THERE was a sadness in the strong, bronzed face.

"Not I. If I could aid you, I would. But I see a cloud sweeping through Mexico and it will bring horror and destruction to you. I see a bearded man in armor and hear his laughter, which is without mirth. Look."

He pointed to the flame-pillar. Juan turned, stared deep in its

heart. At first he saw nothing. Then, within the flickering blue, a picture formed. He saw a dove with blood upon its white breast, and a crushed rose. They faded, giving place to a swarthy, bearded face in a dented helm, his red lips thick and sensuous and twisted in a smile to reveal yellow teeth. The eyes were pale and blue as ice.

A chill crawled down Juan's back. He looked away. The pictures were gone. Only the pillar of blue light flamed up, rustling. Ixtal folded his arms.

"Remember this, Juan, and perhaps you can guard against it. And remember, too, that the gods of your ancestors will always be here, waiting. You have forsaken the Feathered Serpent, but he is not an evil god. He helps his own. In your time of trouble, come to me."

Juan bowed his head.

"I shall remember, Ixtal. I wish I could say more."

"It does not matter."

Without another word Ixtal turned and walked slowly toward the ancient pyramid, into which he vanished through a dark portal. Juan hesitated, then took up the torch to retrace his steps. Never, he told himself, would he enter this haunted cavern. What had he to do with the Feathered Serpent? Mexico was a warm, peaceful land and Rosita waited....

For a little while Juan knew happiness and forgot the Aztec cave. The bells rang a benison above the chapel and Fra Francisco's seamed face wore a smile as he performed the marriage ceremony. Afterward the lovers walked in the walled patio, where white fountains tinkled, and watched purple night fall over Mexico.

"I love you, mia corazon," he whispered.

"And I love you, Juan," Rosita breathed.

She was a small girl, tender and fragile and beautiful, with tiny hands and feet and lashes that curled softly on her pale cheeks. Juan's love was a deep ache within him.

From the blood-stained chaos of Europe came the Wolf of Aragon. A renegade and a killer, driven across continents by outraged kings, Don Diego of Aragon went yelling and slaying into the New World. Plunder and murder followed his steed's hoofbeats. Behind him came his outlaw band, giants in armor, baying and killing, laden with the loot of the dead. Mexico covered before them.

The governors of the Pacific were torn by internal dissension and jealousy. Nepotism was rampant. The armies mutinied often, ill-paid and worse fed. Mexico was in practical anarchy. The Wolf of Aragon blazed like lightning through the land, striking, slaying, fleeing before men could gather to resist him.

FRIGHTENED, the natives turned to their white leaders for aid and found none. The Yaquis muttered. Only the padres tried to help, but they were slain without mercy. Don Diego rode his horse into missions and desecrated the altars. He crucified priests, while his mocking laughter rang out above the clamor of the bells. Aid was coming from Spain, but it would not arrive for months.

"Fra Francisco is not safe in his mission," Juan told Rosita. "Yet he will not leave."

"Why do you not bring him here, corazon?"

"That was in my mind," Juan admitted. "It may be that I can induce him to come. He looks on me as a son. But I do not like to leave you, even for a moment."

Rosita laughed. "Here in your hacienda, I am safe, Juan. Your men are well armed and the Wolf is far from here. Ride to the mission and bring the padre back with you. I ask it."

"Good." He smiled. "My stallion travels fast. I shall be back before nightfall."

He broke a rose from a bush and twined it in his lovely wife's dark hair. The blue sky was cloudless. A white dove beat above the wall and hovered. No evil could enter here, Juan thought.

He left Rosita and rode the black stallion north. Slowly the day dragged past. The winds told Juan nothing of what was happening at the hacienda. His heart was light as he rode back, Fra Francisco beside him on a gray gelding. The padre's dark garments flapped about his lean figure. His face was drawn and haggard.

"Perhaps it is best that I stay with you for awhile," he said, as though trying to convince himself. "I hid the mission candlesticks well and the Wolf will not attack an empty mission. The natives have gone to hide in the hills. Yes, it is best, Juan."

The younger man grinned with a flash of white teeth. He touched his heels to the stallion's flanks.

"Let us hurry, padre. We have roasted a steer for you and brought out my father's wine."

"Wait!" Fra Francisco said suddenly. He rose upright in his stirrups, peering under a shading palm. "Juan!"

Far in the distance, smoke rose from the hacienda--black smoke, roiling thickly. No bells chimed welcome. Vultures were circling in the sky.

"Rosita!" Juan whispered.

He sank his spurs deep into tense flesh. The stallion sprang forward like a loosed arrow. His hoofs crashed and thundered on the trail. Fra Francisco followed, but could not keep pace. He was left far behind as Juan rode to the hacienda.

He arrived as the young man staggered out of the patio, his face drained to an ashy pallor under its tan. The padre crossed himself.

"My son!"

"The Wolf has been here," Juan said in a dead voice.

"Don Diego?"

"My men are dead. And--"

Juan did not finish. His gaze followed Fra Francisco's to where a crushed, slim form lay broken among the roses. A white dove circled overhead, blood on its feathery breast. The hacienda was burning.

The stallion came cantering up. As Juan looked at the animal, a new light came into his eyes. With a muffled curse he swung up into the stirrups and saddle.

"Where are you going?" the padre cried.

"After the Wolf," Juan gritted. His hand went to his sword-hilt. He ignored Fra Francisco's involuntary protest. His voice was like iron. "Some of my men may yet be alive. See to them, Father."

HE TURNED the stallion and was gone in a thunder of drumming hoofs. He rode like a demon, his face a set, expressionless mask, the grim light of murder burning in his somber eyes. Juan's world had crashed in ruin about him.

"I love you, mia corazon."

But Rosita was dead now. Don Diego of Aragon had killed her. Juan suddenly remembered his visit to Ixtal, the priest of the Feathered

Serpent, and the visions he had seen. A dove and a crushed rose and the face of a bearded man with pallid blue eyes....

Hours later, Juan came upon the men he sought. They rode in a compact band, sated with their triumph. At their head was a man in a dented helm, his red lips twisted in a reminiscent smile, his blue eyes cold. Behind the Wolf of Aragon rode his plunderers, the dregs and outcasts of Europe, forty men in armor. These were the ones who had spread death in Mexico.

Juan had eyes for but one. Savagely he roweled the black and charged into the midst of the throng, sending men hurtling right and left as his keen blade whirled like a scythe. Don Diego wheeled his horse. His sword came out, gleaming in the golden moonlight. Laughter touched the sensuous, cruel lips.

"Ohé!" he cried. "What is this? By Satan, the man rides alone!"

Juan did not hurl back his defiance. His sword hacked and thrust. He closed with Don Diego. Abruptly his horse went down, dying from a thrust in the belly. The beast screamed like a human being. Juan fell free, landing catlike on his feet. He ran at his opponent, disregarding the mob surrounding him. His sharp sword cut through Don Diego's guard. Its point ripped down the bearded cheek. Blood spurted as the horseman threw himself back.

Then hard hands seized Juan. He was tripped and flung down. His sword was torn away. He fought furiously, in fierce silence, but without avail. In a few moments he lay helpless, bound at the feet of the Wolf. The murderers formed a ring around the pair. Don Diego was stanching the wound in his face. No emotion showed in his pitiless blue eyes.

"Who are you?" he demanded.

Juan did not speak. He glared and that was all. The armored man laughed.

"Well, no need to ask. We have made enemies in Mexico and this, it seems, is one of them." Don Diego's stubby finger traced the wound Juan had made. "Yet he drew my blood. None has done that and lived." The Wolf laughed lightly. "Fortunes of war, my friend. You gambled and lost. So you must pay--and your payment will leave you with nothing."

He turned to scan the broad expanse of Mexican plain, pale and ghostly in the moonlight, studded with chaparral and cacti that thrust up long, dark arms.

"Good," he mused. "We have honey in that gourd, I think. Pablo!"

A short, dark man, his face pitted with the pox, came forward.

"Si?"

"That is an ant-hill."

No further word was spoken, for the savage men of Don Diego were well trained in their deeds of cruelty. The Wolf watched, smiling, as Juan's clothing was taken from him and his body smeared with honey. The Wolf's light laughter rang out in the night as the youth was staked out on the ant-hill.

The blood of Juan's ancestors came to the fore now. His face was rock-hard, grimly expressionless. Only once he spoke, when Don Diego vaulted to the back of his horse.

"I give you my word that I shall kill you, Wolf."

"And you have my leave to try," Don Diego taunted. "Hasta mañana, then."

He set spurs to his horse and galloped away, his men following in a long string. Dust rose whitely in the moonlight. The thunder of hoofs died into the far distance. There was only stillness.

The cold wind chilled Juan. He lay motionless, staring up at the stars. His body felt numb, like his mind. Since Rosita's death a sheath of ice seemed to have covered him. Through that barrier he could feel nothing. Only, deep down within, a burning longing for vengeance glowed, a deathless hatred for the Wolf of Aragon whose mailed foot had crushed the hacienda.

Then the ants came....

Some time after consciousness faded in the fires of agony, Juan awoke to find himself looking up at the face of Fra Francisco. He lay on the open plain, his skin covered with an unguent that soothed the pain. It was near dawn.

"I followed you," the padre said. "How do you feel?"

Juan sat up stiffly.

"Were any of my men alive?" he asked.

"Not one. And--Rosita--"

"Yes?"

"She lies in the chapel."

"Good," Juan said coldly. "Give her Christian burial, Father."

The priest's eyes were startled.

"What do you mean?" he asked anxiously.

"Our paths part here," Juan stated, rising without aid. "We may not meet again. I seek vengeance."

"The Lord, in his own time, will punish the wrong-doer. Come back with me!"

But Juan did not hear. Drawing his tattered garments closer about him, he turned without a word and strode into the sunrise. Behind him Fra Francisco stood silent, then knelt to pray.

Juan Vasquez did not follow the trail of the Wolf. He had already learned the futility of single-handed attempts. He would get the aid of the natives, the Yaqui Indians who had felt the cruelty of Don Diego.

At a hut miles distant, he took a horse and went faster thereafter. He sought to rouse the Yaquis. The Spanish rulers could not help, so Juan did not waste time with them. He rode fast and found only fear, for the Yaquis had learned to dread the iron might of the Wolf. Leaderless, they would do nothing. Juan cursed and cajoled them, in vain. And ever the whispers came that Don Diego was riding through the south, pillaging, murdering, ruining.

At last Juan knew that he must rely on the oldest aid of all. He rode eastward to a certain mountain cave. He remembered well the path. Soon he stood in a great natural cavern that was lit by a geyser of flaming blue gas. Beyond the pillar sprawled a crumbling pyramid.

"Ixtal!" Juan called softly.

ONLY silence answered. It had been long since Juan had seen the priest and death might have come even to this deathless cavern. But suddenly something stirred and the giant figure of Ixtal stood beside the pillar of flame.

"Night falls on Mexico," the ancient Aztec whispered. "Your doom has come upon you, Juan Vasquez, as was foretold. I could not help, though I wished to do so."

"Once you said that the Feathered Serpent helps his own," Juan reminded.

Ixtal bowed his head.

"He will aid you in your vengeance."

"Give me Don Diego!" breathed Juan.

The priest pointed to the blue flame. It wavered, shook. In its depths a picture formed. At the head of his column the Wolf of Aragon was riding across a plain, tall with bleached grasses, that stretched to the horizon.

"Death comes," Ixtal said.

It came redly. Flame swirled out of the far distance. Smoke billowed across the plain. The wind blew it down on the riders. Juan leaned forward tensely, the fire of revenge in his eyes. Now the riders were having difficulty managing their mounts. The horses plunged and cavorted. The fires spread out in a ring, circling the band. The dry grasses were burning fiercely.

Through the thickening smoke Juan caught glimpses of dark figures moving blindly, stampeding in panic. Horses threw their riders, crushed them. Above the tumult towered the figure of Don Diego, trying to marshal order out of chaos.

It was a useless attempt. He gave it up at last and charged straight at the ring of flames. He burst through.

The fires passed, leaving charred, blackened huddles. Of Don Diego's band, only one man was left. The Wolf of Aragon set spurs to his steed and thundered away.

The picture in the column was gone.

"He rides to the sea, to take ship to Europe," Ixtal said. "You must overtake him before then."

"My horse is tired," Juan muttered.

"You will need no legs but your own," Ixtal said cryptically. "Your blood is Aztec blood. Over it the Feathered Serpent has power."

The priest gestured. The column of blue flame blossomed out. It arched into a great cup. The cup bent as on a stem, touched Juan--folded its flame-petals about him!

It was gone. Beside Ixtal stood no man. A wolf crouched there, a great, gray wolf shuddering convulsively under the shaggy pelt.

"Run fast," the priest whispered. "Haste, Juan Vasquez, for your enemy is fleeing even now!"

Like an arrow the wolf shot across the cave and vanished into the tunnel.

Through the night it sped swiftly. The mountain slopes gave place to rolling hills and then to plains. Tirelessly the beast's legs carried the were-thing on its errand of death. The white fangs were bared in a snarl.

Juan Vasquez had returned to his ancestors' gods, and they were gods of vengeance!

THROUGH Sonora the werewolf fled. Dawn came with a rainbow burst of colors to the east. And at last, far ahead, the figure of a man on horseback was visible.

The grass offered some concealment. A dark shadow flitted stealthily after the quarry to give Don Diego no chance to suspect pursuit. The wind was in the right direction, so the horse would not sense danger until too late.

It screamed and went down, hamstrung, kicking, almost crushing Don Diego as it fell. The Spaniard leaped clear. He caught a glimpse of the wolf flashing to concealment. He drew his pistol, primed and ready. He did not fire. He waited.

The shrieks of the horse were earsplitting. But Don Diego remained motionless, till the wolf slunk out of concealment and stood fifteen

paces away, watching him.

The hammer clicked. At the same moment the wolf sprang aside, then drove forward like a thunderbolt. Don Diego threw up one arm to protect his throat, trying to draw his sword with his free hand.

Abruptly he was standing alone, gasping with amazement. His pistol was gone. The wolf had seized it in its jaws and was racing away. Don Diego laughed with genuine mirth.

"A clever lobo! But I am also a wolf, my friend, and my steel is sharp. We shall see who wins this round."

He cast a swift glance over the plain, suspecting that there might be a pack. He could see nothing but the endless prairie, its dewy grass rippling under the morning wind. Nor was there any trace of the wolf now.

Don Diego shrugged. It would have been worse, had the accident happened hours before. Now he was not far from his destination. He would walk warily, one hand on his sword. As for the horse, he disposed of it with a swift thrust through the neck. The animal quivered once and lay still.

Don Diego walked eastward. After a short time, perspiration streamed from his sunburned brow. The heat of a Mexican day stifled him.

He kept his helmet on, for fear of heat exhaustion. Though the metal became burning hot, the leather pad beneath it protected his skull. His armor was too heavy and unnecessary. This he discarded piece by piece, but kept his sword and poniard.

He was not used to walking. His thighs and calves ached. Once he sat down to rest, but got up again warily at a glimpse of a gray shadow amid the grass. He laughed again.

On he went and on, discovering that there was a reason for the midday siesta. Walking in that burning oven-heat was impossible. At last Don Diego sat down again to rest, his sword across his knees. This time, he promised, the wolf would not drive him on.

Imperceptibly, in the drowsy, buzzing stillness, sleep came upon him. A vague premonition of danger made him awaken, one hand driving instinctively to his sword-hilt. He started up, eyes wide, as he realized that the weapon was gone without trace.

He spun around, an oath contorting his bearded lips. But only the drowsy silence was there and the hot, grassy plain.

He reached for his poniard and went white. It, too, was gone. He was weaponless!

HAD it been the wolf? He shook his head stubbornly. No beast could have had the intelligence to steal his weapons while he slept.

There was the creature now. It came trotting out of the undergrowth and halted a dozen feet away, tongue lolling, eyes intent. Its fangs were murderously sharp. Suddenly it snarled.

Don Diego reached down for a rock, but could find none. The wolf stepped forward and the Spaniard was forced to retreat. Instantly the animal whirled and vanished into the brush. It did not reappear. Don Diego stood uncertainly for a moment, then began walking again toward the east. He kept a wary eye alert, but the wolf did not reappear.

The afternoon dragged on. The sky was blue, cloudless and insufferably hot. The parched plains sent up wavering distortions of heat, yet Don Diego kept on, hoping he had left the wolf behind. He did not pause till his legs were exhausted.

It was sunset and he was still in the midst of the llanos. A shadow moved not far away. Red eyes glowed. He heard a low snarl.

Don Diego got to his feet, staggering. The wolf vanished, but reappeared when he sank down again. He rose and continued stumbling toward the east.

When he kept moving, he had found that the wolf stayed at a distance. So all that night the Spaniard tottered on, his throat parched and dry. Ever the wolf stayed at his heels.

At dawn the Wolf of Aragon came to a little spring. Thirst overcame caution. He flung himself down and buried his face in the cold water. Simultaneously a twinge of sharp agony raced up his right leg.

He whirled in time to see the wolf flee into the brush. He tried to stand, only to fall helpless. Blood was streaming from his ankle. Throbbing agony pounded within it.

The Achilles tendon had been neatly cut by knife-sharp fangs. Only with the aid of a skilled surgeon could Don Diego ever hope to walk again.

He was not smiling as he washed the wound and bound it with strips torn from his garments. That done, he sat and considered. It was not far now to the coast, where he could get aid. There were places there that would harbor even the Wolf of Aragon.

What other alternative was there? To remain, with the wolf growing bolder and bolder? No! Don Diego would make a crutch....

There was no wood on the llanos. He found only flimsy stuff that splintered and broke under his weight. So, gripping a sharp-edged stone in one hand, he began to crawl.

He hoped the wolf would come close. There were more stones in his pockets. Perhaps he could kill the beast with a well aimed blow.

As though divining his intentions, the wolf followed just out of reach. It seemed to have almost human--or, Don Diego thought, diabolic intelligence. Somehow it never was as good a target as it seemed. It dodged easily whenever the Spaniard hurled a stone.

At last the missiles were all gone. The blazing, merciless sunlight poured down. The wolf drew closer.

By this time Don Diego's clothing was in rags and his knees were mere raw pads of bloody flesh. His hands were masses of sheer agony, yet he dared not pause. The fierce flame of life that burned within him would not let him even consider the thought of death. Somehow he must outwit the pursuer. The coast could not be far now.

The shallow blue eyes were wide and red-rimmed. The helmet had long since been lost. Night came on, but Don Diego did not sleep. Unceasingly the wolf drove him.

The Spaniard did not realize it when he was herded from his true path and turned back inland again. Nights and days faded into a dull monotony of incredible pain. Sometimes he would find water. The wolf would let him drink then, after having guided him to the waterholes.

When he grew hungry, there would be a freshly killed rabbit near him when he awoke, for sometimes he was allowed to sleep, though not for long. Nor was he permitted to eat and drink much. Always hunger and thirst gnawed at the Wolf of Aragon.

Days ... nights....

Once another wolf came down from the hills, scenting blood and prey. The gray wolf fought the intruder and killed it. Then Don Diego fed on raw and sinewy meat.

Nights ... and days ... and thought faded from the Spaniard's mind.

Nothing had ever existed before this torment. There was nothing but the necessity of keeping moving, so that sharp teeth would not nip and hurt him. If he crept on, there would be food and water.

Days ... and nights....

* * * * *

CAPTAIN RAMON ALVAREZ made a hurried gesture to his orderly and held up his hand in the order to halt. His command, a file of uniformed men, reined in their horses. The orderly's musket sprang to his shoulder.

"Wait!" Alvarez said. "A wolf is following that man. Fire!"

A shot boomed. The wolf sprang high in the air and fell in a huddle of gray fur. The crawling man kept crawling, ignoring the loud explosion as if he had not heard it.

Alvarez dismounted and walked with his orderly to the half-naked, ghastly figure. He took a canteen from his belt and held it to the twisted lips.

But the man had forgotten how to drink. Captain Alvarez looked down in sick disgust at the monster that was lapping muddy water from the puddle in the dust.

"Lord!" he breathed. "Is this--"

The orderly nodded.

"Si, mi capitan. It is Don Diego, the man we were sent from Mexico City to capture."

"He is smiling," Alvarez said, shuddering.

But Don Diego did not smile with mirth. His teeth were bared in a snarling grimace. Hair grew thickly over his face, hiding all but the deep-set, glaring eyes and a beak of a nose.

He turned and began crawling away.

Alvarez sprang after him. The creeping man snapped at the hand that was laid on his shoulder. He howled like a beast. He was bound and flung across a horse that reared and snorted at the touch.

Alvarez snapped commands. The silent mounted men sat upright in their saddles. The troop rode away, bearing their captive.

Not one noticed that, amid the grasses, lay the corpse of a man where a wolf's carcass had been shortly before. Juan Vasquez lay motionless, a gaping bullet wound in his breast. On the tired young face was the shadow of a satisfied, ironic smile.

He did not hear the long, quavering howl that burst from the lips of a thing that strained and fought against its bonds. But Alvarez heard, looked back at Don Diego and crossed himself.

"This is a strange land," he said.

His orderly, riding beside him, nodded unhappily.

"Si, mi capitan. It is indeed a strange land!"