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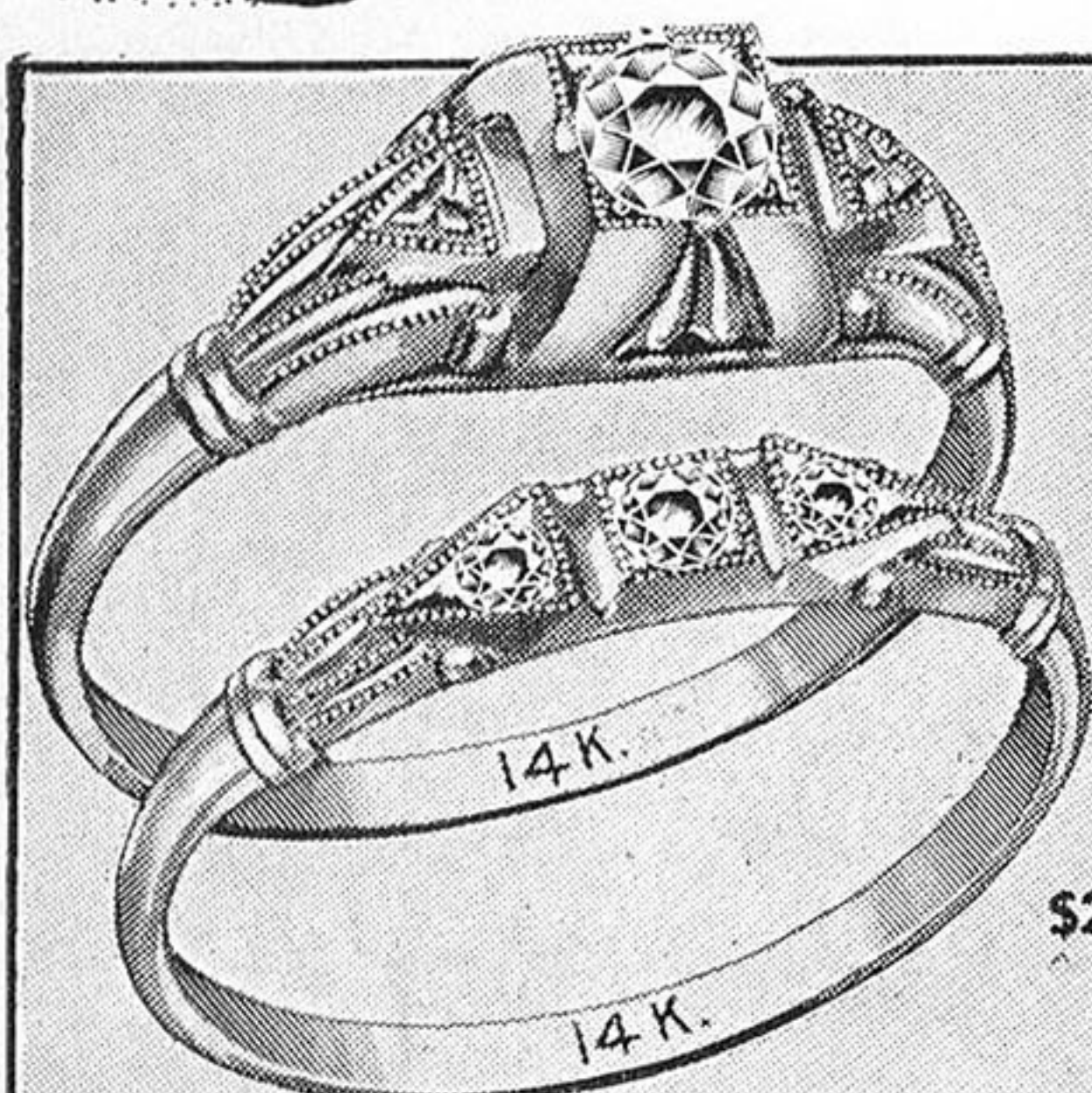
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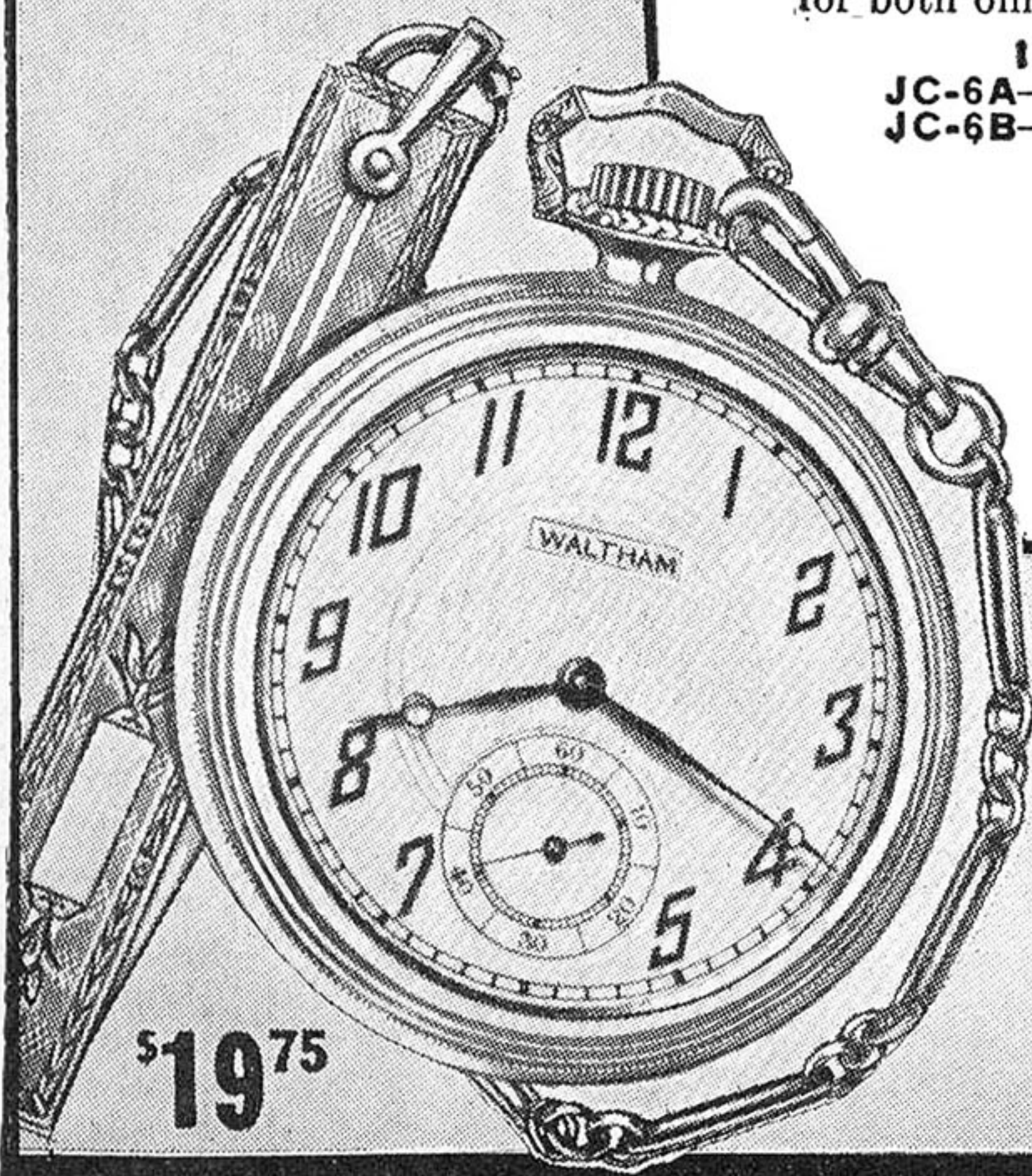
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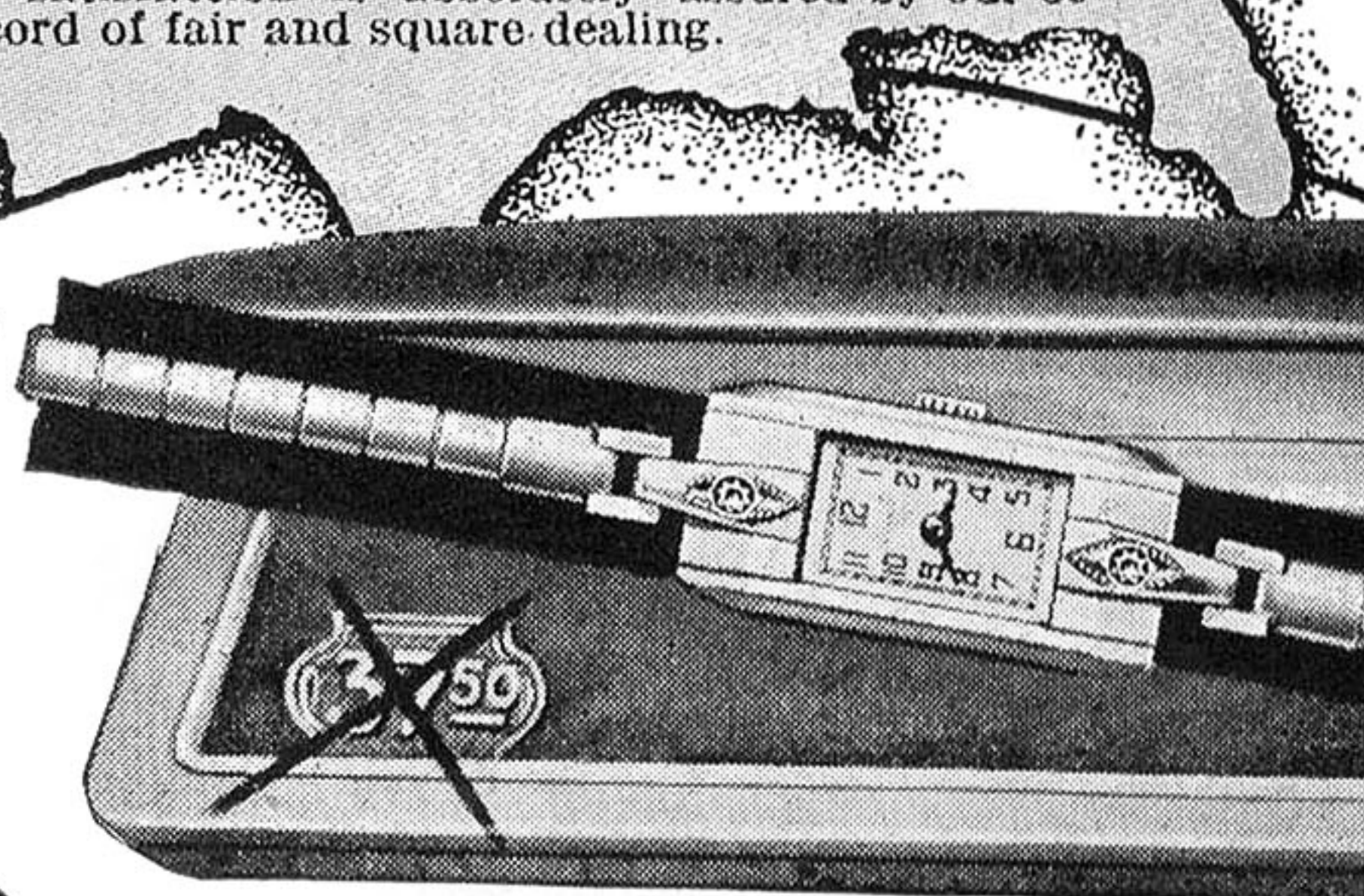
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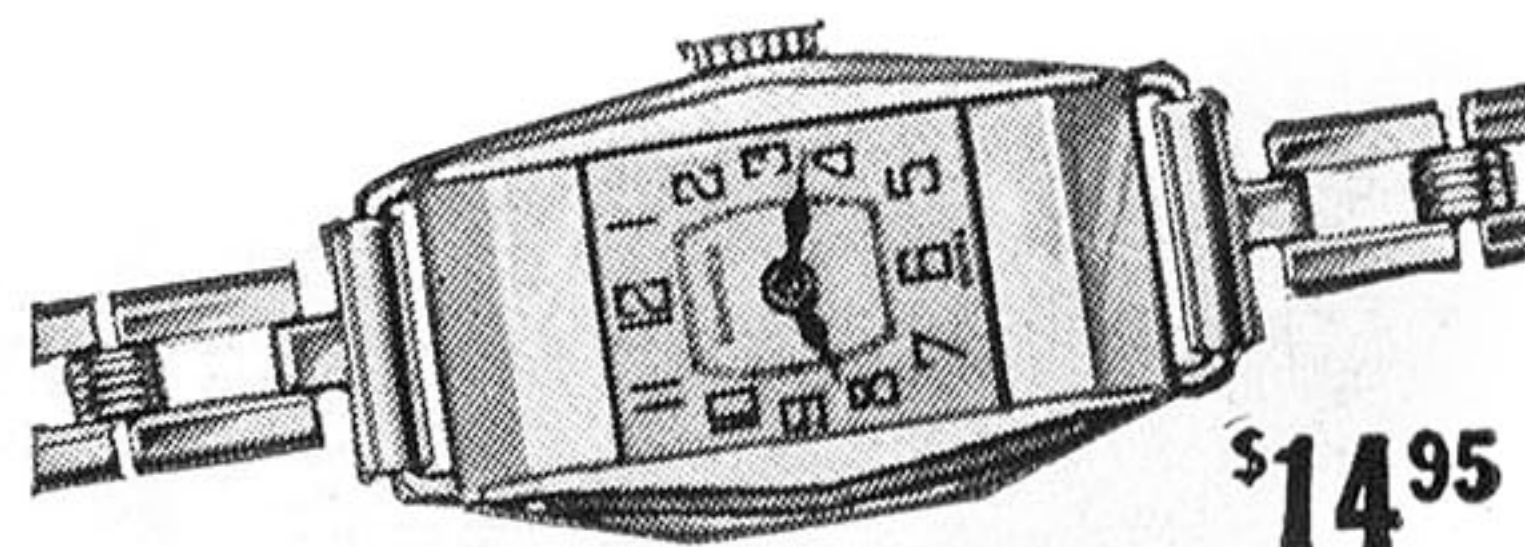
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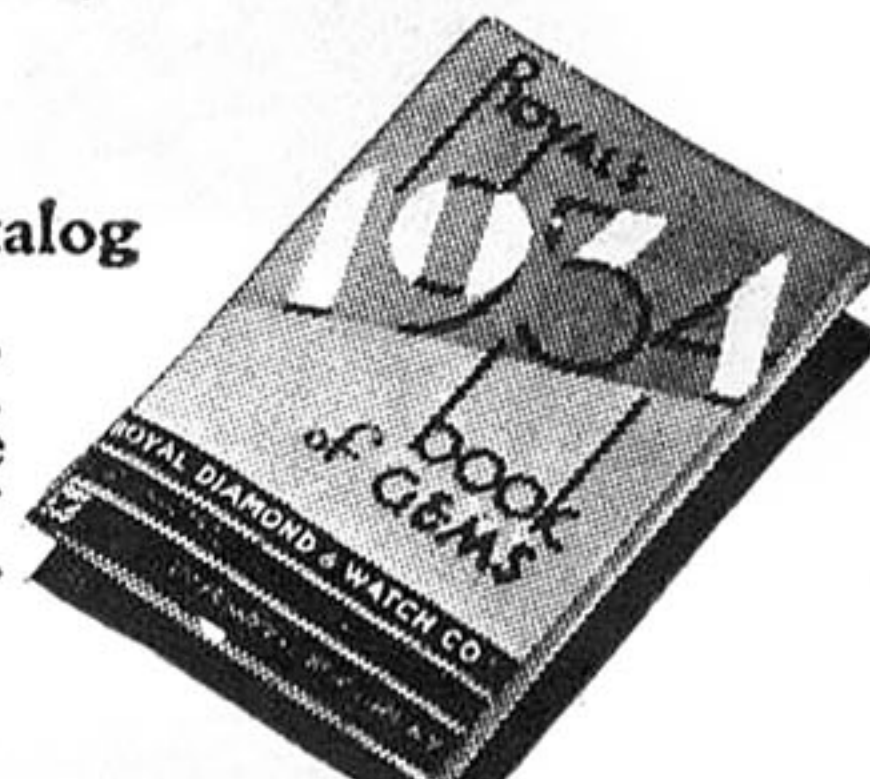
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Five Novels Monthly

F. A. McCHESNEY, Editor

VOLUME XXVII

JULY, 1934

NUMBER 1

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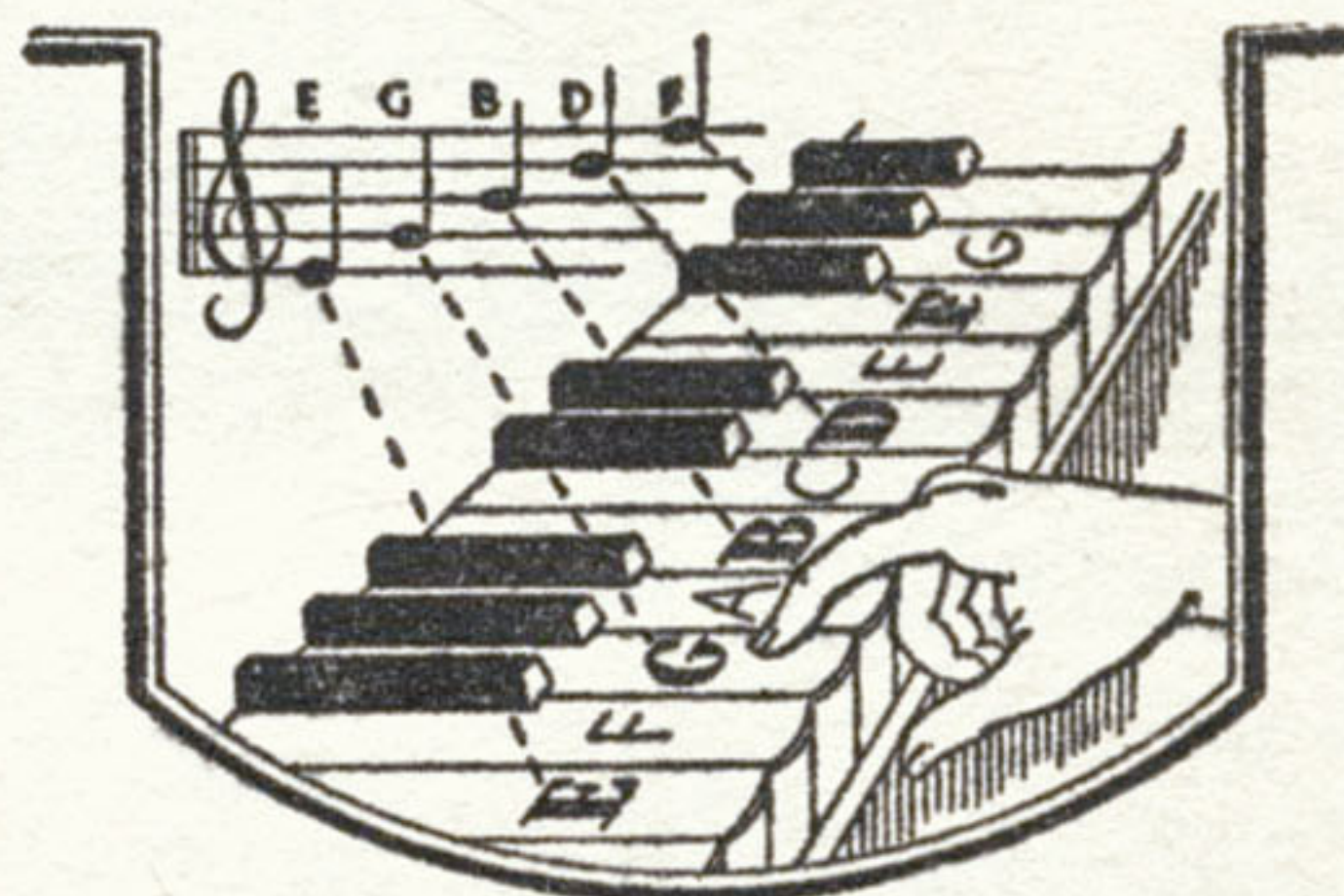
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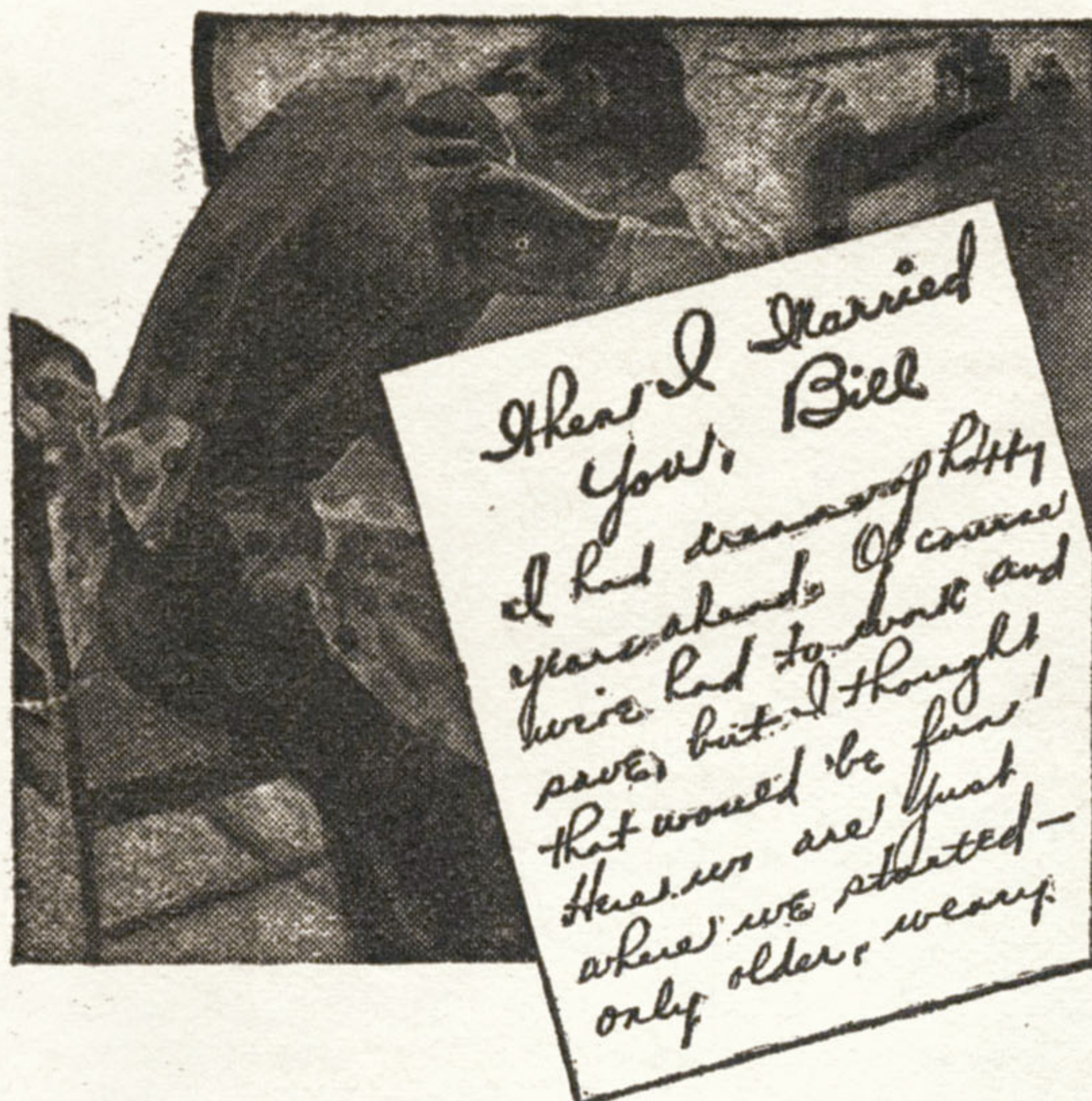
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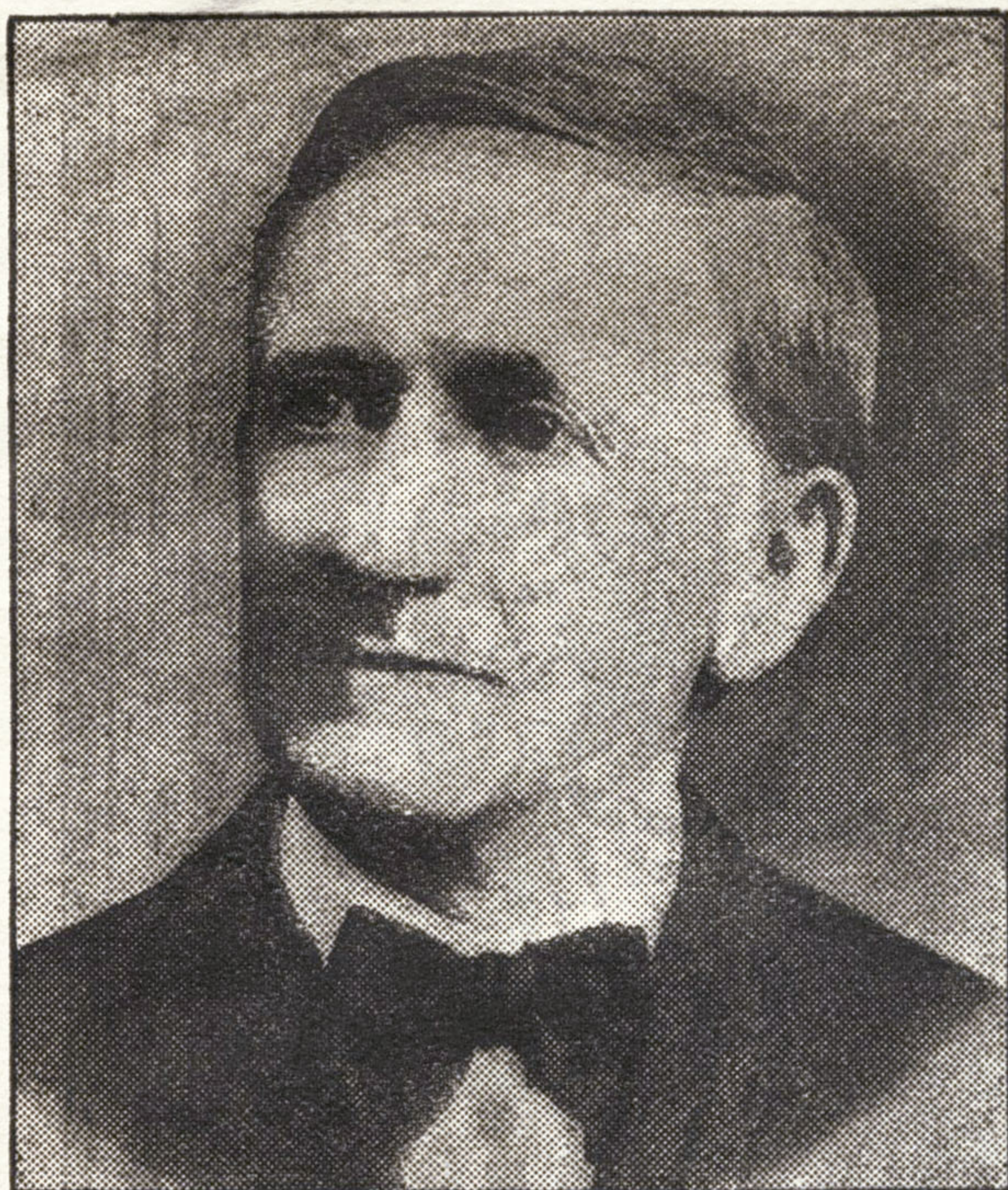
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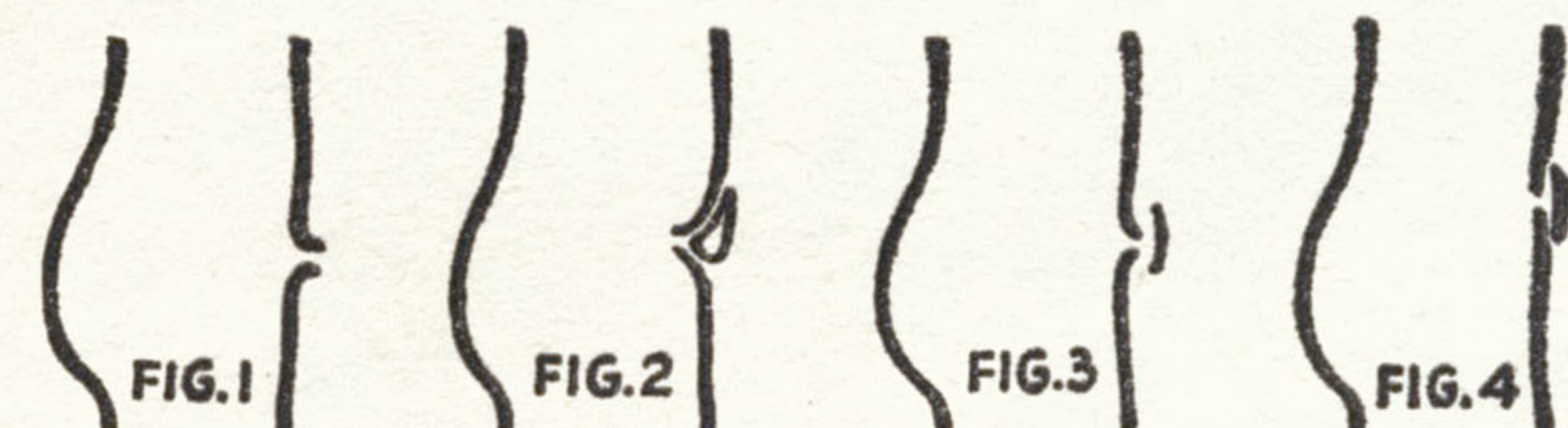


FIG. 1
Shows rupture before old-style truss was applied.

FIG. 2
Shows old-style truss in place. The walls of wound cannot come together. A cure is improbable.

FIG. 3
Shows rupture before Automatic Air Cushion is in place.

FIG. 4
Shows perfected invention in place. Note how edges are drawn together in normal position.

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A scream died in Kathleen's throat. How could she rouse the house, when her heart warned her that the furtive figure might be the man she loved? (Page 14.)

THE DEAD ARE AVENGED

By

Jack Bechdolt and Allan Read

CHAPTER ONE

JASON HOLLISTER'S LAST DAY



ASON HOLLISTER received the bad news at a quarter past three o'clock that afternoon. Kathleen had no notion of what she bore in her slim, white hand. To her, a simple matter of office routine took place. As Hollister's secretary, she receipted for a plain white envelop handed to her by messenger. She rose with the free, easy grace that generations of Irish borebears had given her and went cheerfully into Hollister's private office. So she handed him his death warrant.

Kathleen smiled as she gave it to him, for she liked him. She thought of him as a great man. One of the finest lawyers in the city, with a fame that reached beyond the boundaries of city and state, and bade fair to become national. She looked admiringly at the ruddy-faced man, nervous and quick in mind and body, who smiled genially on all his employees. With that look she left him alone with his letter.

Hollister read the brief, typewritten message. It concerned the secret deliberations

of the Bar Association upon charges filed against Jason Hollister. The verdict had gone against him. Hollister faced ruin, utter, stark ruin that would bring disgrace upon a head he had carried high for nearly fifty years.

The ruddy color faded from his cheeks, leaving them wan and drawn. His head dropped between his hands, and he gave such a heartfelt groan of agony that Kathleen, in the outer office, heard and wondered. He pushed his chair away from the desk, strode to the window, and stared down into the street, eighteen floors below.

Death was the simplest way to end his agony, and Hollister was tempted.

He had been a brilliant, successful lawyer and, on the whole, an honorable one. Knowing the world as a lawyer must know it, he foresaw that everything in his life that had been honorable would now be forgotten in the blazing fire of his disgrace. No honor left, and not even the dubious compensation of riches! In his secret fight to prevent this disgrace, he had exhausted his fortune.

Death was tempting, but Hollister was no coward. He turned from the window and stared about the office. Forty-eight

hours! He could count on no more. Two days in which to ward off his doom—or to fly from it.

In dark hours Hollister had brooded over such a crisis as this. More or less consciously he had planned for it. Some of the usual ruddiness came back into his face. He lifted his handsome white head and his look was grim. After all, he still had life and forty-eight hours of freedom, and life could be very sweet. He strode to the door of his private office and called Kathleen.

She rose swiftly, all concern for the agony she saw in his eyes. Since she had overheard the man's stifled groan, she had been poised irresolute at her desk. The note by special messenger and Hollister's look as he took it from her, his groan and his troubled pacing in his private office, had warned her that something was wrong.

"Are you ill?" she said, quickly.

He shook his head. "I'm all right."

"But you look so upset! I wish you'd—"

His bitter, impatient look checked her. He leaned against his desk, his head bent, his dark eyes concentrated. Slowly, before her eyes, he seemed to change. She saw ruthless lines come about his mouth. She saw his eyes narrow and shift; saw a wary light dawn and spread in them. His body hunched a little and shrank as though the whole measure of the man were undergoing some strange transformation. When he looked at her again she had the cold, troubling conviction that the man she had worked for and respected was gone.

"Kathleen, I want you to get on the telephone at once and call up these people." He handed her a list. "Invite each one of them to spend the week-end at Greenacres with me. This is Friday, and if they have made other engagements, please say that I insist on their coming."

He saw Kathleen's dubious look at the list, and his voice grew harsh. "Don't stare, do it! They'll come; they've got to come! And you come, too! I'll need you. When you get that telephoning done, you go home and pack whatever you'll need."

Hollister waited until the girl had begun her task. He was not worrying about his

guests. They would accept if he insisted. He knew that. They would not only accept, they would agree to the terms he was planning to offer them.

His eyes had a resolute gleam as he glanced about his comfortable private office. The bargain he was about to make with his world was a hard bargain, one he would not have dreamed of making a year ago. Never mind, this was a hard world—and his back was to the wall.

GREENACRES was a beautiful country house in wide, beautifully landscaped grounds. It was famed for Jason Hollister's hospitality. Guests came eagerly and talked of their pleasures there long after they had left. But those who arrived in answer to Kathleen's telephoned invitation came with an air of surprise which she was to see develop into acute uneasiness, as if, even in the midst of this warm, lovely day of autumn splendor, there was a foretaste of the tragedy that impended.

Kathleen, whose position in Hollister's household was less that of secretary and more that of a favorite daughter, filled the rôle of hostess at Greenacres. It was she who welcomed old Sarah Manley, whose affairs Hollister had managed since her husband's death, and Paul Turner, the tight-lipped bank president, and Wallace Clyde, the puffy-eyed promoter of enterprises. To make them welcome and comfortable she counted a part of her duties, but the fourth guest she could welcome, as she always did, with unalloyed delight.

Andrew McClelland came to her smiling, his hands outstretched to capture hers. He drew her hastily out of the house, out of sight and hearing of the others, and took her into his arms.

Kathleen drew away. For years Andy had been resolutely wooing her, and she had been resolutely repulsing him. For good reason, she told herself sternly, for she was fighting herself and her own young longing more than Andy's pleading.

She loved Andy. She loved his tall, quiet swiftness, his dark eyes, his straight, honest way with life and himself. She loved him for the things he stood for, the very things that separated them. He was

a McClelland, the son of Senator McClelland, who had died recently. He had his father's brilliance and an added touch of young idealism. And he was not for Kathleen Reilly, daughter of humble people!

Kathleen knew. She was sure.

When you looked at Kathleen you thought of freedom, and green woods, and warm, brown earth. You could picture her in a home, a home with children, working for them, meeting with warm courage and laughter all that life might bring. But she could not picture herself in a drawing room. For this reason, she said her resolute No to Andy—and wept bitterly in secret.

So she drew away from Andy's arms now.

"No, Andy. You mustn't."

His dark eyes were dancing with excitement. He captured her again, laughing at her.

"Oh, Kathleen, my colleen, you and I are going to be married right away!"

"Andy!" Kathleen's cry was between a laugh and a sob as she tried to free herself.

"Be still, darling. You listen to me from now on. I've been in love with you for three years, ever since we met. I adore you and now—now, my Rose of Killybegs—"

"No, Andy. Please! This is serious."

"Of course it's serious! Wait—you haven't heard my news. Kathleen, I just got word this afternoon. I am to be appointed to fill out Dad's unexpired term in the Senate. I'm going to be Senator Andrew McClelland, like Dad!"

Andy had always given promise of following in his father's steps. Now it had come, and so soon! Recognition and honor.

Kathleen cried his name, and then was in his arms, wholeheartedly glad and proud. Her kiss was all warmth and happiness, and a prayer for him. And then she broke away.

"But I can't marry you, darling. Oh, no, no, Andy! You know why—we've gone into all that. Senator McClelland's wife simply can't be a plain little nobody from nowhere. I will not ruin your career."

"But you'll make my career more wonderful!" He caught her hands again and drew her close. "We're going to get married, darling. We are, we *are*!"

Flushed, breathless with longing, Kathleen stayed in his arms. And Andy gave her hurried, burning kisses that left her speechless and weak with happiness.

"There, you darling. I'm going to the Senate, and you'll be my bride."

"But—but—"

"Hush, silly!"

"But *Andy*!"

Andy kissed her once more. "Now I've got to see Jason. I understand he wanted to see me at once about something important. Maybe he's heard of my good luck."

"Oh, yes, Andy, he does want to see you. He's upstairs in his room, waiting. It's some business matter. He's been talking with the others, too." Kathleen sighed. "Andy, darling, if you come away from that conference looking as sober as the rest do, this is going to be the most terrible weekend I've ever had. I wish Mr. Hollister would leave business out of it."

"Don't you worry," Andy laughed.

She watched him stride back toward the house, all her warm young heart beating in her throat. If only she dared say yes, if only she could think it right to marry Andy!

The dinner hour was near and she must go up to change. She followed after Andy slowly, lingering to enjoy the cooler air of early evening and to cherish her own joy in Andy's happiness.

The other guests were dressing before meeting in the library for one of Jason Hollister's famous cocktails. Kathleen passed along a corridor of closed bedroom doors. Before the door to Jason Hollister's suite she slowed her pace, giving it a lingering glance, because Andy was there.

It came to her ears suddenly, that shout of rage that was to ring in her memory so long after, a sudden shouting of two angry voices, forerunner of tragedy.

Above Hollister's voice came Andy's furious cry "You dare try that, Hollister, and I'll kill you!"

Then Hollister's door burst open and they stood for all the world to see, Jason Hollister and Andy McClelland, furious, panting, breast to breast. And Andy's clenched fist was raised to strike down his host.

CHAPTER TWO

A SHOT IN THE NIGHT

KATHLEEN caught Andy's up-raised fist. For a moment he struggled against her interference, sweeping her aside. Then her voice, crying his name, called him back to more sober reason. He dropped his arm, but stood there glaring at Hollister.

Hollister was quiet, too. His look at Andy was hard, but he said courteously, "I'm sorry you're so upset about it, Andy. Let's discuss the matter some other time."

Andy, still panting with anger, answered, "Don't try it, Hollister. I won't let any man alive get away with that."

The guests had heard the shouting voices. Bedroom doors opened and other eyes witnessed this strange scene. Kathleen, glancing behind her, saw them. The two men saw them and concealed their rage.

"See you in the library for cocktails," Hollister said. "Too hot for any more business today."

He closed the door as he said it, shutting Kathleen and Andy in the hall. She turned to him for an explanation, but Andy thrust her aside.

"Don't talk to me," he said, his voice so choked with fury that she was startled. He strode across the hall and the door of his own room slammed behind him.

That the other guests had overheard was more evident when they met in the library. Over them all a cloud of nervous apprehension gathered. Hollister was making cocktails. Sarah Manley, an imperious and spoiled woman nearing seventy, sat aloof. Wallace Clyde and Paul Turner, the bank president, were muttering together at a distance. Kathleen, trying nervously to assume that all was well, found herself fluttering among them with a growing conviction that nobody was at

ease. When Andy came in a few minutes late, they all looked at him with scarcely concealed curiosity. Andy was pale and constrained. After a few barely civil words with the others, he was silent.

Hollister's cocktails were not ready when the butler announced Lou Peters. Kathleen brightened. An outsider might restore at least some pretense of enjoyment to these constrained guests. Lou Peters was Hollister's neighbor, on an adjoining estate. Like Hollister, he was a lawyer. For years he had filled the post of district attorney. It was not unusual for him to drop in at Greenacres at cocktail time.

A lean, white-haired man, with piercing black eyes, Peters was acquainted with all of Hollister's guests. But today his appearance had none of the effect Kathleen had hoped for. If anything, he seemed to add to the general air of constraint. Even he seemed to notice it.

"Give that to me," Peters exclaimed, and took the cocktail shaker from Hollister. "If I'm going to have a drink, I mean to earn it. And you look hot and tired." Shaker in hand, Peters strolled away from the group and went over to Kathleen.

"Anything happened to upset Jason?" he whispered.

"I—don't know. I'm afraid so."

"Anything you care to tell me about?" She shook her head.

"I think I can guess," Peters murmured, wielding the cocktail shaker vigorously as he talked. "I heard something about the old fellow that distressed me. I came over to see if there was anything I could do." He was moving back toward the others. Kathleen plucked at his sleeve.

"It's not only Mr. Hollister, it's all of them! They seem so wretched!"

Peters' keen eyes swept the room. "Like a funeral," he said.

"And it's so ridiculous," Kathleen sighed. "Andy quarreled with Mr. Hollister—Andy McClelland, of all people! The best natured, most even-tempered man in the world. And he came here so happy! I think it's upset everybody a little."

"Never mind, a drink ought to smooth

things over. And the drinks are ready." They moved toward the others and Peters murmured reassuringly, "Don't worry too much, Kathleen."

"But this news about Mr. Hollister—is it serious?"

The district attorney shook his head. "Can't say. It might be. But carry on!"

Kathleen's head was beginning to ache with the effort of carrying on. Her worried eyes watched Hollister. Since the arrival of that note he had changed. What was it? What had changed him so?

Andy neared her, cocktail glass in hand. He was still pale, still silent and miserable. She caught at his sleeve. "Andy, just a word—"

"Not now." He put her hand aside and went off to gloom alone by a window.

Hollister raised his glass and addressed them, trying to summon back the urbane smile that was so much of his old charm.

"I suggest we drink to old friendships," he said, and Kathleen shivered at something mocking and hard in his voice.

Old Sarah Manley gave a laugh that was more croak than laughter. "To auld lang syne!" she said.

Glasses were raised, but the toast was drunk in ghastly silence. . . .

IF dinner passed like a troubled dream, the evening that followed rapidly degenerated into a nightmare. The party broke up early. Sarah Manley complained of headache, Wallace Clyde and Paul Turner muttered about the heat and excused themselves. Kathleen, despairing of a word with Andy—the cruelest blow of all this strange day—went wearily to her room.

There was no reason why a knock at her door some while later should have brought her erect with trembling foreboding. No reason why she should creep shrinking to the door, demanding in a whisper to know who it was. She did these things, and the voice that answered caused her to open hastily.

"Andy! Why, Andy, what it is? Come in."

This was an Andy McClelland she never had seen before. White and shaken, despair burning in his eyes. He came in

and caught her in his arms. "Kathleen! Help me!"

"Of course, Andy! Don't you know there's nothing you could ask of me that I wouldn't do?" Her voice was reassuring and quiet, with the strength of a love she was only beginning to realize.

Andy spoke in a nervous, staccato whisper. "I—Kathleen, I've got to get into his room. If you—"

"Into whose room?"

"Hollister's."

Kathleen's laugh was relief at the absurdity of his request.

"Why, of course, Andy. If you want to see Mr. Hollister, that's easy."

"I don't want to see him. I want to get into his room. Get into his room without his knowing it."

Kathleen gave him a sharp, bewildered look. "Why, Andy! You're a guest here. You wouldn't do a thing like that!"

"Guest or no guest, I want to get into that room while Hollister is asleep. I'm asking you if you know a way."

Her amazement turned to apprehension. "Andy McClelland, that's either insane or criminal!"

"Well, it's not insane. I've got to get in. There's something there that I want."

"What is it, Andy? If I can get it for you—"

"You can't get it for me. Nobody can. I'm not here to talk about the right and wrong of it—I've *got* to get something from Jason Hollister. Call it criminal, if you like, but will you help me?"

The question froze something in Kathleen's heart. She turned away. With eyes averted, she said gently, "You won't tell me what it is, Andy?"

"No. I can't tell you."

"Then tell Mr. Hollister," she cried. "Andy, listen, and trust me. If you have done anything wrong—something that might ruin your life—face it. Remember who you are. Remember what your father stood for. Remember how fearless and honest he was, Andy!"

"Don't!" he said.

"Don't start being underhanded now," she pleaded. "I'll stand by you, everybody will stand by you, Jason Hollister more

than anybody else. Go to him. Tell him everything. He'll help you. He's helped so many people. I know that. He's so good."

"He's so good?" he repeated slowly. Then he was shaken by rage. "He's a devil, Kathleen! He's not fit to live. He's not even fit to die, but I could kill him as if he were—"

"Stop it! Stop it, and go, Andy. I love you, and I always will, but I've worked for Jason Hollister, I know what he is. He's done everything for me, helped me to an education, given me every good break I've ever had. And I know he's good. It's a black secret in your own heart that makes you call him a devil. And if you do anything to hurt him, I'll be on his side. And I'll tell what has happened here tonight."

But Andy had gone.

She leaned against the door just closed behind him, shaken by a storm of tears that left her breathless. Even after she went to bed, troubled, depressing thoughts kept sleep away.

The house grew quiet, so quiet that all the small noises of the night seemed magnified.

Such a sound was outside her door. It might be the creaking of timber or the stir of summer wind. It might be someone moving stealthily in the corridor. Andy's cry, "I've got to get into his room," rang in her ears. Kathleen reached for her dressing gown, cautiously opened the door and peered down the darkened corridor.

At one end a large window let in the white light of the moon. It touched to ghostly life familiar objects. It touched to startling vividness the outline of a crouching form, hunched and heavy, that moved cautiously along the moonlit hall toward Hollister's door.

A scream died in Kathleen's throat. How could she rouse the house, when her heart warned her that the furtive figure might be the man she loved?

She slipped after the vanished shadow. Hollister's suite lay around a bend in the corridor. The hall was empty when Kathleen peered cautiously about that turn.

A door opened without a sound. This

was from the side opposite Hollister's own door. Light from the room behind him highlighted Andy's grim face. He came out of his own room and moved toward Hollister's door.

Kathleen reached the door first, and faced him there, silent, and shocked. So they confronted each other, the loyal secretary and the man she loved, a man who had seemed to her beyond the reach of dishonor.


No word was spoken between them. There was only the mute question in Kathleen's eyes, and the sullen refusal to answer in the desperate blue eyes of Andy McClelland. Kathleen made a slight, pleading gesture toward him, but he turned away and went back to his room without a word.

All the gay trust and faith between them was shattered, yet Kathleen was glad, grateful as she had never been before in all her life, that she had come in time. That she had saved Andy from the disgrace and dishonor of what he had been about to do.

She slipped back to her own room and stood with hands clasped against her aching heart. She was still standing so when the silence was split by a shot.

CHAPTER THREE

HOLLISTER SAYS NO MORE

HE sound gave no intimation of the direction whence the shot had come, but Kathleen ran at once to her employer's room. The door was unlocked. Her first view of the room gave her overwhelming relief, for Andy was not there. Except for herself, there was no living person in the room. As surely as she was ever to know anything, she knew at a glance that the huddled figure on Hollister's bed would never move again. Jason Hollister lay under the sheets, facing her, his eyes wide and sightless.

While she stared, others arrived. Andy's face bore a strange look, a look both of fear and triumph. Kathleen saw, and wondered.

Sarah Manley, looking old and shrunk-

en, her white hair in disorder about her shoulders, hesitated in the doorway. Wallace Clyde and Paul Turner were staring awestruck at Hollister.

"Is he dead?" Andy cried. He left Kathleen's side to make an examination of the body. "Dead," he reported, turning to the others.

His words seemed to lessen the tension. There was a sigh, it might have been a sigh of relief. Every face reflected in some degree the look on Andy's face, shock, horror, but, above all, relief.

From the floor above servants came streaming down. An Irish keening was added to the confusion. They stood gaping, or moved about aimlessly. Smedley, the butler, his face altered to lines of blank dismay, ran to the window.

They were long French windows opening onto a balcony. As his hand reached to open them, Paul Turner spoke sharply.

"Don't touch that! Don't touch anything! Every move you people are making may be destroying clues."

That sharp, commanding tone halted them. They turned to the first voice of authority.

"Smedley, get Mr. Lou Peters at his home," the banker went on. "He can get over here in five minutes. Until he comes to take charge, I suggest we wait outside this room."

Lou Peters entered Greenacres with an air quite different from that when he had called a few hours before. There was a grim professional briskness about him as he examined the body on the bed, and then studied the room, pausing at the long windows that opened on a balcony.

"This balcony extends the whole front of the house, doesn't it?"

The butler answered. "Yes, Mr. Peters."

"All the front bedroom windows open on it?"

"Yes, sir, and the windows of the cross hall, too."

Peters turned to the others, his eyes stern. "I came over here expecting to find a suicide, but this is murder. Jason was killed by somebody who came along the balcony, opened that window and fired his

pistol from just outside. Whoever did it was thoughtful enough to leave the State a beautiful thumb print by which he can be convicted. The window trim has just been painted, and the paint is wet. The murderer, in a hurry and in the dark, evidently overlooked that."

Peters' voice rang. His savage triumph showed in the bright eyes that gave everybody present a grim, keen glance.

"No," he repeated. "Strange as it may seem, Jason Hollister did not commit suicide. And whoever murdered him seems to have made several fatal mistakes. The police have got to take photographs here. I want you all to come downstairs with me, where we can talk."

CHAPTER FOUR

KATHLEEN IS DOUBTED

IN her heart Kathleen felt such sick, sinking terror that she doubted her strength to join the procession that filed downstairs to the library. Reason had presented the name of the guilty man to her, and faith, the faith born of a woman's love, struggled in vain to vanquish reason. Andy—had Andy fired that shot?

Hadn't he quarreled with Hollister? Hadn't he come to her furious a few minutes before Hollister's death, and declared the man not fit to live? Hadn't she driven him once from Hollister's very door? And a few scant moments after that, the shot had been fired!

Then there was that person in the corridor, that dim shadow seen against the moonlight. True, she was not sure that had been Andy. Rather it had seemed unlike him. But she could not swear to that.

Reason presented the case against Andy complete, in all its tragic details. Against that array of facts Kathleen's faith could not stand.

State police were arriving in answer to Lou Peters' orders. A trooper who carried a stenographer's notebook attached himself to the district attorney as they filed into the library.

They were all there, guests and servants. Lou Peters began:

"This is an inquiry into Jason Hollister's murder. None of you is obliged to testify without the advice of a lawyer. On the other hand, those of you who are innocent, and wish justice done, can be of assistance by telling me all that seems to have any bearing on this case. Please answer as you are called upon."

"Wait!" Wallace Clyde was the speaker. The promoter was breathing heavily, his puffy eyes bulging with excitement. "I've a statement to make, Peters. It's about that thumb print you found on Hollister's window. When you come to check up, I think you'll find that that thumb print is mine."

All heads jerked in his direction. Clyde looked flushed, but determined.

"I'm ready to start things off with a clean slate," he said. "I'm not going to hold out on the State. That is my thumb print, Mr. District Attorney."

Peters said to the stenographer at his elbow, "Take it down." He turned a piercing gaze on Clyde. "Very prompt and thoughtful of you, I'm sure. I hope Mr. Clyde's promptness will set a good example to anybody else who might have the idea of holding back information. Now, Clyde, since you're so sure the print is yours, you might tell us how it got there."

"When I first got here, Miss Reilly told me Jason wanted to see me. I went up to my room and washed and came along to his room by the balcony. I didn't notice at the time, but when I got back to my own room, I found I'd stuck my hand in that wet paint."

"Of course this was hours and hours before the murder, Mr. Clyde?" Peters' voice was sardonic.

"Yes. It was when I got out from town. About half past four, wasn't it, Miss Reilly?"

"I think so, Mr. Clyde."

"And you were alone in the room with Jason for how long?"

"Oh, about ten, fifteen minutes, I guess."

"Business talk, Mr. Clyde?"

"Oh, one thing and another."

"Jason was feeling good?"

"Yes. He was okay."

"Didn't seem downcast? Or angry?"

"Why, no. No, he was feeling tip top I'd say."

Peters nodded. He seemed about to dismiss him, then fired another sharp, startling question.

"How much money did Jason Hollister ask you for?"

The bluff joviality faded from Clyde's face. "Wh-what?"

"You heard me. How much money did Jason want from you?"

Clyde looked uncertain, then stubborn. "No money at all. We never talked about money."

"Oh, you didn't!"

"No, sir."

"Jason Hollister didn't say—didn't even hint to you—that he was broke, ruined? That he needed money? That he wanted *you* to give him money? That did not happen, you say, Mr. Clyde?"

"It did not. And if anybody says it did, I say he's a liar."

Peters looked at him sourly. "Thanks. That's all."

Clyde subsided into a chair, aware of the concentrated gaze of the others, puffing to himself, twisting his thick neck uneasily around an overtight collar.

Like the others, Kathleen had been watching him. Her gaze included Sarah Manley's lean, aristocratic profile, and at the mention of money, Kathleen had seen Sarah lean forward with heightened interest. The same avid, intent look was on other faces, too. Paul Turner's eyes were bright; Andy stared intently. Kathleen felt that those four shared a common interest, one that she could not yet fathom.

Her own name, called by Peters, startled her. "You found the body, Kathleen. Suppose you give us your own account."

SHE had not had time to think. She had not had time to weigh or judge what could be told safely from what could not be told. And upon her words—and what admissions she might be trapped into—the safety, perhaps the very life, of Andy McClelland depended. Her mouth was dry, the palms of her hands

were clammy and cold, as she faced Lou Peters.

She told her story, beginning with hearing the shot. Peters asked a few questions. It was soon over and she drew a breath of relief. She could listen now to the answers of the others, none of whom knew any more than that a shot had been fired in the night and they had run to Hollister's room to find him dead. But of each one Peters asked significantly, "You had a few minutes' private conversation when you came out here today?"

The answer was "yes" in each case. And Peters added sharply, "How much money did Jason Hollister ask of you?"

"Not one cent," old Sarah answered promptly. "It is not a matter I would discuss until I know what bearing it may have on this case," said Turner.

When Andy's turn came he shook his head decidedly. "We didn't discuss money."

"Hollister didn't ask you for any?"

"No."

"You say he did not." Peters turned suddenly to point a dramatic finger at his witness. "Then you claim it was not about any such demand that you quarreled violently with Jason Hollister this afternoon—a quarrel that enraged you so you threatened his life?"

"I quarreled with him, certainly." Andy's voice was composed. "If you want to know why we quarreled, it was because Jason told me I was too young and inexperienced to succeed my father in the senate, and I resented it."

Though he made the explanation gallantly, Kathleen knew—and knew that they all knew—it was a lie. No eloquence or manner known to man could have made that weak explanation acceptable. She saw a thin, doubting smile on Turner's face, heard old Sarah sniff.

"And so," Peters cried, his voice brazen with triumph, "because Jason told you he thought you just a little young and inexperienced for a senator's duties, you flew into a rage and threatened his life! Not only threatened his life, perhaps also carried out that threat! All because Jason Hollister pricked your youthful vanity!"

Andy turned red, and his blue eyes looked more startlingly blue—and more dangerous. But he kept his head. He answered, "I had no thought of killing Jason Hollister, and I didn't kill him. If you believe otherwise, make a charge and arrest me."

They exchanged angry stares. Peters bit his thin lips, but the wave of his hand told Andy he had no more to say.

Kathleen wanted to cheer for him. He had denied the charge she dreaded, and she believed him, now and always. Her thoughts returned to her own problem, something she had omitted to tell. Of Andy's strange visit to her room and his wild talk she would say nothing, but the business of that shadowy form in the hall—something that bore directly upon the crime—she must tell that. She volunteered it now, and her story was heard in a breathless hush.

"You saw this person while you were standing at the door of your room?"

"Yes."

"He or she was going away from you, toward Hollister's door?"

"In that direction."

"And you say he vanished. What do you mean, vanished?"

"Well—just vanished. The light was very dim, you know. It was just a moving shadow. It disappeared. The hall makes a bend just before the cross hall comes in. I thought the shadow had gone around that turn, so I followed—"

Peters interrupted. "Why did you follow, Miss Reilly?"

"Why? Why—" She faltered.

"Did you have any idea that that shadowy person threatened Jason Hollister? Did you?"

"No. No, I did not."

"And you say you had no idea who it was. Then why did you follow it?"

"I—it seemed rather unusual."

"Unusual! In a house as big as this, with guests and servants, it seemed unusual, abnormal, to you that somebody should walk along the hall in the night? You want me to believe that?"

"That's how it seemed to me." Kathleen's cheeks were bright, she was angry.

"So when you got as far as Hollister's door, the shadow had gone. What did you think then?"

"I thought it—the person—had either gone into one of the guest rooms, or down the cross hall that leads onto the balcony. The balcony outside Mr. Hollister's window."

"But you didn't go on the balcony to see. You didn't do anything about it, did you? You went as far as Hollister's door, then went back to your own room to go to bed." Peters seemed almost to spring at her with his next words, so sharp did they come. "Kathleen Reilly, who—and what—are you trying to cover up?"

She gasped. "Nobody! Nothing! I'm not trying to conceal or cover up anything."

"No? You are not, for instance, inventing a story about a blood curdling shadow with the idea of drawing attention away from some person you know to be guilty? Some person, perhaps, who is very dear to you?"

Startling as the charge was, and terrifying, Kathleen cried firmly, "No, I am not!"

"This whole fabrication about shadows didn't suddenly come into your head while you listened to my questioning of Andy McClelland?"

"They did not."

Peters' laugh branded her a liar. He shrugged and would have turned to other matters, but Andy cried, "You'd better apologize to Miss Reilly, Peters."

Peters swung on him, white and venomous. "I'll conduct this inquiry. And if I were you, I'd save my wits to clear my own skirts. You're in a dangerous spot right now. You're lawyer enough to realize that."

CHAPTER FIVE

"I REFUSE TO ANSWER"

THE photographers and fingerprint men called Peters away and put an end to the questioning. "I'll have to ask you people to stay right here," he said in departing. "I'm counting on your help in clearing this thing up. At least,"

he added, "the help of most of you. I don't believe more than one or two persons here have any guilty motive for concealing information about Jason Hollister's murder."

"Name those persons, please," old Sarah snapped, but Peters merely shook his head. The old lady's gasp of indignation followed him out of the door.

"Well, he left us in a hot spot!" Wallace Clyde was on his feet, red in the face and puffing. "That sounds like a nasty crack at you, Andy."

Andy, too, was on his feet, pacing with long, nervous strides. He glanced at Clyde, but merely shrugged.

"And the way he picked on Kathleen! That's the heck of a way to treat a nice girl, calling her a liar to her face."

"Lou Peters loves to show off," old Sarah said.

"Mr. Peters has proved a very able district attorney," Paul Turner said drily, and Sarah snapped, "Oh, yes, you can say it. Lou Peters didn't happen to pick on you."

"Oh, let up on those cracks!" Wallace Clyde had lost most of his thin veneer of manners. "Listen, no offense meant, but we're all up the same tree for the minute. We're all liable to be suspected. We don't *know* that Andy put Jason on the spot."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence," Andy said.

"What gets me," Clyde went on, "is Peters asking us if Jason wanted money from us! Listen, he didn't try to hold up any of you folks for money, did he?"

Silence answered the question, silence and the stony stares of three pairs of eyes. Clyde assumed the answer.

"Well, no more did he me. What's more, if Jason Hollister was a ruined man, as Peters says, it's certainly news to me. What is Lou Peters trying to get at?"

There was silence again, and then one of the state troopers looked into the room.

"Miss Reilly, Mr. Peters wants to talk to you."

Andy caught at her sleeve, as she turned. "Wait! You don't have to answer

any more of Peters' questions, or stand for any bullying. You have a right to a lawyer's advice before you say a thing. I'll go with you."

"Sure, he's a lawyer," Clyde said. "Stand on your rights. Call Peters' bluff."

Sarah and Paul Turner were nodding agreement. Kathleen shook her head at all of them.

"Of course I'll go. Mr. Peters is welcome to any information I've got."

"What information, Miss Reilly?" The banker's question was precise and sharp.

Kathleen shrugged. "I haven't any idea what information, Mr. Turner. If he asks anything, and I think I know the answer—"

"Say now, listen!" Clyde's heavy hand was laid on her arm persuasively. "In a case like this, the biggest fool thing you can do is to talk too much. No offense meant. I'm not supposing for a minute you've a grudge against anybody here—but you might say something innocently, something that would put false ideas in Peters' head. You might hurt innocent people, don't you see?"

"For once I think Mr. Clyde is right," Sarah said. "For all our sakes, you must be very careful, Kathleen."

"I would advise that you volunteer nothing," Turner added, and even Andy nodded vehement agreement.

Kathleen frowned, surprised.

"Do you realize what you're saying to me? Mr. Hollister was murdered, my employer, a man I loved and respected—and you're asking me not to help find out the person who murdered him. I'm going to Mr. Peters, and I'm going to answer any questions I can. If I can clear the innocent and convict the guilty, I certainly mean to do it."

She walked out, leaving the room heavy with silence.

LOU PETERS was waiting for her in a small sitting room on the second floor. He dismissed his stenographer as she came in and placed her in a chair. "Make yourself comfortable, Kathleen. This isn't going to be a third degree. If I was a bit hard on you a little while ago,

don't hold it against me. It's all part of my job."

His urbanity surprised her, for the moment woke a grateful feeling. Then the warnings the others had voiced and her own shrewdness told her to be on guard. She gave the district attorney an engaging smile, but waited warily for surprises.

"Kathleen," he began, "I'm going to be frank with you. I want to tell you how this case stands to date, in the hope that you may be able to fill out any missing details. First of all, you heard me express surprise that this was not a suicide?"

"Yes, and I wondered."

"The reason I did that is because Jason was ruined. I happen to know it. Because I knew it, I ran over this afternoon hoping I might be able to do him some little service. We've been friends for years, you know."

He told her then of Hollister's vain attempt to turn aside the Bar Association inquiry. "He spent all he had, and failed, Kathleen. He was ruined both professionally and financially. He was desperate. I happen to know that."

Kathleen was stunned.

"Then that was what that letter meant this afternoon." She told him of the note she had carried her employer. Peters agreed.

He leaned nearer her, his black eyes watching her pale face.

"Here's how it stands. Hollister was ruined and desperate. He invited Andy and Turner and Clyde and Sarah here after he got that word. Why did he do that? Think, Kathleen!"

She shook her head. "I can't see why."

"Because he had to have help—money—right away," Peters said. "He invited four old clients and friends, Kathleen—people whose business he has known in intimate detail for years. He demanded money of them. Probably he demanded lump sums and big sums. And if they didn't agree to give the money—and you can bet they did not—he threatened them."

"Threatened them! Threatened them how?"

Peters voice became more confidential. "Jason knew their secrets, Kathleen.

Every person alive has a few secrets, things he hides from the world. A lawyer like Jason knows things about his most respectable clients that would blow them sky high, if they were told. And a desperate lawyer, like Jason Hollister, no matter how straight and honorable he had been before, would be pretty likely to threaten publicity if he wasn't given money to silence him."

Kathleen sprang from her chair. "It's a lie, I don't believe a word of it. I knew Jason Hollister."

Peters said coldly, "That's my theory of the case. Jason threatened those people. That accounts for the glumness at cocktail time. It accounts for Andy's quarrel with him. And I have no doubt at all that it accounts for Jason's murder. Some one of his guests killed Jason Hollister to keep his mouth shut."

A GAIN Kathleen burst into horrified denials, more horrified now, because doubts were creeping in. Peters' shrewd reasoning checked up with all she had seen, all she knew. She was sick with the terror of conviction.

When she was exhausted, Peters merely repeated steadily, "Four clients. Four secrets Jason threatened to expose. Four people who had good reason to wish Jason Hollister dead. There's your case!"

He added, "Here is where you can help me out. I want all of Jason Hollister's most private and secret papers. Among those papers, I have no doubt, is proof against at least one person here, proof of something strong enough to constitute motive for murder. When I find the motive, I find my man. Where *are* those papers, Kathleen?"

"Papers?"

"Yes. Memoranda, old affidavits, photographs, things of that sort. Jason had a few things of special importance that never went into his office safe. And to be frank, I have not yet been able to locate any private safe or hiding place here in the house. Where did he keep such stuff? You were his trusted secretary, you must know."

"But I *don't* know."

"Be reasonable, Kathleen! Of course you know!"

"I do not know. If Mr. Hollister had any such papers that he didn't keep in his safe or his desk, I don't know where he kept them."

"Well, I'm dead sure he brought them to this house today, in order to talk business to his guests. And I've got to have that stuff. Where in this house did Jason keep such things?"

Kathleen shook her head. Once more she said firmly, "I don't know."

"Don't know, or won't tell? Which is it?" The district attorney's manner changed abruptly. His black eyes glowered at her, his threatening finger shook close to her face. "Be careful, Kathleen. A lot that concerns you depends on whether you're willing to help the law."

She read the inference Peters meant her to get from his words. They had cautioned her not to let Peters bully her, but if the others had been present then, they would not have worried so much about her being bullied. People did not bully Kathleen Reilly without rousing the fighting Irish in her.

"Just what do you mean by that remark?" she asked, coldly.

"Just what I say. You're in love with Andy McClelland, aren't you? Well, it happens that Andy quarreled with Hollister and threatened his life, and I have witnesses to it. And before I'm done, I daresay I can find enough to make out a damned tight case against that young man. I'm warning you now, if you start getting rough with me on this case, I can get rough with you. Suppose you tell me where Jason kept his private papers in this house?"

"Suppose you listen to me," Kathleen retorted. Her cheeks were blazing, she was beautiful in her anger. "If you suspect Andy McClelland of that murder, that's your business, Mr. Peters. If you did suspect him and could build a case against him, you wouldn't be offering to doublecross the state you work for and throw your case, just to pay me back for a favor. That's a poor bluff, and it's no good. As for Mr. Hollister's papers, I told

you all I know about them, and that is exactly nothing. Now if you want to try railroading me—or Andy—for something we didn't do, go ahead!"

She was out of her chair; her hand was on the knob of the door.

Peters had risen, too. He made her an ironic bow.

"I think I can conduct this case without your help, if necessary. But I'm warning you, you'll have to tell me where Hollister hid his secrets. When you say you don't know, you're not fooling me. And if you find Andy in a peck of trouble, you can thank yourself for it."

CHAPTER SIX

SMEDLEY'S MESSAGE

KATHLEEN went to her room with Peters' threat ringing in her ears. "If you find Andy in a peck of trouble, you can thank yourself for it."

He had found the weak spot in her armor with fiendish cunning. She was in terror lest she jeopardize Andy, and in terror lest she fail in a sacred trust. True to that trust, she had lied to Lou Peters, and now the possible consequences of her lie, and of the course plainly marked for her to follow, haunted her.

She knew where Hollister kept such private papers as Peters had described. Several years before her employer had shown her.

"A neat hiding place, isn't it?" Hollister had said, showing her the secret compartment in his antique desk. He had added, with a strange premonition of what was to come, "If—or when—I die, Kathleen, you are to open this drawer. If you find any papers here, don't read them—*burn* them. A lawyer comes into possession of a lot of dangerous things in the course of a lifetime. We don't want to leave any of this dynamite around where it may blow up and hurt innocent people."

It was the true Jason Hollister who had spoken then. The Jason Hollister that Kathleen always would remember, whose passing she would always mourn. It was that honorable man she meant to serve now. She kept her promises.

She knew that to keep that promise she must run grave risks, perhaps the risk of life itself. If, as Peters thought, there was among them one who had killed once to protect a guilty secret, would he not kill again to protect his own life?

But if she turned to the law for help, if she confided in Lou Peters, the district attorney would demand that she turn those secrets over to him. Dangerous secrets, involving the safety of innocent people. No, she would not violate Hollister's trust in her, not even if her course endangered Andy McClelland!

Andy tapped at her door while she pondered the problem.

"We're all going to bed again," he reported. "Everybody is staying on, and Peters is staying. Peters has the house guarded, and there's nothing to be worried about."

His eyes softened. "I came to thank you for believing in me, darling. If you knew how much that means to me tonight!"

"Of course I believe in you—as if I could ever think you guilty of a thing like that!" She hoped passionately that he would tell her now, in detail, all that lay behind his wild talk earlier that evening—wild talk and even wilder actions—but Andy merely pressed her hand and thanked her.

She whispered anxiously, "You must be careful, Andy. Lou Peters thinks—oh, he's imagining dreadful things about you!"

"Did he tell you that?"

"Yes."

Andy looked grim. "There's a lot appears against me, Kathleen. More than you told Peters, unless you told later—"

She shook her head. "I'd never tell that. Not unless you asked me to."

"Then, don't you worry, honey. We'll come through this all right. It looks bad, but Peters hasn't anything real to bring against me." He patted her arm. "Now, get some sleep. We'll all need what rest we can get."

They had whispered at the door of her room. She watched Andy down the corridor until he vanished around the turn, as that shadowy figure had disappeared. A light burned in the hall now and things

looked different, but it was reassuring to think that it was not Andy's shadow she had seen in that stealthy promenade.

She could not sleep. She sat up, haunted by the mysteries and terrors of the night.

IT was very late and the house was silent when the footsteps crept to her door. She jerked erect, watching the cautious turning of the door knob, the stealthy pressure that told somebody it was locked.

Then the stealthy visitor knocked softly. More frightened than the circumstances warranted, she stole forward and spoke in a low whisper.

"Who is it?"

"It's Smedley, Miss. I must speak to you."

The voice was the merest whisper, impossible to identify. Kathleen hesitated, then opened the door a fraction of an inch, ready to slam it shut and bar it against the intruder.

Seeing that it was really Smedley, she stepped back with a sigh of relief and Hollister's butler came in silently and closed the door behind him.

"Miss Reilly, I must tell you something. I must warn you."

She saw then that the big, quiet man was very pale. She felt the color draining from her own face.

"Warn me?" she repeated uncertainly.

"Yes, Miss. You must leave here at once. That Mr. Peters, Miss, he's doing nothing to protect you. It isn't safe—"

"What do you mean? Why do I need protection? Smedley, tell me what has happened."

"Well, Miss, it's like this. I was in my room, ready for bed. And I heard someone whistling through the old speaking tube. There was one connecting from the library to my room when Mr. Hollister bought this house, and though it was never used, it was left there, open. Well, Miss, I'll tell you truly, it made me go queer all over to hear that whistling. But I went to it and answered."

He stopped and wiped his damp, hot face. Kathleen, with a sympathetic stirring at her heart, waited anxiously.

"When I answered," he went on, "somebody spoke in a whisper. They said I was to come to you when everything was quiet. They said I was to tell you to keep your mouth shut about what you knew. That if you talked—" the man gulped and mopped his face again—"Miss Reilly, they said if you talked, you'd go the way Mr. Hollister had gone."

"But—but—" Kathleen backed away from him in instinctive alarm. "But what did it *mean*? What do I know? What could I tell that would hurt anyone? Smedley, who was it that spoke to you?"

"Before God, Miss, I don't know. It was just a whisper. I wouldn't even be able to say if it was a man or a woman. It just came like a breath and stopped, and that's all I know. But I think you ought to leave this place. I do, really, Miss."

His voice and manner were earnest. She cried again, "But what is it they think I know? How could I harm anyone in this house?"

"That's for you to say, Miss. You must know what they were talking about. Nobody's going to risk a thing like that at such a time without having something to risk it for."

He looked at her intently. Too intently, Kathleen thought, with sudden uncertainty. She drew away and said, as calmly as she could, "It probably doesn't mean a thing, Smedley, and I shall pay no attention to it, only to notify Mr. Peters."

Smedley snorted. "Him! He's a fine one! Goes off to a room and to bed as though there hadn't been a crime in this house. Who's to guard us all? A policeman down at the front door snoring till you can hear it up here! I tell you, he's no help, and you'd better leave here!"

"You mustn't speak that way of Mr. Peters, Smedley. Thank you for what you have told me. Now go back to your room."

"You don't want me to stay and watch while you rest?" he insisted. "I don't mean any impertinence to Mr. Peters, but I don't like your being here. You'd be that easy to kill if anyone wanted to do it."

Undoubtedly it was a warning, not a

threat, but Kathleen moved a pace further from him and thanking him again, watched the door close behind him.

She flung herself after him then, and turned the key in the lock.

WAS it true that her life was in danger? Was it true that, in one heart at least, there beat a murderous rage against her, for a reason she could not fathom?

Her first thought was to run to Andy for help and advice, but this instinctive turning to the man she loved was vetoed almost immediately. Andy was already involved. How, she did not know, but he was in trouble. It was not for her to add to that trouble.

And, after all, it was hardly necessary, for the help of the law was at hand. Much more sensible, surely, to take the butler's story straight to Peters and follow to the letter whatever advice he gave.

Smedley had said the district attorney was in his room, and she stole quietly through the deserted hall. She tapped softly at Peters' door, and at the pressure of her hand it swung open. The room was empty.

She stood undecided, then moved softly along till a muffled sound from Hollister's room brought her to a rigid standstill.

Someone—or something—was moving in that room. Low, muffled sounds, as though whoever stirred behind that closed door was using extreme caution. For a moment Kathleen's heart almost stopped beating. Then the reassuring thought that it was probably Peters himself brought back some semblance of courage.

Yet she dared not go directly in to find out. Craven she might be, coward she told herself she undoubtedly was, but when she reached her hand to the door, it stopped in midair, seeming of its own volition to refuse her bidding.

Instead she crept to the balcony. Like a shadow among shades she slipped along to the window of Hollister's room. Crouching, she peered in.

The room was dark, save for a small circle of light that moved here and there cautiously. Someone, a shadow only to

Kathleen's eyes, was searching frantically through that silent room. The light swept back and forth. She saw that the carpet had been turned back. She saw hands feeling beneath it, with quick, nervous motions.

Was it Peters? Was it—her breath caught at the thought—Andy? Or was it some cold-eyed murderer who would not hesitate to strike her down as he had struck down Jason Hollister?

As she crouched in the darkness, she felt her courage going with a speed and finality that left her breathless. She dared not move either forward or back. A small, shaky laugh rose to her lips. What was she going to do? Crouch here, unmoving, till morning came? Scream and run? Or just die, just simply die of fear?

It was settled for her. Some breath, some involuntary movement or sound must have escaped her. Or some sixth sense must have warned that desperate searcher. The light vanished and in the darkness Kathleen could feel that dark figure turning toward her. Could feel that he was staring at her and that she was outlined clearly against the dim starlight.

It was too much. She caught her breath, opened her lips to scream, to scream until death or help put an end to her fright. But the scream was never uttered. She was caught into the darkness by arms like steel. A strong hand was clapped over her mouth.

And for the first time in her healthy young life, Kathleen Reilly fainted.

WHEN she opened her eyes, she was conscious first of Peters bending over her, his face both furious and anxious. She was conscious of light and safety, and someone to hold on to. Her second realization was that she was inside Hollister's room, lying on his bed. And at that grisly discovery she sat up with a cry of dismay.

Peters shook her. "Quiet," he whispered fiercely, "or I'll put you out again!"

"Let me off this bed!" she gasped. "Let me off this bed, where Jason Hollister was killed." She scrambled to her feet, frightened and angry, and began to cry,

silently but bitterly. Watching her, Peters' grim face relaxed.

"Never mind," he said. "You're safe now—and that's a good deal more than you were a few minutes ago."

She controlled her sobbing with an effort. "Someone—someone tried to choke me," she whispered.

Again he gave her that grim smile. "Someone wanted to, all right," he said. "I did it."

"You!"

"Now quiet down," he said. "I didn't hurt you. I didn't know you were going to faint. And just at this minute I don't care much if you did. Will you kindly tell me what you mean by prowling about and scaring off a man I've been up all night trying to trap?"

His words were wasted. She sprang toward him, hot anger in her heart. "Do you mean to say it was you who caught me out there on the balcony and scared me to death? Why—why, you ought to be murdered yourself for doing a thing like that. You—you hadn't any right!"

Even the grim smile left Peters' face. "Listen to me. I knew somebody was going to try to get into that room. Somebody had to get in, and that person was Hollister's murderer. He was bound to come in the hope of finding something that would betray the motive for his killing. In the hope of finding what we were talking about—"

"You mean Mr. Hollister's papers?"

"Exactly. You refused to help me, so I set a trap. I cleared the way, made it easy for the fellow to get in. And I saw him and watched him for ten minutes. The minute he got his hands on those papers and I had him with the goods, I would have grabbed him. Then you come along and make a walking advertisement of yourself, warning him he is watched!"

He gave her an infuriated look. "Twice is too much! I ought to throw you in jail for obstructing justice!"

"How was I to know?" Once more Irish blood was prompting Kathleen to fight. "I came out looking for you, to ask protection! I have a right to that, I think!"

She told him of Smedley's warning. Peters knit his brows over that.

"Threatened you, eh? Well, you can see what's behind that."

"I cannot."

"Hollister's papers! Don't be an idiot! Somebody in this house is scared to death you'll tell where they are."

"But *who*?"

"How can I say? They all know you talked with me in secret. Who? I dare say the same one that we saw in here just now, conducting his own search!" Once more his fury mounted. "I could wring your neck for getting in my way!"

He looked as if he meant it literally, but in a moment his face cleared. "Go on back to bed, Kathleen. I'll post one of the troopers in front of your door the rest of the night. You'll be safe. And you'd better think over what I've told you. Willing or unwilling, you're going to help me clear up Jason Hollister's murder. You're going to tell me all you know."

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE PARADE OF SHADOWS

KATHLEEN found a haggard, hollow-eyed company at breakfast the next morning. Except for Andy, there was no friendship in the glances turned upon her as she joined them. And one among them, if Lou Peters was right, had stained his hands with murder! How was one to share toast and eggs and bacon and small talk with that thought for company?

The thought must have been common to more than Kathleen, for there was very little small talk.

"I expect to be in and out during the day. I've got some things to check up in town." Lou Peters glanced over them as he made the announcement. "I should like to see all of you here after dinner to-night. Do what you please today."

His black eyes held Kathleen's. They seemed to demand again that she tell him Hollister's secret. Then, finding no encouragement in her glance, Peters glanced at Andy and smiled in a way that chilled her blood.

She must find those papers and deal with them as Jason Hollister had ordered. Surely, she thought, the day would bring her that opportunity.

She had other work to attend to, letters and telegrams to dispatch, many necessary details of Hollister's business that had come to so sudden and tragic an ending. That gave her good excuse to remain at Greenacres, close to the hidden papers—but, persist as she did, the opportunity to get them did not come. Ten minutes alone in Jason Hollister's room, in these circumstances, were impossible. She did not dare risk investigating the secret drawer of Hollister's old desk.

On his return from the city, Lou Peters found the house guests in Hollister's library. He came to them smiling grimly, like a man whose day has been hard, but whose business has come to a satisfactory conclusion.

"I'm glad to find you all here. The State appreciates the cooperation you people are giving," he said. To Kathleen he seemed mocking, gloating over secrets he was not yet ready to reveal.

Perhaps Sarah Manley felt the same thing, for she said, "Humph! Very nice of the State to be so appreciative, Mr. Peters. Speaking only for myself, I am staying here in hope of seeing something found out about who killed Jason. Perhaps I'm a bit optimistic?"

"I think not." Peters made her a brief bow, then turned to Kathleen. "Get the servants down, please."

"The servants?" He had startled her with that ironic light in his eyes. Her frightened thoughts flew back to the threat he had made against Andy.

"The servants, certainly."

"What—what are you going to do?" Wallace Clyde's voice was sharp and startled them all.

Sarah Manley chuckled. "That's presumptuous of you, Mr. Clyde. The State is not obliged to explain to the common people."

"I don't mind telling you that I'm going to conduct a little experiment," Peters said coldly. "You are all going to play a part in it."

A look of inquiry passed about the room. Sarah muttered, "Oh, indeed!"

Kathleen rang for Smedley and gave him Peters' orders. They waited silently until the household staff had assembled. Peters said, "All follow me, please."

He led the way to the second floor corridor, the state trooper who carried a stenographer's book at his side.

KATHLEEN REILLY saw somebody slipping down this hall just before Hollister was killed last night," the district attorney said. "She is not sure she would recognize that shadow if she saw it again. I want to know if she can. I am going to have the lights put out as they were last night. One by one, as you are called, you are to walk slowly down this hall where the moonlight will fall across you. Kathleen, you stand at your own door as you say you did last night. If you recognize that shadow, tell me at once."

"Stuff and nonsense!" old Sarah sputtered. "I, for one, will do nothing of the sort."

Turner echoed her. The crisp, slight little banker's tone was precise. "You can't do that, you know, Lou."

"These people are not under arrest," Andy said. "If you mean to charge us with anything, better do it first."

Peters faced their protests, a figure of patience, his smile slightly mocking.

"Anybody else to be heard from?"

There was. Smedley cleared his throat. "Beg pardon, Mr. Peters, but I understand a man has a right to legal advice before he puts himself in jeopardy. At least so I've been told, sir."

"You have—all of you have. If you want to stick to your point, each one of you here can refuse to say anything. Each one of you is free to go hire a lawyer, if he wants to waste the money." He paused, then added, "And one of you would not be wasting his money, either! One of you is going to need a damned good lawyer, because he is going to face the charge of murdering Jason Hollister!"

As one person they caught their breath and stared at him and at each other.

"One of you," Peters cried, and pointed

from face to face with a stabbing forefinger. "Perhaps that one would prefer to save us a lot of trouble and confess now?"

Frightened silence answered him and he laughed.

"What do you take me for, a fool?" His voice was harder now, defiant. "If you think I've not been hard at work on this case and haven't got it sewed up by now, you're making a serious mistake. I know which one of you killed Jason. I *know!*"

An hysterical maid cried aloud, a gasping, shuddering cry that made them turn upon her, and made Peters snap, "Keep that woman still!"

Andy broke out again, "Well, Peters, since you know who did it, why not make your arrest? It will save a lot of time."

"I'll make my arrest all right," Peters answered, with an angry flush. "Now all of you listen. I can't make you do what I ask, I can only advise you to do it." He counted them all. "Eight persons, not counting Kathleen. Seven of you are innocent—"

"And why exclude Kathleen Reilly?" Sarah Manley demanded. "Do we understand you consider her above suspicion?"

Kathleen shrank before the indignant gaze of eight persons. Unanimously their eyes accused her of Jason Hollister's murder, and innocent as she was, she blanched and trembled. Her heart sank more when Peters answered:

"I have not placed her above suspicion. I am inviting her to take part in my experiment. I'm asking you all to help. Those who are innocent will have no reason under the sun for not helping. Anybody who refuses to help, certainly directs suspicion upon himself."

"Meaning, I suppose, that my feeble old hands killed Jason!" Sarah cried acidly. "Thank you, Lou Peters."

"Will you help?" Peters asked, and his voice was impatient. "Are you going to talk all night, or will you help me find the man who murdered Jason Hollister?"

"Not me," Sarah declared. "I'm getting too old to play charades."

"I'll help," Andy volunteered, and Kathleen wanted to cheer.

Clyde stared about defiantly. "All right, I'm game. How about you, Mr. Turner?"

The little banker bit his lip. "I must say it's very unusual. Yet, as I understand the case—"

"All right," Peters nodded. "You, Smedley? And you three back there?"

The servants nodded solemnly.

IN the darkness, her heart hammering and her hands cold and damp, Kathleen stood at her bedroom door. One by one the strange procession went, the members of the dead man's household filing past her, following the path of moonlight down the long hall.

Smedley, looking even in silhouette the perfect butler he was, went first. Irish Bridget lumped along, moaning to various saints for protection. The maids followed. After them came Andy, his figure young and clear-cut. At sight of him, Kathleen's heart gave a great surge of relief. She was able to cry truthfully, "Not him!"

There was a momentary interruption then. Old Sarah cried out irritably, "Don't crowd! Let the girl get a good look at me. I certainly am not carrying around a guilty conscience!" With this capitulation she joined the procession, marching like royalty to the guillotine, erect and gallant.

After her came Turner, trim and small, and Wallace Clyde, his big body moving along easily.

"That's all," Peters said. "Recognize any of them, Kathleen?"

"No!" Kathleen's voice was both glad and sorry. Glad that it must be no word of hers that would convict the guilty, sorry that she had been unable to clear the innocent.

Peters sighed bitterly. "Well, I didn't expect it," he said, his voice sharp with disappointment. "Anyway, I've got my case without it. But an identification would have been a help! Come on downstairs again, everybody."

"More games, Mr. Peters?" Old Sarah's laugh was taunting.

They were trooping down the dark hall, Kathleen among the first. For some reason she was never able to fathom, she turned. In that cold, clear moonlight she saw a

drooping, heavy figure moving clumsily, one shoulder hunched, head hanging forward.

Her hand pressed tight against her throat. She heard her own voice, sharp and high-pitched in terror, cry, "That's the man! That's the man!"

CHAPTER EIGHT

GUILT—AND MORE GUILT

PETERS sprang like a wildcat at that shadowy figure. "Turn on the lights, Smedley," he shouted, and struggled with the wildly fighting form as Smedley ran down the hall and clicked a button that flooded the scene with light.

In Peters' hands Wallace Clyde was fighting. Now, as light swept over them, he stood still, heavy, defiant, his eyes fathomless pools of dread.

Kathleen shrank back, catching at Andy for support. "But I don't understand!" she cried. "I saw him walk past before. I didn't recognize him then. Oh, there must be some mistake!"

"I think not," Peters said coldly. "I think our friend walked past on tiptoe when you were watching him. I think he threw his shoulders back, moved in a way that was as foreign to his natural walk as possible."

"It's a lie!" Clyde shouted. "You can't railroad me like this. You want a conviction, and you don't give a damn how you get it. The girl saw me pass. She said I wasn't the man. Now, damn you, take your hands off me! You haven't got anything on me!"

"Haven't I?" Peters said softly, his hawklike face close to that of the terrified man. "I told you I had my case—and you'll see that I have it."

Clyde's face took on a yellow hue. Andy said impulsively, "You don't have to speak, Wallace. You don't have to say one word. You can refuse to talk. You can demand legal advice."

Peters turned on Andy furiously.

"True," he snapped. "He can. And it will close in my mind the last doubt as to his guilt. I think you'll talk, Clyde. If not, I'll talk for you. You had an interview

with Hollister when you first came to this house yesterday, and I am as sure what that talk was about as I am sure that I stand here. I have proof of what I say."

Kathleen caught her breath. She was mortally certain that none of Hollister's secret papers had been discovered. The district attorney was playing a hunch. She started to speak, then shrank back undecided. Who was she, to dare?

Clyde dwindled under the menacing eye of the district attorney.

"Why should I kill him?" he argued. "I tell you he was a friend of mine!"

"Was he?" Peters leaned close to him. "Was he your friend, after that interview in his room? Or wasn't he a man you would have risked your life to silence?"

Clyde gave a gasping sob. "I don't give a damn what you say!" he cried. "You can't prove anything. I tell you the girl didn't know me just now, and—"

"She *will* know you," Peters said, something so cold and brutal in his voice that Kathleen shuddered. "You walked on tiptoe, didn't you? Well, let's see how long you can keep that up. Let's see how many times—how many hundreds of times—you can walk that space before your muscles and courage and nerves fail you. You can spend the night in that death walk, but sooner or later you'll give up and tell the truth. And while you walk, you can think of the man you shot and why you shot him. And you can remember that I know why. You can think of that fingerprint, and—"

They were all on the verge of protest. Andy started forward to that crumpling, beaten figure. But Wallace Clyde threw up his hands in a sudden gesture of despair.

"Stop!" he shouted. "I'll tell the truth. It was I Kathleen saw, all right. I was going to Hollister's room, that's true—but I didn't kill him. He had something I wanted to get—something I had to get, or else serve a term. I didn't kill him, but I can tell you right now why somebody did. It was because he was a blackmailing devil!

"You've got the goods on me for that—no use caring who else knows. I'm a

crook. I'm a crook that never got caught. Only one man had the proof of that on me, and that man was Hollister. I didn't worry. I thought of him as the squarest man that ever lived. Well, that's the first mistake I made. He got me out here yesterday and told me he had kept some papers I thought he had burned years ago. Papers that would send me up for a stretch—that will now, if you've got your claws on them, as you say you have!

"He told me he would sell them back to me for fifty thousand dollars. I thought he'd gone crazy. Maybe he had, for all I know. He didn't look like the same man, he looked like a devil. I begged him. I told him the truth—that I was running on a shoe-string. That I could hardly raise one thousand, let alone fifty. I begged for time. I promised anything if he'd only wait. He said I could get the money if I had to. He said I was lying, that I had cash hidden away in safe deposit boxes—that my kind always had. Well, he was wrong.

"Last night I was going to sneak into his room and see if I could lay my hands on those damned papers. I did sneak out on that balcony—but that's all, I—I heard a shot. And I ran for it. I—"

He paused. Up to that moment his story had a ring of truth so absolute that no one could have doubted a word he said. Now it fell apart, left him faltering, lying.

"You heard a shot? From which direction?"

"I don't know. I've told what happened. Now you can get your man—but it won't be me."

Peters spoke suddenly. "Did you get your papers?"

Clyde said sullenly, "How in hell *could* I?"

"Why not?" Still that iron bearing down. "Why not? After you shot him?"

"I *didn't* shoot him!"

"No?" From his pocket Peters drew something that shone and glinted in sharp light. "Clyde, this is your revolver. It bears a serial number and is licensed in your name. The bullet that killed Hollister was fired from its barrel. It had your

fingerprint on it, and my men found it where you flung it into a crotch of the old elm tree outside of Hollister's window. Have you anything to say now?"

The man broke like a fiddle string.

"All right," he said. "I shot him. Now hang me if you want to."

A sigh ran through the group. Terrible though it was, his confession meant safety for them all. There was a relaxing of tension as complete as it was brief.

Outside a motorcycle roared to the door. Heavy footsteps pounded up the stairs. A young officer handed Peters a note, and stood silent while he read it.

When the district attorney turned back, his face was white and tired.

"I have here the medical examiner's report," he said slowly. "The report of the autopsy performed upon Jason Hollister. Clyde, when you shot Hollister, he was dead. He had died of poison."

CHAPTER NINE

THE GARAGE

CONFUSION worse than before, worse even than the terror and bewilderment of finding Jason Hollister dead, descended on them all with that announcement. The district attorney glared at the report that had been handed him. He looked as if he would like to tear it to shreds.

It was Andy who cried, "Then Wallace Clyde is innocent. Innocent of killing Jason! He tried, but he was too late. You can't send him to the chair for that!"

"I told you that parade was nonsense," old Sarah declared.

The prisoner's yellow face flushed with a rush of hope.

"Say, how about it?" he demanded. "By hell, Andy's right. You can't hang me for what I did!"

The district attorney swung to him. "No? Well, maybe not. But maybe I'll hang you for murder just the same. You're not cleared yet." He turned on them all with his black look. "None of you is cleared! Every mother's son of you—and daughter, too—is under suspicion."

"But, Peters, Hollister died of poison! Clyde used a gun!" Andy persisted.

"Yes? How do I know he didn't poison him first and then because the poison didn't work fast enough, shoot him? Or maybe *you* poisoned him. Did you?"

The affair was becoming a wrangle, with all of them clamoring, insinuating, threatening. Kathleen got Andy by the arm and whispered, "Follow me upstairs. As fast as you can. I need you."

Now was her opportunity!

She slipped from the room. Andy, following, found her near Jason Hollister's door. She whispered, "Andy, I'm going into that room for a few minutes. I want you to guard me. Watch that door and the hall. I've got work to do in there, and it's got to be done secretly. I'm trusting you all the way."

Andy's eyes lighted. "Hollister's papers? You know where they are?"

"Yes. You'll help?"

"Through hell and high water!" Andy answered exultantly.

To Andy, watching the quiet corridor, it seemed that Kathleen took an interminable time. She was in Hollister's room not ten minutes, and in that time no person appeared in the corridor. From the first floor of the house came distant echoes of the dispute, but there were no interruptions.

Andy gripped moist palms tightly in his nervousness, and when at last Hollister's door opened quietly and Kathleen came out, his heart leaped. Under her arm she carried a leather dispatch case.

She turned from the door toward the rear stair, the servants' stair, and Andy slipped along after her. She went on with light, hurried steps down that stair, through a dimly lighted service corridor, and to a rear door. Andy was beside her when they passed on into the dark of night.

A distance from the house, he whispered, "It's all right?"

"Yes."

"What are you going to do?"

"I've got a plan. I want you to let me carry it out alone. I don't want anybody—not *anybody*—to know."

Andy's hand gripped her arm. He said with a sudden earnestness that startled her, "Kathleen, I've got to talk to you first. I've *got* to."

She hesitated. "It isn't safe. Andy. At any minute—"

"There's the garage. It's out of sight of the house. I've been in there with Hollister. I know the place. It's safe."

Still she hesitated. "Andy dear, we've got to do this thing my way. I can't talk to you while—"

He gripped her more firmly. She could feel the urgent trembling that shook him.

"It's more than a matter of life or death. It's a lot dearer to me than my own life, Kathleen. For heaven's sake, if you love me, let me explain!"

His earnestness, something like despair in his voice, frightened and moved her.

Andy had admitted tacitly that he, too, was involved in the net of secrets Hollister had spread. Scarcely had she thought of it then or since, in the hurry of events. Whatever secret was his, it must be a vital matter, more vital than she had imagined, so vital that he had risked life and honor already to gain it back. Was he guilty? No, she would never believe that. It was in her power to give him reassurance and balm—and she loved him.

"All right. But we mustn't take long," she whispered.

THEY went on toward the large brick garage. It was well out of sight of the house, and a safe enough place to talk. They walked fast, two young, hurrying figures, and after them, taking its path through the shrubbery, slipped another figure. They had been followed from the time Kathleen left Hollister's door.

"Lucky for us the chauffeur sleeps in the house," Andy whispered, and cautiously rolled back a large door. He lighted a match and, cupping it in his hands, told Kathleen to follow. They passed through the large, clean, silent main room, where the cars stood, and into a workshop at the rear. Andy snapped a wall switch and a light sprang up overhead.

"This is safe," he said, keeping his

voice low. "The shrubbery comes close up against the rear, and the light can't be seen through the front of the building."

Kathleen leaned against a work bench where stood a power lathe, vises, racks of tools. The dispatch case lay beside her, her hand resting upon it lightly. Her eyes were sad as they met Andy's.

"I'm nervous, Andy. All upset. Oh, this shameful secrecy and evasion! That wasn't Hollister's way, not his real, normal way, Andy."

Andy's lean, brown face twisted. "A lot you know! I'm sorry, Kathleen—sorry to disillusion you—but I'm afraid that *was* Hollister's way. It was a brutal, ruthless way. I'll swear that is true!"

"But he was sick, Andy! Half out of his mind. Driven desperate, don't you see?"

He shrugged. "It doesn't matter. The point is that the man was so potentially dangerous to me, it's a good thing he's dead."

Kathleen shrank away from him. Brutally hard and inhuman his words sounded. And yet, if she could ever believe what people said of Jason Hollister, were they not reasonable?

Andy came closer to her, his hand touching hers. "You do love and trust me, Kathleen?"

The eyes she raised swam with tears. "I love and trust you, Andy. I—I've tried, but I can't help loving you."

His arm went about her shoulders and he pressed her close with sudden, breath-taking strength. "Oh, Kathleen, Kathleen! My darling, what fools we've been! If only you hadn't held me off so long!" His manner changed, and his arms loosed their hold. "Kathleen, there is one paper in that packet, just one, that I must have. I want it now."

Her alarmed stiffening foretold her answer, and Andy cried out, "Wait! Don't answer until you understand. I'm not interested in any secret but my own. I don't care even if this murder is never solved. It's just that one paper I've got to have."

"But you can't. *You can't!*" Her eyes bright, Kathleen shrank from him, afraid, her hand clasping the leather case close.

"You must understand me once and for all, Andy. These papers were Hollister's, or in his keeping. Long ago he asked me, if anything ever happened to him, to destroy them. I am going to keep my promise to him."

Andy had caught her arm. His fingers clamped hard about it, bruising the soft flesh. He said through gritted teeth, "I want that one paper." Then, by a great effort, he calmed himself and let her go.

"Kathleen, I'm going to tell you something and trust you absolutely. You and I will be the only persons alive to share the secret. Among those old papers is one that concerns the honor of my own father. Until yesterday I didn't know that paper existed, but it does, for Hollister showed it to me when he tried to sell it back, exactly as he tried to do with Clyde. It concerns a political deal, and its discovery now would do the world no good at all. Rather it would blacken for all time the memory of a man the world honors. I won't let that happen. I want that one paper now."

So that was it, Andy's secret! Even in Kathleen's shock and grief at his sorrow she felt thanksgiving, because Andy was not tarnished. With all his young loyalty and idealism, he was fighting to protect a dead man's honor.

Again he pleaded, but she shook her head.

"I understand, Andy—and I'll never tell. But I can't give up the paper. I made my promise, too. I made it to Jason Hollister when Hollister was his real self, an honest man. I give you my word nobody shall ever know about your secret, but I mean to hide and keep these papers until I know that none of them concerns the mystery of Jason Hollister's death. Then I'll destroy them all."

Andy's face was livid, and his eyes blazed.

"Kathleen, *give me that paper!*"

She cried back, white and defiant, "No! Never!"

So they faced each other, bitter and furious. Andy's hand was raised, but whether in menace or despair, Kathleen never learned. Without warning, the light

in the ceiling blinked out. They groped in utter darkness. Andy's cry of alarm choked off abruptly. A bulky *something* seemed to leap from the blackness, thrusting them aside. A heavy hand snatched the leather case.

In fear and anxiety, Kathleen cried out. She heard Andy's answering shout, and then a hand clutched at her throat. The scream died away. She was struck brutally and knew no more.

CHAPTER TEN

THE SECOND VICTIM

AT Kathleen's scream, Andy hurled himself through the blackness. His outflung arm brushed a man's shoulder, caught at a coat collar. The fellow was moving rapidly. The cloth was jerked from Andy's grasp, a body brushed his. Andy attempted a flying tackle, and something on the floor—a stool or some hard object—tripped him. He went down heavily—and the unknown escaped.

As he rose, Andy noted a draft of night air. One of the rear windows had been raised, evidently for the man's entrance and his retreat. He found a switch and pressed it.

Kathleen lay on the concrete floor. There was a cut on her temple, but she breathed regularly. Andy gritted his teeth in futile rage at the man who had struck her. Thus he was found, Kathleen's head on his knees.

The newcomer was one of Peters' guard of state troopers. Andy had not time to give an explanation before more help arrived from the house. Kathleen's scream and his shout had brought everyone.

They clustered at the door, staring. Old Sarah, Wallace Clyde, Smedley, and, behind them, the frightened maids. Turner was missing. So was Peters, Andy noted.

Andy spoke for all to hear. "Miss Reilly met me here to talk over Hollister's affairs. Somebody turned out the lights while we were talking—"

The group at the door gave way before an onslaught from the rear. Peters stalked into the room. The district attorney evi-

dently had come running, for he was pale and breathless. His snapping eyes took in the scene and he said crisply:

"Now then, McClelland, what happened?"

Andy began again, "Miss Reilly met me here—" then stopped. His eyes had turned to the workbench. His jaw dropped. "He got away with it! He stole the dispatch case!"

"What dispatch case?"

"The one Kathleen found. Hollister's private papers!"

"Hollister's papers!" The exclamation was a chorus of excitement. So loud was it Peters snapped over his shoulder, "Silence! I'll do the talking." He looked angry enough to strangle the man who still crouched before him, Kathleen's head pillowed on his folded coat.

"Did she get those papers?" Peters asked sharply.

"She did. And whoever hit her over the head stole them again."

"Of all the blundering numbskulls—" Peters checked his indignation. "Stop! Let's count noses. Where's Turner?"

The banker was missing. "Get out of here, all of you. Find Paul Turner!"

Peters' words sent the police at about face.

"All of you help look," he raged. "The man hasn't had time to get far away. He can't get out of these grounds. I've men posted all along. You, Smedley, Clyde—all of you get busy and help."

As they poured out of the garage, Peters turned back to Andy. "So you two got those papers?"

Andy was silent, and his silence enraged Peters again.

"All right, McClelland, you're lawyer enough to know what I can do to both of you! You've made yourselves accessories after the fact—in murder."

Andy forced a purposely weary smile. "Do anything you like, but do something. You've done a lot of threatening, and damn little performance."

"You'll see it! As for that girl—damn it, McClelland, I knew she was lying all the time!"

"Why not find Turner?" Andy sug-

gested. "If he's got the papers, as you seem to believe, you ought to be able to catch him. He's about as easy to lose as the President of the United States."

"Bright boy, aren't you? Well, that can wait. Better get that girl into the house, where one of the maids can look after her. Then suppose you come out and see if you can be useful for a change. I need every man here for a thorough search of these grounds. Turner simply can't get out of here. And he can't make a fool of me!"

Andy was not interested in Peters' threats. He gathered Kathleen's slender figure into his arms, and with one of Hollister's maids at his side, went back to the house. The girl brought water, towels, smelling salts. Kathleen responded to first aid quickly. At sight of Andy's anxious face, she began to cry softly.

Andy paused long enough to whisper, "You're safe here, darling. Lie still, don't worry. We'll make the grade between us." Then he left the maid to look after her and went out of doors again.

He wondered if it could be Turner they were looking for. Turner had not been with the others, to be sure, but that fellow Andy had tackled in the dark had put up a fight surprisingly strong for a man like Paul Turner.

Andy could hear Peters raging about, directing his cohorts. "We'll go over the place foot by foot. Spread out, boys. Work about ten feet apart, and cover every inch. The fellow can't have got past the lodge in this time! He must be here!"

Andy reported and joined the spread-out line of men who were making a thorough search of Jason Hollister's shrubbery. They had worked less than half an hour when a shout halted them all. Several electric torches bobbed about a huge rhododendron bush. Andy, running toward them, saw their beams concentrate on a spot where Smedley knelt, raising to the light a white, shaken face.

The butler was gasping as Andy came within hearing, "Damn it, sir, it isn't decent! I want to get out of here! I tell you I'm sick!"

Peters, somewhere just behind Andy,

had heard the words and shouted now, "Stay where you are. Like it or not, you'll stay there. None of you people try to get away. Now, let me have a look."

He strode past Andy and the others made way for him. Andy saw it, as Peters saw it—the crumpled, twisted body of a man, the face purple with congested blood, the eyes protruding, staring horribly in death, the hands raised in the stiff gesture of agony with which they had tried in vain to loosen the murderous cord twisted around his throat.

"Well, it's Turner all right," Peters was saying grimly. "The second victim of murder at Greenacres."

At the dead man's side the leather dispatch case lay. It was open—and empty.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

DEFIANCE

PETERS snatched at the leather case. "They're gone. Whoever got Turner got the papers." He turned to the butler. "Smedley, help me get this man back into the house."

"Me, sir!" Smedley recoiled, his broad face a sickly yellow in the torch beams. "I beg pardon, Mr. Peters, but I cannot touch—"

Peters roared at him, "Pick up that body and carry it into the house! One more refusal like that and you'll be under arrest."

The butler bent over the twisted body of Turner. Despite his agitation, he picked it up without seeming effort, and it lay in his arms, no more burden than the body of a child in a mother's arms. To Peters' fussy, "Wait, I'll take his head," the man paid no heed. He walked slowly and easily, bearing his burden toward the house with the same dignity with which he performed all tasks.

"All of you come in," Peters ordered.

They trooped into the drawing room where Kathleen lay. She sat up wide-eyed at the entrance of Smedley and his gruesome burden. Turner's body was laid upon a couch and the butler with steady hand drew a cover over the distorted face. He said then, "You'll have to excuse me, Mr.

Peters, but I—my nerves. I—” Peters caught and supported him, or he would have crashed to the floor.

“Bring me some cold water. He’s sick, all right.”

Smedley sputtered over the water and smiled apologetically at Peters. “Very sorry, sir. The sudden shock—”

“That’s all right. It takes some people that way.” The district attorney’s voice was suddenly considerate. “I’m obliged to you, Smedley. Now I’ve some telephoning to do. I’m going to ask you to take charge of these people here. Just keep track of them for me. I don’t want anybody to leave this room.”

Sarah Manley’s voice came, sharp and shrill. “And why is he in charge, Lou Peters? Why isn’t he as much under suspicion as any of us? More than some of us, for *this* murder at least?”

There was significance in her words. Peters asked with impatient courtesy what she meant.

“I mean that whoever did this murder was strong. He had strong hands. And I ask you to look at the hands of this man who carried the dead body of a full grown man as though it were a baby.”

The district attorney turned away. “Why should it be he?” he snapped. “He’s simply a servant here.”

“A man can be a servant and a murderer, too, I think,” Sarah insisted. “You talk as if servants were of another race. Smedley eats and washes his face like any other man. I presume he could also kill if he wanted to. And he might want to.”

Smedley gave a choked cry of indignation. The old woman went on.

“I said he *might* want to. Somebody might want him to—and want it badly enough to pay a fortune. Murderers have been hired before now, Lou Peters.”

Peters swung to her angrily. “All right,” he snapped. “You’re right. That’s possible. And now that you’ve proved that, you’ve put yourself back under suspicion along with the rest. Your own hands—as you so carefully point out—are not strong enough to kill a man as this man was killed. But your pocketbook is lined, and lined well. You’ll stay in this

room. The rest of you, also. In my eyes, until you’re proved innocent, you’re all guilty. All equally guilty.”

Neatly caught in her own trap, Sarah Manley subsided. But not for long. The police on their way, and Peters again facing the group of suspects, she interrupted with a force and majesty that quelled for the moment the somewhat shaken district attorney.

“I demand the presence of my lawyer,” she said. “I know my rights, and I will have them. And I advise the rest of you to do so, too.”

“Don’t let this man intimidate you. He’s bungled this case from start to finish. He hasn’t found out who killed Hollister, and he won’t find out who killed poor Turner. If it hadn’t been for Lou Peters, and his determination to get hold of those papers and ruin every innocent person here, Turner might be alive. He sent us out after the poor man, didn’t he? Sent”—her eyes raked the group, including even the shrinking servants—“a murderer out into the darkness. Now he’s got a second killing to solve. I wish him joy with it. I am going to my room now, unless you place me under arrest.”

She started sweeping across the room, but Peters caught her roughly and whirled her back.

“Oh, no, you don’t! No matter who you are or what your standing, you’ll not leave this room until you’ve been searched. There’s a policewoman coming to do just that.”

“One of you has those papers. One of you committed murder to get them. If you’ve found a chance to dispose of them already, you’re smarter than I think. I think they’re on one of you this minute. And I think, before you leave this room, I’ve got the one I’m looking for.”

THE others had been watching this dispute, tense with interest. Kathleen, white and shaken, and with a purple bruise deepening on her temple, came forward.

“You’re wrong, Mr. Peters,” she said. “There’s no need to search these people. Because none of them has the papers.”

"What do you mean?" Peters' eyes were bright and his hands reached toward her, as though he would shake the truth out of her.

Andy half started to his feet. He, too, watched Kathleen with burning eyes.

She spoke for all of them to hear.

"I did know where Mr. Hollister kept important private papers. I have no doubt they are the very papers you are all so interested in—"

"I knew it!" Clyde groaned. "I told you all. But you all knew so damned much—"

"Then you lied to me?" Peters said. "You concealed evidence in this case? Interfered with the law?"

"Yes. I concealed what I knew. I knew where the papers were kept. Perhaps I interfered with the law, as you say. But I kept my promise to Jason Hollister. I'm glad I did. Glad!"

Her eyes swept the staring faces.

"Those papers, Mr. Hollister's secrets, things trusted to him by his clients—I want you all to know about that. Several years ago Mr. Hollister showed me where he kept them. He made me promise, if ever anything happened to him, that I would destroy them, unopened, unread. He said they were a lot of dynamite and must not be left about to hurt innocent people. *That's* what Jason Hollister said to me."

Kathleen's voice broke. "I've heard him called crooked—and worse. I've heard the things you said after he was dead and couldn't defend himself. But I can tell you that he was an honest man. He was honest when he asked me to guard those secrets. And I was honest when I carried out my promise."

Out of the moment's silence after her vehement challenge, Peters spoke more softly.

"Get to details, please. You got those papers tonight, from wherever they were hid?"

"I went to where the papers are hid. When I went out of this house, I carried that leather case. I did that deliberately, to mislead any person who might be watching me. Everybody here, it seems,

has been expecting me to turn up those papers. If anybody saw me, I wanted him to believe the papers were with me."

Sarah Manley laughed suddenly. "I always said the girl's no fool!"

Andy was staring. "They weren't in the case, Kathleen? You let me make all that fuss, and they weren't even in your possession?"

"The brief case was empty, Andy. Whoever it was put out the lights and snatched it did not get the papers. They never were in that case. I left them where Jason Hollister hid them."

Peters' eyes were glowing. He said in silky accents, "You're a pretty clever girl, Kathleen Reilly. And you have been very lucky—you can take my word for that. Now I think you and I had better have a little talk in private. Will you come into the next room, please?"

Andy sprang forward, protectingly. "Don't go. Peters, if she goes, I go. I'm acting as her attorney."

"And I'm acting as the district attorney, the state's representative. I'm telling you to keep still and sit down."

The two men glowered at each other. Kathleen put her hand on Andy's arm.

"It's all right, Andy. I'm anxious to talk to Mr. Peters alone. Don't be worried for me, dear."

Andy fell back.

PETERS was holding a door open for Kathleen and she went through it, young, slim, and quite serene. Peters' thin, black-clad figure followed, eclipsing her like a threat of vengeance.

The door had closed again. They were alone.

Lou Peters began, "Now look here, Kathleen—"

But Kathleen let him go no farther. "No, *you* listen." Her eyes were bright with purpose. She had a plan, and she meant Peters to approve it.

"I admit I know where those things are," she began rapidly. "I know all about the penalty for doing what I have done. You can send me to prison for contempt of court, for complicity in covering up a murder. You can do all the things you

threaten. But there's one thing you are overlooking—one point that's of vital importance to you. If you treat me right, I can help you solve your murder case."

Peters' eyes narrowed. "What do you mean?"

"I mean I can work with you, not against you. I mean I can help you—help you find out who killed Jason Hollister—just as sure as the sun will rise tomorrow. But you've got to play it my way. If you don't—if you stick to this idea of shoving me into jail and trying to scare and bully me—I'll shut up like a clam, and I'll stay shut. You can bellow from now till Kingdom Come and you won't get one word of help from me."

"You know where those papers are?"

"I do."

"What are you going to do with them?"

"I'm going to destroy them, exactly as I promised Jason Hollister. I'm glad to do it, because there are more secrets in that packet than the possible explanation of who killed him. There are secrets involving innocent persons, secrets that threaten decent people, just as he said."

"I see you've read—"

"I have *not*!" The denial came with vigor. "I have not read them, and I never will. Except that among them might be something that would help prove the guilt of Hollister's murderer, I would have burned all of them tonight. That's the only reason I am not burning them."

"Find your suspect, show me your proof and his name, and I promise I will go through those papers, read absolutely as little as necessary, and if I find that man's name involved in any way, I'll give you every paper concerning him. But I will not give you one thing more."

In the pause that followed, the district attorney bit his lip and frowned. He said finally, "Kathleen, you said you were on the side of the law, that you could help me land my man. Let's hear your plan."

SHE began with a sense of growing relief. At least Peters had to listen to her, now. Perhaps she might count on some help from him.

"Those people know that I have the secret of Hollister's papers. All you've got to do is let them think I refuse to tell it to you. Then, if there is one among them who did that murder—as you keep insisting—and if whatever would give him away is among those papers, that person will try to get them away from me."

"Keep watch over me, keep quiet until the guilty person makes his moves. He'll try—he's bound to try to get his secret back. Let him try to make a bargain with me, threaten me, do whatever he's going to do to get the papers. Guard me, but keep out of sight. I'll bring him into your trap. I'll do anything you say—take any risk!"

Again that frowning suspicion. Then Peters asked, "Just why the devil should you?"

Kathleen's answer was a faint smile. "You're so clever, and yet you ask that? Because I love Andy McClelland, that's why—and because Andy's name has been dragged into this, and will be mixed up in this until we find the really guilty person. The sooner we clear Andy, the happier I shall be."

"You're risking all that for Andy?"

"Of course I am."

Peters stared at her, then he turned away and paced the floor in fierce indecision. Finally he came, took her hands in his.

"I'm going to take a chance on you. You've got to give me your word on one thing, though—your sacred promise. You will promise to give me the evidence I need, no matter whose name is involved. No matter *who* is hurt. No matter if that person is Andy McClelland. Do you promise that?"

Kathleen's nod was eager. "I promise you, on my word of honor."

"Done!" Peters cried, and gave her his hand. "And I want you to realize, right now, that anybody who carries around the secret you know is risking his life. Among those people in that next room is Jason Hollister's murderer. Yes, and Paul Turner's murderer. Somebody who has killed and killed again! The minute that

person knows that Kathleen Reilly is the one person alive who can send him to the electric chair, you can bet your life that person's one ambition will be to become Kathleen Reilly's murderer."

CHAPTER TWELVE

A RENDEZVOUS WITH MURDER

THEY stared when Kathleen and Peters came back. Sarah, Clyde, Andy, Smedley, the servants—all of them stared, and to Kathleen their eyes seemed to burn with curiosity and menace.

"Well, Lou Peters, where's your murderer? You've been saying he's one of us. Which one?"

Peters glared at old Sarah and bit his lip. "The State is making progress, Mrs. Manley. You people are free to spend the night here or to go home, just as you please. I will notify you if you are needed again."

The gasp of surprise was general. Clyde's voice made itself heard over the others.

"Well, what's the idea? For one, I've been accused of this murder once. If you have decided I'm not guilty, I've a right to know what's going on."

"I have nothing more to say to any of you at present," Peters said coldly, "with the exception of Miss Reilly." He turned to her, angry and menacing. "You may consider yourself arrested on suspicion, and you'll stay right here in this house where I can keep an eye on you. I will give you until tomorrow noon to change your mind and tell me where those papers are."

"Then she didn't tell!" Sarah cried.

"She *will* tell," Peters snapped.

"Ah, but she hasn't! Humph!"

The change that came over every one of them was so obvious there was no mistaking it. Again the tension had lifted. Again each mind was leaping back to its personal problem. Kathleen saw it, and saw how right she had been. Whoever needed those papers most to save himself would dare most to get them. And that person would be a murderer, ready to kill

again if he found it necessary. The thought froze the blood in her veins.

Peters made a gesture of dismissal. "We'll be busy here with the usual routine. You people go to bed or go home. Do whatever you like, only keep out of my way. As for you, Kathleen, go to your room and stay there till I send for you."

Kathleen gave him a last look of defiance. "I am not going to tell," she said faintly. "Do what you like—I won't tell!"

She walked out of the room white and trembling, and every eye watched her go. She saw them watching her, each one thinking, thinking of the secret she held against them. And one of them, she knew, was planning to send her out into the darkness where already two men had been flung in murderous haste.

She went to her room unattended. The door would be unguarded, Peters had told her. "If anybody wants to bargain with you, I've got to clear the way for him," Peters had said. "I'll have watch kept from a distance. I'll do my best to guard your life. But I can't guard your door."

The very quiet and orderly familiarity of that room in Hollister's house—a room she had occupied so often—seemed a menace to her now. She went into it with a sudden rush of terror and fought hard to suppress her impulse to barricade the door against murder. She conquered the impulse, but her terror persisted, a terror that increased with the very lack of menace, the familiar orderliness of the house.

She made herself prepare for sleep, though she had no expectation of rest. But she could not bring herself to lie down. Even the thought of surrender to the helplessness of sleep in this murder-haunted house set her shuddering. Instead, she slipped on a warm robe and sat upright in a chair, trying in vain to fix her mind upon a book.

THE house had grown quiet. The hour was past one o'clock when a faint tapping at her door brought her from the chair with a bound. Half fainting, she made herself go to the door and

open it, and so sudden was the reaction of finding Andy facing her, that she tottered weakly into his arms.

Andy caught her and drew her inside and closed the door. He put her back in her chair and drew a chair near for himself. He spoke in a whisper.

"Kathleen! My darling, brave Kathleen! I had to come to tell you things are going to turn out all right. I can promise you that now, darling. I am sure of it."

He said it so positively that she gained heart and asked eagerly for an explanation. Keeping his voice low, Andy went on.

"Lou Peters isn't the only person who's been at work on this case, Kathleen. I've had some theories of my own, and I have been at work on them since Jason was killed."

He saw the eager questions in her face and shook his head.

"I can't give you details now. If what I know is true, it's pretty dangerous. Too dangerous even to whisper to you. And I've got to have positive proof, proof of several things that I haven't got as yet. But I'm sure, Kathleen. I'm *certain*, now!"

He caught her cold hands, pressed them between his own. "You're wonderful, Kathleen. You've got courage, defying Lou Peters. I came here to tell you that this case is going to be over soon. If you can hold out only a few hours more, my dear—if you can keep up this defiance until evening tomorrow!"

"I am not to tell about the papers, you mean?"

"That's it. Bluff it out, Kathleen. Everything depends now on your bluffing it out."

He had not guessed. He had no doubts. Like the others, Andy assumed that she had defied Peters and won again.

Kathleen's lips parted to tell him the truth. She remembered in time that she had given a promise; she could not tell. And what did it matter, a few hours delay, since Andy asked her to do exactly what she had promised Peters to do?

She whispered to him, "I will, Andy, darling. Don't worry, I'll bluff it out."

"I'll work just as fast as I can, darling.

I'll save you every minute of worry possible—"

"Of course you will!"

"And I can tell you this, dear. If you just stick to the course you have chosen, you will not be in danger."

He rose hastily. "This isn't any place for me to be at this hour, but I had to tell you, Kathleen. Keep up your courage. It's going to be all right. And—good night, my dearest."

He held her close, his lips on hers. Then he turned quickly to the door. Kathleen let him go. Once the door had closed, she sprang toward it, impelled again to tell Andy all the truth. He had said, "If you stick to the course you have chosen, you will not be in danger." But he did not know the course she had chosen!

At the door she struggled between the impulse to call Andy back, and the promise she had given Peters. No, she would keep her bargain with Peters. Simply she must not build imaginary terrors upon real ones. Andy's words might mean anything. This was the time to keep her head and remain steadfast to the course her own conscience had dictated.

All night long, terror hung over her, and she woke from a brief troubled sleep and saw the unnatural gray of a stormy, close daylight. Her heart leaped at sight of something unfamiliar in the room, a plain white envelop that had been thrust under her door. With trembling hands she opened it and read:

You have started your own voyage. It has two possible conclusions, death—or a fortune. The fortune is yours if you deliver Hollister's papers to me. Meet me this afternoon at the place marked on the map. Come alone if you expect to return, and don't try tricks. I shall watch every step you take. Bring the papers or there will be no further chance for you to go on living.

The letter was unsigned. On the sheet was a rude map showing the Greenacres property, and, beyond, a desolate, uninhabited swamp. At a spot marked by a low hillock was a cross which plainly indicated the place for her rendezvous with murder.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE EYES OF A KILLER

KATHLEEN dressed with hands that were cold and wet and trembling in spite of all her resolution. The gloom of the day seemed to add menace to the unseen but strongly felt menace of the house and its mysteries of death.

She asked for Peters and found him taking a hasty cup of coffee. They were alone in the dining room and she showed him the note. He glanced at it and his keen, thin face quickened into intense excitement.

"Now what?" she said.

"Now with luck—and slickness—and still more luck, I get my man."

"Then we'll go to meet him?"

"*We!*" He stared at her. "Certainly not," he said. "I'll go, and we'll hope to heaven he thinks it's you who's there. But you won't be there."

"But I must!" Kathleen cried. "If I don't go, he'll find out—somehow. Oh, Mr. Peters, we can't fool that man, he's too smart. He's been able to do anything he wanted to in spite of all our precautions. I was watched, yet this letter got under my door."

"True. But all the more reason for your keeping out of it."

"But I can't! I won't!" she cried.

He looked at her undecidedly, then shook his head. "I'm sorry," he said. "If you were a man, I'd say yes. But it wouldn't do, Kathleen. You've been wonderful, you've taken your risks, and so far you're safe. The State owes a debt. It owes you more than just another chance to be hurt."

She caught him by the shoulders. "Yes," she cried. "Mr. Peters, the State does owe me something. I have risked danger—and you mustn't ruin everything for me now. This means so much! Mr. Peters, I'd die to prove Andy innocent. I would, truly! And this is the way to prove it. I know it's irregular, but doesn't the State sometimes do things that aren't quite regular, when it's important? Necessary?"

He smiled grimly. "The State has been

known to do just that," he said. "But a girl—"

She shook him angrily, forgetting for the moment who he was. "You're not fair!" she cried. "I'm not a coward. I've a right to save the man I love. You let me run a risk last night, and you've got to let me run this one, too. If the State owes me anything, it's this chance to save Andy."

He turned away, but Kathleen saw that he was weakening. She followed him, her voice low and pleading.

"I'm not afraid," she said again. "You'll be there, Mr. Peters. You can take care of me—I know that. We've got what we've been waiting for since the very beginning of this terrible thing. Let's win it together. Oh, please!"

He swung back to her suddenly. "All right," he said. "Go to this place and take the papers with you. I'll go along, and I'll keep near you all the time. You may not see me, but I'll be there. And the risk is hardly, after all, as black as I've been painting it. It's just a question of keeping a stiff upper lip and bluffing it through. And I guess you can do that."

"You can trust me," she said.

They agreed upon an hour for her start.

"Now I'll be off," he said. "I'm keeping in the background from now on—but I'll be on hand when I'm needed." He forced a smile. "Good luck, and promise me one thing—that you'll do what I say. No starting something on your own hook out there in the woods. Take the papers, meet the man, let him talk—and agree to anything he says. I'll be listening and watching. But don't go beyond these orders. There can be only one captain to a ship, you know."

She gave him a wordless nod of acknowledgment.

PETERS drove away in his car a few minutes later. There were still several of the state troopers on watch in the grounds, but their duties consisted mostly of discouraging newspaper photographers and curious visitors. Smedley told her all the guests had left except Andy, and early in the day, soon after her farewell to

Peters, Andy encountered her, coated and ready for travel.

"Everything all right, darling?" he whispered.

"Everything's all right." She smiled, but her hand did not leave his solid arm. The touch of him was so reassuring—her last link to warm reality on this nightmare day!

Andy must have had some doubt, for he looked more sharply into her face. "Kathleen, you're sure you can get away with this bluff a few hours longer?"

"Yes, Andy, of course! I'm not worried a bit!"

"Give me just a few hours more, Kathleen. One or two points to verify, that's all. If I've guessed right, this case is going to blow up with a loud bang. And it won't be either Andy McClelland or Kathleen Reilly that will be under suspicion any longer! There won't be any more suspicions; we'll *know*!"

Andy looked suddenly grim. "Man hunting isn't my line, but there is one person among us—I won't say if it's man or woman—that I can expose with real pleasure. If what I think proves true, I'll soon cinch my case."

He kissed her and hurried off. Once more Kathleen longed to call him back, to beg him to take her wherever he went, never to let her stray from the warm security of his nearness. But if Andy knew what she planned, he would forbid it—even if he guessed half of it! She had given her word to go through, and there must be no interference, not even from Andy. She stood at the front door of Greenacres and made herself smile after him and wave her hand as his roadster sped down the drive.

A rain had begun to fall when Kathleen left Greenacres soon after luncheon. She went through the grounds unmolested and without seeing anybody. Except for the servants, the house had emptied; even the state troopers on duty in the grounds had disappeared.

At the boundary of Hollister's property she found the old wagon track that led into the swamp. Second growth timber had almost concealed the road and windfalls

blocked it here and there. Kathleen shivered, gritted her teeth, and went on into the screen of timber.

For a moment, in the dusky avenue before her, a man appeared and silently waved his hand. It was Lou Peters. He vanished almost as soon as she saw him, but she knew that he would be near, traveling a course parallel to her own. She took heart to go on.

The woods were dusky and there was no sound except the faint drip of water from branches. On either side of the old road, stagnant water covered the ground. The forest grew out of it. Kathleen went rapidly, her small jaw set in her determination to carry out the plan.

The map drawn upon the note was accurate and easy to follow. She recognized the hillock marked with the cross. In a bit of higher ground stood a small shed, evidently used at some time for storing tools. She was glad to see the door open, for the rain fell more steadily now and she needed shelter.

It was dry in the shed, but darker. She dared not sit down. Wherever she turned, she felt that just at her back somebody, somebody menacing, with a killer's glowing eyes, watched and waited to attack.

The gray light of day was changing. By slight degrees it dimmed and faded. Her watch told her she had waited nearly two hours. Night would come early, because of the rolling clouds.

While she debated returning to Greenacres a slight rustle of underbrush brought her hand to her lips to stifle a scream. A low voice said, "It's I, Kathleen. Don't be frightened."

PETERS came out of the tangle. He looked wan and discouraged. "I guess it's no use. Something scared our man off."

"I'm afraid you're right, Mr. Peters." Kathleen sighed, discouraged. With all her heart, with her life at stake, she had tried to keep faith, and nothing had come of it.

Peters gave her a ghastly smile. "Try to take it with your chin up. Look here, though we're not to go back with our

criminal in a bag, I still think the State owes you some reward. There's nothing to do now but fight this out in the regular way. Give me the papers, Kathleen. I'll have to have them now. But before we leave this place, I'll look them over and hand you back anything that concerns Andy McClelland."

She flushed with gratitude. "Oh, that's kind! I would, I'd do that, only I—well, I didn't bring the papers with me."

"You didn't bring them! After I ordered you to bring them?"

"I didn't dare, Mr. Peters. I—I was afraid you might force me to give them up. I didn't know you would be so fair and generous."

Peters' eyes blazed with rage and frustration, and he caught her arm.

"You fooled me! You lied, and tricked me! You let me think—" He broke off. "Well, come back to the house and we'll get them."

Kathleen backed from him uneasily. "But nothing's altered, Mr. Peters. We didn't find who was guilty. Why should I—" As she looked at him, cold doubts crept like a night mist about her heart. "I'll promise to do this," she said breathlessly. "I'll look through the papers myself. And then—" She could not go on, facing that white, rage-twisted face.

"Why—why, you look so!" She stared with glazing eyes. Always since that moment when Hollister's body had been found, she had been searching the eyes of those about her, seeking to find just this cold light, this cold, ruthless light of killing rage.

She cried, "I'll tell you! Oh, I will tell you! I'll take you where they are. I'll do anything. Only don't look at me that way! Don't!" Her voice trailed into half senseless whispering. It said dimly, "Don't kill me, too!"

Peters looked at her steadily. "What did you mean a minute ago when you said, 'Don't kill me, too?' His voice was silken and steady, his black eyes burned into hers.

Kathleen shrank. "Nothing," she whispered. "I didn't know what I was saying!"

"Didn't you?" He looked coldly at her. "When I brought you here, I meant to play the game out. If you had given me that evidence against the others—" For a flash he hesitated, and a sudden, clear light of truth broke in Kathleen's mind. Peters continued. "Yes, and the evidence against me. If you had done what I told you, I would have let you go. As it is, you know too much. Just a little too much. And so—" his voice lowered, his strong hands tensed suddenly—"and so you're not going back. You're through. . . ."

ANDREW MCCLELLAND had hurried to the city in answer to an exchange of secret telegrams. The Governor of the State was sending representatives to consider Andy's charges of unfitness, brought against Lou Peters.

It was a long and serious secret conference, and Andy went over his case point by point.

"I haven't enough to prove murder, but I claim I have enough to cast grave suspicion of two murders on this man. Enough to prove beyond a doubt that the conduct of this case needs investigation. Two men were killed, Jason Hollister by poison, Paul Turner by strangulation. Beyond a clumsy attempt to break down a bungling fool, Lou Peters has done nothing to find guilt in either case. Instead, he has devoted his entire efforts to find Jason Hollister's private papers. Why? Because Lou Peters is more afraid than any man alive of what Hollister's papers may reveal about him! That's my theory!"

His listeners were intent, grave.

"First of all, a murderer must have motive," Andy argued. "I can prove by witnesses that the afternoon he invited guests to Greenacres, Hollister visited Lou Peters, and their interview was so stormy that members of Peters' office staff overheard their threats. If Hollister's papers are ever found, I claim you will find among them proof of something in Peters' past that he would risk his life to keep secret. By the same reasoning, when Paul Turner stole that briefcase from Miss Reilly and me in that garage, he was stealing something Peters would risk murder

to keep secret, for Peters believed that briefcase contained Hollister's papers.

"A murderer must have opportunity," Andy went on. "Jason Hollister was killed by poison, a poison that takes from six to eight hours to work. A poison that could be administered in food or drink. Six hours before Jason's death, as nearly as it can be fixed, Lou Peters was in Hollister's house. He took a cocktail shaker from Hollister's hands, finished mixing the drinks himself, and distributed the glasses himself. I can prove that. And I can prove that Lou Peters was out of the house at Greenacres for twenty minutes before Turner's death, and had ample opportunity to spy on Turner and kill Turner when Turner stole the briefcase."

Very much in earnest Andy summed up his charge. "Gentlemen, I maintain that the State's investigation of the murders of Jason Hollister and Paul Turner is being carried on by a man who, in each case, had both motive and opportunity to do those killings. By a man who should be as much under suspicion as any person at Greenacres. I am asking his removal from the case, as totally unfit!"

His hearers debated it, and Andy waited, white and tense. Their decision was tempered by caution, for this was an unusual proceeding. They would summon Lou Peters and examine him.

"Then do it *now*," Andy pleaded. "At once! My God, he's out at Greenacres alone with Kathleen—Miss Reilly—the girl I'm going to marry. If we're going to act, let's act quickly!"

THE state's representatives were with him when Andy's roadster sped at breakneck speed for Greenacres, through the waning light of that dour afternoon. At the house came the shock he would never forget: Smedley's word that Kathleen had gone off toward the swamp, and that Lou Peters had been gone since morning.

Smedley himself had seen Kathleen turn into the old wagon road and along that road Andy went now. It was the one path into the desolate land. If she were

there alive, he must find her along that path.

The other two had followed him, but he outdistanced them. He broke into a run, his heart hammering more and more furiously as the desolate loneliness of the place struck at his rising panic.

He stopped at a sound, then crept forward, moving like a shadow, scarcely daring to breathe. The others, pounding after him, saw and were warned. Silently they crawled close beside him.

Then they heard Kathleen's cry:

"But everybody will know! They'll *know* you killed me! They'll hang you!"

"Nobody will know." That was Peters. The listeners crouched, more tense. "No, they won't know. You will know, but you won't count. You'll never live to tell it. And I'll have an alibi, don't worry. I arranged all that in advance. This ends now, Kathleen Reilly. And when your body is found—days, perhaps weeks later—I'll have one more mystery to investigate! So—"

Andy was nearly paralyzed with fear. Peters' back was between him and Kathleen. He knew that Peters held a gun in his hand, and that the weapon was turned on the girl. If he sent a bullet into that back, Peters might fire with his last dying twitch of muscles and end her life, too.

Kathleen moaned and put her hands to her eyes, drawing back from him. With her turning, Peters turned. In his hand, within Andy's sight, he held a pistol, his finger twitching at the trigger. Andy's shot came first, and the pistol flew from Peters' fingers.

Peters stared at his shattered hand, then at Andy rising from behind the screen of brush. He shouted with rage and sprang at him. But the others sprang, too, and bore him down. Andy turned from the broken, beaten figure to Kathleen.

She lay on the ground, a crumpled little heap. But when he took her into his arms, her eyes opened. Weakly her arm rose to clasp him closer. She lacked breath even to whisper her gratitude and love, but it shone from her eyes, for all the world to see.

(The End)



"You were always the cleanest thing in my life—and the finest."

"Not in your life, Cornie—beside it, perhaps . . . as close as you would let me be." (Page 62.)

RAINBOW AT DUSK

By

Mary Frances Doner

CHAPTER ONE

CORNIE'S WAY



HE long, dark, foreign-made car nosed its shining way down the rain-swept street in the soft hush of an April evening. It had an air, that car—a very superior and definite air of aloofness, as it slid to a stop at the curb before a cheap apartment house on a cluttered street off upper Broadway.

She watched it from the window of that stuffy third-floor suite, hands clenched nervously before her. For over an hour she had waited there, gaze fixed on the street below. Now she got to her feet unsteadily, peered down, cheeks suddenly flooded with color, breath short. She heard the car door slam, saw the tall, brisk figure hurry to the doorway. Then, half-running, with guarded steps, and an anxious glance toward the bedroom from which came sounds of her father's fitful, labored breathing, she fled down the long hall to wait for his ring.

His step outside, his finger briefly on the bell. After a moment she opened the door and he came in, breathless after climbing the two long flights of stairs. He was

holding his damp hat in his hands, smiling down at her vaguely, dinner jacket enhancing the splendor of his physique and accenting his charm of manner. He was not really handsome, yet he possessed a smile that was unforgettable. He had a healthy skin and a healthy eye, and he gave an impression of worldliness not too remotely acquired.

"Sorry I'm late, Althea," was his greeting. "How is he now? More comfortable?" He glanced thoughtfully down the hall toward the bedroom door.

"Yes. I gave him those tablets you left." Her voice had a strange, jerky rhythm when he was near. She ran aimless fingers across the shining dark hair that lay in soft waves above the high, white forehead, and resolved itself into a shock of curls at the nape of her neck. Her eyes were clean—warm, intelligent gray-brown eyes that emotion darkened sometimes, as it darkened them now. Evenness of feature and the healthy glow of her skin, and the proud angle of dark head against square little shoulders, set her apart from the shoddy neighbors with whom she brushed shoulders climbing and descending the stairs here in this cheap apartment house.

She stood looking up at him with such tense and helpless awareness that her secret was emblazoned in her eyes. Yet it was no longer a secret between them.

At first, she had suffered in shame at her capitulation to his appeal. Dark nights she had lain still and wretched in the room next to her father's, wondering about it, suffering over it, trying to analyze a thing so amazing and mysterious, so devastating. But now she no longer struggled against an emotion that owned her so completely. For it glorified the dreary sequence of her days. She fashioned from its nebulous proportions a dream life which nourished her starved soul. Out of the careless, pleasant, random words he uttered, she built a ladder to the stars. Pleasant random words now, where once they had been intense.

The dim hall light limned the warm ivory of her face, and deepened the shadows in the gray-brown eyes. With a careless gesture of familiar conquest, he drew her close in a casual arm.

"Kind of lonesome for you around here, Althea, isn't it?"

She said with simple honesty, "I've been waiting for you."

"I can't stay," he said uncomfortably. "I'm a busy man, Althea. You know that. Your father is growing weaker daily. I've got to keep an eye on him."

A paroxysm of pain crossed her face. Yet she smiled. "I know. He keeps trying to tell me something. It's heartbreaking. His eyes are desperate. Oh, I wish I knew what he wanted to say!"

"Tough," murmured young Doctor Dare. "He'll never speak again, Althea. It's that sort of—paralysis. Probably wanted to tell you something about your mother. Queer set-up, wasn't it? Never would let you mention your mother's people, would he? Fixed idea—"

"He hated them because they disowned her for marrying him, and made her unhappy—and because she died without ever seeing them again. Oh, I shouldn't be talking about it now, Cornie, I know. But tonight, somehow— He knew it broke her heart, that definite separation. It's haunting him, I suppose."

"Hm," mused Doctor Dare thoughtfully. "Funny they never tried to see you, either. Must have been pretty hard-boiled. Stern Yankees, I suppose." He turned and went in to the sick man, and she moved along to the front of the apartment.

SHE appraised the barren room, her thoughts flying to *his* new apartment on Fifth Avenue. She had been there a few times. It was rich and luxurious and beautifully appointed, vastly superior to the modest place he had previously occupied there on upper Broadway.

Oh, it was well known that Doctor Cornelius Dare had made a fine success of his profession! Self-made man, college bred! Through his own efforts, now at thirty a rising young physician, phenomenally affluent. Deeply as she loved him, Althea sometimes wondered how he had come to accumulate such a fortune, at a time when money was so scarce and people unable to pay their bills regularly.

In the old days, the first days of her father's lingering illness, she had gone frequently to Doctor Dare's Broadway office to consult with him about the rather terrifying and persistent malady that was sapping her father's strength. And in those days, Doctor Dare had been a gay, care-free fellow of twenty-five, eager for cases, deeply engrossed in his work, finding no patient too poor nor too difficult. In those days, he had struggled to get a foothold in the medical profession in New York.

And then over night, mysteriously, he had achieved fortune—but in doing so, something happened to Doctor Cornelius Dare. . . . Now he had a splendid office on Fifth Avenue in the Eighties, and yet he wasn't so busy as of old. He had worked up a big practise among the poorer classes, but now his dreams of achievement apparently did not include them. Now many would not seek him out, abashed at this grandeur and display; fearful, no doubt, of exorbitant fees—uncomfortable, turning to neighborhood men rather than travel to a new world to find one who had ceased to be their friend. . . .

Warm, tender memories flowed over her as she recalled the first days of their acquaintance—the ensuing days of glorious companionship. Helplessly, from the moment of that meeting, she had loved him, the dashing young Irish doctor with his lips curved to a whistle or curved to a kiss. Stormy, determined, fearless Cornelius Dare. That first day—she had wrenched her wrist falling from the bus as she alighted, and seeing his sign near the corner, had gone in. He was ushering out a little old lady in whose faded eyes one could read the stirring of an old dream at his swift, impulsive laughter. As he had ushered her in, she had looked into his eyes, and never so long as she lived would she have peace again. She had known it then—she knew it now.

He had dropped in occasionally, on professional calls to see old Jack Glynn, Althea's father—for old Jack Glynn had come from the same county in Ireland as old Cornie Dare, *his* father, who was dead. And then his visits grew more frequent—social visits now.

Cornelius Dare loved music, and Althea's natural talent provided many hours for pleasure for the three of them. And there had been hours with just the two of them; an inexpensive dinner somewhere, a movie, a jaunt up the Hudson or down to Coney Island in his modest little car, with Cornie always discussing with passionate intensity his dreams of success and fortune. And Althea would listen, and encourage and stimulate him—and love him. Restless, ambitious Cornie Dare, whose uncertain feet stumbled on toward that ultimate goal, dauntless.

That was *before*, of course! Before Cornie Dare had become rich and moved away, losing his passion for his beloved profession and his devoted followers. Before he had taken to the worship of the flesh-pots. . . .

HE came in now, with rather slow tread, to where she stood beyond the glow of the one lamp the room contained. He slipped an arm about her in a gesture of tenderness and pity.

"You know, don't you?" His voice was

quiet and thoughtful. "It's merely a matter of days now. Perhaps hours."

And since it had been years, she was schooled to meet the dark shadow which hung over her house. She nodded, glanced up, eyes heavy with tears.

"You should be glad, Althea," he told her. "Death will mean release for him. He has suffered a long time."

"I'm grateful for his release. I'm not crying for him. But sometimes life seems too much."

He dropped back the dark head impulsively, bent close to the warm ivory face.

"You've had some pretty rotten breaks, Althea. You've come through fine. Don't crack under it now. You know, you're a great girl." He kissed her then, for kisses came easily to those laughing lips. It was a word and a kiss with Cornelius Dare, as with his father in the old country it had been a word and a blow.

"Why do you kiss me, Cornie?" Her voice was low, shamed.

"Because you're sweet, Althea—and kissable."

"Not because you love me, then."

He laughed again. "What is love?" he asked lightly. "Do you know? Do I?"

"And yet," she had to remind him helplessly, "last year you said you loved me, and the year before—"

But the tone of his voice told her that she had not captured his entire attention. He was thinking of something else. Some girl, of course—that Stephanie Dubois with whom they linked his name.

"I've always loved you, Althea—after a fashion. You're pretty, you know. And there's something about your eyes—" He brushed the dark hair with his lips. It was a gesture, no doubt, that he had learned after nice practice. . . .

"Cornie, why do I love you so?" The words burst from her reluctant lips in a cry of despair. "Where is my pride? Under your feet, Cornie! Dust. Why do I love you so?"

"Because you're romantic and impressionable, and because you have a dash of old Ireland in you, I suppose," he decided idly. He kissed the tip of her nose.

"You'll meet someone, one of these days, and over night you'll forget that you ever knew Cornie Dare." With a skilled gesture he snatched out his watch to glance at the time, drew in his breath sharply. "Lord, it's late!"

How nicely he evaded the delicate moment which emotion had precipitated. There were other women, no doubt, that he paused beside, to kiss, to flatter, to love, perhaps. Stephanie Dubois. A year or two ago, he belonged up here. Now, things were different. A whirlwind of fortune had lifted him bodily up the ladder to his dreams—to mysterious fortune, to be sure—but with him, her love had gone.

A kind of dark despair settled on her. She turned away, her voice low.

"I should have loved you anyway, whether you told me or not. But you shouldn't have told me, Cornie, when you didn't mean it. You let me think you cared. And I went on dreaming—like a fool! Loving you—oh, go away and forget this scene, please! It isn't really happening. You only imagined it. Good-by!"

He took her in his arms again. "Poor darling! It's been tough, hasn't it? But you'll always suffer until you learn to live lightly—and love lightly. You're bound to get burned."

"Is that—what you've learned?" she asked.

"Yes." He moved back, with a gay shrug. "It's much less wearing, and women should be more careful, you know, even than men. They age more quickly." He lighted a cigarette now. "You're too intense, Althea. Feeling like that is good in your music, and you play well, for an amateur. I don't know how much of an asset it proves in your career as model to commercial photographers. I suppose it has its value in the turn of a wrist or the line of chin and throat—"

"I saw you going into the Metropolitan Opera House the other night with Stephanie Dubois. You made a very handsome couple, Cornie. I was standing in line, hoping to get a gallery seat."

"Did you? You know, her father is Stephen Dubois, the oil dictator."

"And worth millions," Althea added coolly.

He frowned, then impulsively caught her close and kissed her again.

"Those eyes of yours, Althea! Live coals!"

"Once you said they were the crystal in which you read the meaning of life."

"All flame, aren't you, Althea? All burning, restless flame, fastened on me, thinking I'm the answer. But I'm not. You want the truth? Well, then, here it is. I've been attracted by you—I guess I've loved you a little. Not a wild, passionate love, but a sort of warm, tender feeling for your youth and sweetness, and something about your eyes, and that steady, terrible earnestness in your voice. But I've been able to sleep after thinking about you. You're something nice along the road of life, Althea. You'll be that to many men—and you'll be *the* road to some man. Learn the secret of living lightly and loving lightly, Althea. That's the battle."

She said, with a smile, "It isn't you that I love, after all, I guess. It's an illusion, an ideal I had of you. You're right—as usual. I'm just a kind of romantic, impressionable creature. Go 'long now, Cornie, you'll be late. Use your own judgment about seeing father again. I won't call you unless there is a change."

He blew her a kiss as he tiptoed down the long, dark hall, then went out.

She watched from the window as he reached the street. The room still breathed the echo of those words—those incredibly *final* words. There was the sound of a motor, and the long dark car sped down the street.

Waves of hysterical laughter crowded her throat. She stood stiffly fighting tears, beginning that long battle back to freedom—freedom from loving him.

Across the band of light thrown from the one lamp, she met her mother's eyes in the little framed photograph hanging near the mantel. She stumbled across the intervening space, fingered the tarnished gold frame mutely, her head dropped now against the wall. "*You* were of that other world—I know, I *feel* it. And you gave

it all up—for love. Give me some of your strength tonight—and your courage and fortitude.”

The low moans that came now from her father's room roused her presently, and she went in to him.

Again, in his dear, tired face, she saw the futile effort to speak to her, to reveal something that preyed on his fevered mind. But words would not come, and she knelt beside him there, ministering to him, and he slept. So peacefully did he die that she was unaware of death until his hand grew cold in her clasp. . . .

CHAPTER TWO

TO BE FREE

IT was May. Weather that stole its magic straight from Elysian fields drifted down the canyons of Manhattan, paused outside the window on a soft, starlit evening where Althea sat at her piano, playing the songs her father had loved; singing them in low, uncertain tones, because it seemed to bring him nearer—because it seemed to alleviate the keen loneliness she had known since that day of bereavement, of double bereavement really, for on that day, too, she had lost Cornelius—except that one can't lose what one has never owned.

The sound of the doorbell broke raucously through the hushed music. And when Althea answered the summons, an elderly stranger bowed briefly in greeting—a man she had never seen before.

“Miss Althea Glynn?”

“Yes.”

“My name is Gideon Snow.” He presented identifying credentials. “May I speak with you quietly for a few moments?”

When she had admitted him and they were seated in the small living room, he said, “Miss Glynn, I have come to bring you a message from your grandmother, Mrs. Abasheba Nickerson, of Cape Cod, Massachusetts.”

Althea stiffened. She smiled coldly. “I'm not interested, thank you!”

But his quiet gaze was disarming, his mellow tolerance. “Your mother was a

spirited girl, with eyes like yours. Your grandmother is still spirited—and her eyes are remarkably young for a woman of seventy-five. You're a lot like—she was.”

Althea was consumed with curiosity, yet inhibited by pride.

“Please,” she said, “I don't care to discuss her with you. I would feel disloyal, after the way she treated my mother.”

Gideon Snow took out his flat leather bill fold, with the quiet deliberateness of a man who refuses to recognize obstacles. He was an old man, schooled to meet difficult situations, no doubt—and to meet them adequately.

“Your grandmother has gone to considerable expense to locate you, and—”

“Why,” bristled Althea, “this sudden interest—after twenty-four years? Twenty-five, really—for she utterly disowned my mother, as you know!”

He tapped the envelop thoughtfully on the arm of the chair. “There—ah—there seems to be some question about that. However, we can take that up later. Will you be good enough to read this note?” He extended a square of cream envelop in a fine old shriveled hand.

“No—no!” Althea shook her head stubbornly, yet her fingers ached to grasp it, to read, to look behind that wall of mystery.

“If you please?” So might a courtier have asked a queen.

Abruptly then, after a moment of indecision, she tore it open and read:

My dear child:

Before the summer is over, I shall have passed my seventy-fifth milestone. It would please me to see you and have you here on a visit, so that we may know each other.

It has come to my knowledge that you recently suffered the loss of your father. Permit me to offer my sincere sympathy.

Your grandmother,

ALTHEA NICKERSON.

The last two sentences completely disarmed Althea. She wept.

Mr. Gideon Snow showed magnificent tact. He seemed definitely engrossed in some papers he had carried along.

Presently, Althea said in a low voice, “What is she like—what are they all like, my mother's people? My father would not

“speak of them. His heart was bitter—and I never saw my mother, that I can remember. There is her picture.”

He nodded, shook his head sadly. “The Nickersons, my dear, are a fine old Cape Cod family. Captain Abasheba Nickerson, your great-grandfather, was a figure of considerable importance. He amassed a fortune in clipper-ship days. Started out as a sailor lad, and ended by owning his own fleet of ships. He built a fine old mansion down at Dover Bay, on the Cape, and the family still occupies it. Your grandfather was his only son.”

“My grandfather must have been hard and cruel, to shut his oldest daughter out of his life!”

“After she ran away, my dear, he was a broken man. His heart was bad, as it happened. He lived only a few years.”

“Then why didn’t he *send* for her?” she blazed. “She was his child. Was that any way to—”

He shook his head sadly. “He and your grandmother did send for her—and for your father, too. They wanted to make peace, after the first storm was over. The letter was returned, unopened.”

“I don’t believe it,” whispered Althea.

“Mrs. Nickerson still has that letter. When she heard of your mother’s death, it almost killed her. Your mother knew she was going to die, and she sent her a note of farewell. It was then that your grandmother realized that the letter she had sent her daughter had never reached her. She knew then that your father had returned it secretly—in bitterness.”

“I don’t believe it!” whispered Althea. And yet she remembered those tortured moments at the last—her father’s unbearable anguish at not being able to speak, to tell her something that preyed on his mind.

“What is my grandmother like?” she asked after a while. “Fearsome and stern and—”

“I have been Althea Nickerson’s friend for many years, my dear,” he said stiffly. “She is a noble woman. She is not inclined to speak lightly, nor to act without first weighing the question. And she is kind, in her way.”

Bitterness was slowly deflated. Althea sat staring dully across the room, mists rolling away, the picture clear at last.

“Well, will you go to her, my dear?”

The buzzer of the house telephone now echoed down the dim hall. With a murmured excuse, Althea went to answer it.

“That you, Althea?” a voice asked, *his* voice. Cornie’s.

“Yes.” Stiffly, yet tremulously.

“Well, how’s everything?”

“Why, about the same as usual, of course.”

“Which, I hope, means fine.” Brisk, frank tones.

“Yes.”

“Staying alone these days?”

“Uh-hm.”

“Making out all right?”

“Certainly.”

“Good. Listen, Althea, there was a check from you in the mail this morning. I’m tearing it up. You shouldn’t have received that bill. I spoke to my bookkeeper previously, but she neglected to make a note of it. You don’t owe me a thing.”

“I beg your pardon!” She bristled now. “You made the calls and I owed you the money. We’re square now.”

“Well,” he asked sharply, “would it be asking too much to let a fellow make a gesture to a gentleman who was once—his friend?”

Quick tears sprang to her eyes. Yet her voice did not betray them. “Is it possible that the celebrated Doctor Dare is letting himself become sentimental?”

“Listen, Althea!” He sounded uncomfortable, unhappy. “Don’t be like that. Maybe you need a tonic. You know, you’ve been on my mind all day, somehow. I tell you—stay in tomorrow evening and I’ll drop by with a prescription for you.”

“Sorry. Tomorrow night,” she said, “I shall be well on my way to points north.”

“What’s the big idea? Althea, listen! Maybe you don’t realize it, but you’ve been on my mind since—since your father’s—”

“How touching, Cornie!”

“Listen, Althea—what’s the matter?” he

asked blankly. "I give you a buzz just to show I'm interested in your welfare, and you—"

"Thanks, awfully, but you'll have to excuse me now. I have a guest, you see, and I've left him alone long enough now. He'll have to leave soon, then I must pack. Good-by!" Even as she hung up the receiver, she could still hear his puzzled and disturbed voice calling her name. She moved down the hall to the living room, trembling, excited.

Gideon Snow laid down a volume he had found on the table. Before he could speak, she said, "Well, Mr. Snow, I think I shall go to my grandmother after all. I'll leave just as soon as I can straighten things out. Perhaps even tomorrow. I pose, you know, for commercial photographers. They've been kind to me. They've wanted me to go away for a rest, ever since my father's death. But I felt that I couldn't afford it—before."

He breathed a relieved sigh, nodded. "Fine! You can reach me at the Brevoort when your plans are definite. I'll make reservations. Your grandmother hoped very much, I know, that I would bring you back."

She heard him vaguely, smiling murmuring words. Down the corridors of her heart still rang Cornelius Dare's voice. She wanted to banish him, she *must* banish him! She went to the radio, moved the dials. Music—that was what she needed. Gay, reckless music. Defiant music.

And with the melodic rhythm following her, she ran to her room and pulled down boxes and bags from the closet shelves, and surveyed her wardrobe. She was going to Dover Bay, to that old mansion which the first Abasheba Nickerson had built those many years ago; the mansion to which he had brought his bride, and from whose great doors had fled another Althea to the arms of her waiting Irish lover, gay young Jack Glynn.

The radio music kept streaming out to her, hauntingly, tauntingly. Well, there *had* been gay young Irish lovers who had put love above ambition! There *had* been paradise for one Althea, a long time ago,

if there was nothing but frustration for this one. She closed her eyes, for one shameless moment, and let herself picture the kind of special heaven that would mean Cornie and herself.

And then the doorbell rang, and she went to answer it. And he was standing there, grinning down at her defiantly, determinedly, while the radio crooned *Love Is the Sweetest Thing*.

WHAT'S the big idea?" he demanded, walking past her into the dim hall, tossing his hat on a chair, and catching her hand with the old familiar gesture.

She said, "I think I should be asking that question."

"See here, my dear." She was in his arms now, and he was regarding her tolerantly with that funny, amused look. Always amused—that was Cornie these days. Always smiling lightly, kissing lightly. Detached—casually amorous.

She drew away. "I'm through with that sort of thing, Cornie," she said, smoothing her hair. "For a long time I made a merry little hell for myself, loving you—that is, loving an ideal I had of you. It's over." She shrugged now, smiling at him frankly. "I'm not your dear. I never was. People eventually come to their senses, you know. I guess I have. And certainly your frank confession of a few weeks ago helped enormously."

She had annoyed him. He glared at her. "So you're going away!" he said belligerently. "Where?"

"For a rest—and change."

"Good idea. Maybe it will clear up your disposition. You've become a regular grouch."

"Oh!" she blazed. "I have! Then just why did you bother to come up here slumming tonight?"

"Your father was a friend of mine," he said savagely. "And there was a reckless note in your voice over the telephone that spelled danger. By the way, who was the guest you had here tonight?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?" Provocative, too-bright eyes.

His eyes narrowed. "Listen, Althea—

you don't mean that—that you're going away with some fellow?" His voice was anxious, worried.

"Shall I submit an itinerary?" she flung at him bitterly. This was even more satisfying than telling him the truth.

"You always were sensible—" He frowned, thrust his hands in his pockets, glared across at her.

She laughed defiantly, then recognized the throbbing melody on the radio, the sweet song, *The Touch of Your Hand*, and felt the swift lump in her throat.

With a savage gesture, he caught her to his heart. "No you don't, you little fool! You haven't been around. You don't know the world. There are fellows just waiting to trap a good-looking kid like you."

"Good-looking, but in the wrong class—isn't that it, Doctor Dare?"

He kissed her in anger and in helpless surrender. "Take it easy, Althea. You can't play a game like that. You weren't meant for it. You're clean—and decent."

The radio crooning seductively—sweet tunes, precious tunes. More of love in those words than he had spoken in over a year, more of real emotion. It had not been her intention to deceive him as to her plan. But it pleased her now to play along with his surprising apprehension for her.

"I'm going to live my life from now on," she said slowly. "Up to now, my heart has ruled my head, but those days are over. I think I've learned your secret at last—I think you're right. Live lightly, love lightly. It's my motto now, too."

"Why, you crazy—" he thundered impatiently, just as the radio clock struck eleven, and the brisk voice of the station announcer broke the spell of music.

"Go away. Leave me alone, Cornie Dare. We're nothing to each other." She tried so hard to be brave now, to convince him that he no longer counted.

And as he held her there, the definite tones of the station announcer echoed through the room. He was saying, "—and at nine-thirty tonight, the diamond establishment of Schwartz and Sons, in Times Square, was broken into. An alarm sound-

ed, and the quick action of the police saved what was probably planned to be a wholesale looting. Harry Leigh, a watchman, was seriously wounded and may die. The bandits got away, but evidence shows that one of them suffered pretty serious wounds. This is the third break within four days in that section. Police are of the opinion that this is more news from the Clepak gang, and—"

"I guess it's about time I was getting out of town anyway," laughed Althea hollowly. "My diamonds aren't safe here!"

But Cornelius wasn't looking at her now. He stood aside, fingering his forehead restlessly, with agitation. He snatched her to him then, searched her eyes, his own feverish and unhappy.

"There's the news—must be after eleven. I've got to go. Listen, Althea, don't be a fool. Sit tight. I'll be back tomorrow. Got to scram now. I just remembered a case I promised to look in on." He kissed her hurriedly, turned away—turned back. His face seemed curiously different.

She laughed, and the laughter was fretted with bitterness. "A rather desperate case, isn't it, Cornie? And she won't wait. But why should she? Who would dare keep an oil magnate's daughter waiting?"


He went striding down the dim hall. He called back, "See you tomorrow. Sit tight, now—and use your head." He went leaping down the stairs, two at a time.

She slammed the door savagely, desolately. "You've gone to her, Cornie—she's what you want. Not me. Luxury and beauty—and important people. Not love. But I'll show you, Cornie. You'll see! I belong in that world, too—really belong! And some day we'll meet, and maybe then—maybe then—"

But the agony of hunger for him dulled the promise of triumph. . . .

CHAPTER THREE

AND NOT TOO WELCOME

 HE shifting sands of the broad gleaming beach drank avidly the opaled crests of timid waves that broke gently on their breast. Tacked to the warm horizon were triangles of white,

where lazy craft drifted aimlessly toward the long, hazy stretch that was Monomoy Point, drifted across the glittering expanse of blue and gold sea. There to the left old Chatham lay dreaming in the June sun, and here the sweet languor of the early summer morning laid its spell on Dover Bay.

Up the long green velvet sweep, and topping a flower-crested hillock stood Silver Sands, the old Nickerson mansion, as it had stood these many years since the first Abasheba Nickerson had built it for his bride. Smothered by tall spires of hollyhock, hedged with bay berry, bounded by fox glove and canterbury bells and delphinium and a thousand other colorful flowers, it fascinated now, as it had that first moment, the wondering eyes of the youngest Althea.

She lay back on the sands, hands locked behind her head, her slim young body browned by the sun where the white wool bathing suit left off to point up its contrast. Her thick dark hair was tangled in a damp mat of curls, and drops of water glistened on the healthy, glowing skin.

"—I said, Althea," repeated her grandmother positively, "that I think it's all nonsense, this idea of yours about Hendrick Bloomer. He isn't conceited. He's a perfect gentleman."

"That's just the point," yawned Althea. "He's too perfect." She smiled impudently across the space between them, at the busy little old lady with her knitting needles clicking away rhythmically and making sort of spangles against the smart severity of the violet bouclé sports suit. A floppy white hat accentuated the crown of snowy hair that framed the firm-mouthed, parchment-cheeked face, and the deep gray eyes so alert, so searching, and so unequivocal.

"Well, then," demanded the aged Althea, "would you be so good as to tell me what, in your opinion, constitutes the ideal man?"

Althea rolled over on her stomach and kicked up her heels, chin dropped against arms folded on the sand. "I wouldn't dare, darling. You would have me thrown out on my nose—and my nose, they tell me, is rather my best feature—that is,

Hendrick Bloomer tells me, and surely he's seen the best noses, being a Bloomer, and all that."

"I choose to overlook these absurd lapses, Althea," the grandmother said coolly. "You haven't answered my question."

"Frankly," shrugged Althea, after a moment, "men just don't interest me especially."

"Humph!" Knit, purl, knit, purl—rather briskly, too. "I see. Well, then, if I must stalk you to your lair, there *was* a man, presumably. It would interest me to know the type."

"I wonder?" mused Althea vaguely. "You've had so little patience with—that type."

"Don't be ambiguous," the grandmother said sharply.

"Dear old bluff!" thought Althea, watching her lazily, adoring her, from the tip of her snow white head to the toe of her white linen shoe. A bluff, scaring them all, the way you cry "Boo!" at children in the dark.

In these few weeks there had been established a nebulous something, yet strong as bands of steel to weld them together. Two Altheas, finding each other in a world of snarls and tangles, finding the essence, the kernel, the true soul back of the masks, after all the bitter and cruel and hurting years.

It had not been easy, that transplanting from New York to Cape Cod; not easy to turn one's back on all that was left of love, on smouldering embers of the past, on the job—and the few good friends, and the spires of Manhattan, and the incredible magic of it. On Cornie.

"I do not intend to coax you, Althea, but I want to remind you that I'm accustomed to the courtesy of an answer."

The girl smiled absently, turned gray eyes on the woman beyond. "You know, if you'd said that to me a month ago, I'd have folded up and died of actual fright."

A shadow of a smile warmed the dark, rather stern eyes. "We were discussing a man, Althea."

"You were, Gran. I was referring to—an illusion. I can't give a concrete pic-

ture of that. Now that you've asked me to put it together, I can't. I can say, once I knew a man with a voice like a song and eyes like an angel's eyes, and a smile that made me feel the way I do when I see the sun coming up over the ocean, or when I stand in your garden in the moonlight. And that doesn't make sense, does it?" She was looking off at the sea, hands clenched sharply together under her chin.

The needles clicked on, after a moment's brief pause. "Well, I'll admit it would be rather hard to meet a person at a railroad station—with only that description as identification!" The voice was brisk, but the tone was warmer than usual.

Althea stirred up a laugh. It was rather a queer laugh, and bitter. "Don't worry. You won't encounter that difficulty."

"Quarrel?" asked the other briefly.

"I suppose you'd call it that." But Althea did not move. Her gaze seemed to see beyond the horizon.

Mrs. Abasheba Nickerson folded up her knitting then, took a moment to gaze out at the sea—focused on a catboat whose white sails veered toward Monomoy Point.

"I suppose that's Hendrick. He's passionately interested in sailing. I declare, sometimes I'm afraid to look out there on a windy day, when he and Bashby are racing. I think Hendrick admires Bashby's skill—for really, the boy is a genius with a boat. But I don't approve of it—I don't approve of it at all! There are lots of sports less dangerous—but Bashby is headstrong."

"Bashby is a darling," commented Althea warmly.

"Humph! He's spoiled, I tell you. Well, Hendrick Bloomer is coming to the party tonight. It's a special party, Althea, as you know, observing a special occasion. Dean and Jerry will never be twenty-one again. And they're the only twins ever in the family. I want you to be nice to Hendrick. He's really a charming fellow—and he's awfully fond of you. Will you oblige me, Althea?"

Althea scrambled to her feet as her grandmother rose, slipped the white rubber cape about her damp shoulders, and appropriated the knitting bag.

"What do you think?" she asked, smiling, as her arm crept through one of violet bouclé.

"You're rather a nice child—at times," conceded the other, reservedly.

"So are you." Althea shifted the knitting bag innocently. "When you're reasonable—and don't growl."

"I've never encountered such impudence!" protested the suddenly fuming old lady, smiling in spite of herself.

THEY went inside and came upon Lucy Nickerson Brewster, where she stood in her cool white muslin, looking out toward the sea. Forty-three summers had drawn an expression of restlessness and discontent on the pretty, if faded face.

She said irritably, "It's just like Phil, Mother—wiring me the last minute that he won't be down from Boston tonight. He has no interest in his children—or me. I'm tired of it!"

Geraldine Brewster came in now, hot and damp from tennis, flung herself across her grandmother's path and into a big basket chair on the porch that opened out to the sea.

"I'd rather you'd given Jerry and me a new Chris-Craft, instead of this old party," she complained to her grandmother. "We'd both rather. Tomorrow we won't have a thing but a hangover—and a lot of stale flowers."

"Dean!" said her grandmother sternly. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself."

Geraldine shrugged angrily, glared at her. "Oh, nuts!"

"The market has taken another drop," Lucy Brewster told her mother desolately. "And that hospital Phil was to have figured for was just a pipe dream. They've withdrawn the order. No funds, I guess. What are the architects going to do?" she demanded, her voice rising on the last words.

"They could spend their time teaching their wives a reasonable philosophy of life." Althea Nickerson made her way toward the stairs. The glow had left her eyes, her step was weary.

"Why don't you sit down on the porch, where it's cool?" Althea asked her. "I'll

take your things upstairs. You ought to rest."

"Because she probably wants to freshen up for lunch," Lucy said stiffly. "Come along, mother. I'll carry your bag."

"Dutiful daughter, all of a sudden!" giggled Geraldine boldly, and was rewarded with a glare as her mother swept past her. Then she, too, bounded toward the stairs, shouting, "Anyway, won't I get my check for one hundred and five dollars, as usual—a fiver for each year?"

Althea watched them thoughtfully, bewildered, then turned to step out to the porch for a moment and observe the never ending beauty of that scene—without the sharp clatter and dissonance of unpleasant words from unpleasant relatives.

A roadster came flying down the road, turned in at the drive, and stopped opposite the rose-covered pergola. Out of it jumped a young man in flannels.

It was Abasheba Nickerson III.

"Greetings, Anadyomene!" He came over and tossed her a cigarette. "Thought I'd make it back from the club before you checked in for lunch. Golly, but you're a water rat!" He grinned down at her from his ridiculous height of six-foot-six—smooth, genial, good-natured fellow whom everyone called Bashby Third. He lived in that love of a house down there at the cove, which old Althea had built for her son, Abasheba II, when he had married Laura Stearns, twenty-six years ago.

"I owe it all to a life guard at Coney Island," she confessed dramatically.

"Don't tell the dowager!" he whispered tragically. "She'll have palpitation."

"You're wrong. I did tell her. She betrayed a sneaking curiosity about life guards. I had to go into the matter too fully for comfort. She has a way of getting things out of me."

"Was the secret deadly?"

"He called on me once—*only* once, though—after he'd practically saved my life."

"Why but once?" Bashby demanded.

"Well Jantzen makes a better tailor for those boys than Hart, Shaffner and Marx."

Bashby laughed boisterously. "I like you, Althea. I wish you'd take Dean and Gloria in hand. Girls can be bearable—you've proven that. Dean is spoiled as the deuce—but that sister of mine is the limit. She's been secretly showing some breath on the mirror, however. I went into the house today, and heard someone playing the piano for the first time in months. 'Who,' I begged, 'are we having for lunch? Rachmaninoff?' And mother, doting as usual, answered, 'It's Glory. She's taking up her music again!' So I listened. She was slowly slaughtering that Gershwin thing you played for Bloomer last night—you know the one. It goes—" He whistled solemnly, beating time with the cigarette. "Play it, will you?" he begged.

She went at once to the piano, smiling back over her shoulder. She played easily, improvising clever variations to the lilting theme. He slid to the bench beside her.

"You know, Wynard fell for you with a bang." Bashby watched the keys under her nimble fingers.

She smiled, pleased. "You mean that nice hermit-artist?" She paused pensively. "He lives such a fascinating life, there in that cabin by the sea. You know, Bashby, driving along that road of brush and scrub pine, it seems incredible that beyond it there could be such a precious sanctuary—and nothing to point the way to it but that little blue sign at the side of the road."

"Hm!" laughed Bashby. "That's its charm—to Wynard. You know, I can make it by water with my eyes shut! And boy, do the tipe-rips boil around his beach!"

"It's so remote, that place out there." She glanced through the broad window down toward the sea, beyond where Monomoy Point stretched hazily in the noonday sun. "Like living in another world. I'll never forget that jaunt out there with you in the car. Just sea and sky, and the rough brush, and sand. He's utterly undisturbed, to paint those dream ships, or those studies of the sea. Oh, Bashby, Clive Wynard has magnificent talent! His paintings of the sea are as real as the sea itself!"

"Yeah, he's good, all right. Burns him up when the hunters crash in on his privacy."

"It's a different world, Bashby—and the people are different. *You* are. I hold my breath when you climb into your catboat and glide off through that strong tide. Hendrick doesn't seem to have any fear, either."

"He's getting a honey of a new boat!" sighed Bashby heartily. "I hope he lets me help him with it. It's going to be keen. Swell little motor in it—"

"Well, really!" said a voice.

HI, Mater!" Bashby rose, grinned at his mother, who had just come across the gardens from their own place farther down. Laura Stearns Nickerson was the typical New England mother of the old school; prim, proud, intolerant of any departure from the narrow code she followed, unless the culprit happened to be her own spoiled daughter, Gloria.

"Althea, my dear!" she spoke crisply now. "Do you realize that you are sitting on old mahogany in a damp bathing suit?"

Althea always felt the veiled antagonism this family cherished toward her. If the dowager Althea were about, they spoke with veneered sweetness—but steel shone through their words to the observant eye. And if the dowager Althea were not about, the steel was bared.

Out of a clear sky, Althea, the daughter of that erring sister, had been brought on the scene. Althea understood. When the market was bad and stocks had been sacrificed, when their personal fortunes had been practically swept away through bad investments, and enforcedly idle architects, such as Philip Brewster, and yacht builders, such as Abasheba II, were living carefully and yet without real concern—in the offing was that substantial fortune still controlled by the dowager Althea, which would one day be theirs and their childrens'.

But now—here was a contender for that security. Althea Glynn. Had she come unsolicited, that would have been one thing. But she was here because old Althea Nickerson had searched her out.

From her point of view as outsider, Althea saw the situation clearly. They hated her for what she represented—an obstacle to their desires; hated her helplessly, stoically. For there were the Brewster twins, Dean and Jerry—and their future to consider. And there were Gloria and Bashby III, with all the proud plans for them to be accomplished. And here was an intruder, with her dark, Irish eyes that saw through them, and her spirit, which obviously enchanted the dowager Althea—with her musical ability which enchanted her still more, since music was her outstanding passion.

Althea had little fear of them.

Aunt Laura Stearns Nickerson was small, dainty and dark, talked incessantly about her house, and her children, and her husband, and crocheting, and embroidery, and floor wax, and furniture polish, and morals, and subconsciously—Althea was sure—lived vicariously the hoyden life enjoyed by her daughter Gloria, which she had never had the courage nor initiative to undertake.

Althea said now, "I'm sorry, Aunt Laura. I'm afraid I'm not well enough acquainted with old mahogany to give it the proper respect."

"Hm," smiled Laura Nickerson, with veiled scorn.

Bashby slid an arm through Althea's. "Aw, nuts, mother—I dragged her over here. Do the darned mahogany good to have somebody sit on it who can *play*!"

"You're getting vulgar, Bashby. It's unpleasant."

"If you'll excuse me—" Althea fled upstairs. Just a little scene, just a few words—yet she felt herself choked with tears.

She had, at first, hoped to slip within this family circle. After the harrowing experience of meeting them, of passing inspection, of enduring the cold appraisal, she had hoped to melt into the atmosphere and *belong*. Other people had aunts and uncles and cousins. Other people knew the sweet intimacy of cozy hours beside the family hearth, where one exchanged comments and ideas and opinions. After the first shock of coming

here, of finding that, after all, her grandparents had not turned their backs definitely on her mother, she had hoped to find this a healing unguent for the wound of unrequited love.

But they, too, made her feel that she did not belong. They used every possible measure to shut her out of the little circle that meant *family*. All of them, except the dowager Althea, and that precious cousin, Bashby.

Standing now beside the broad windows curtained in mull—the windows that looked out over the ocean, where gulls wheeled and swooped—Althea realized more definitely than ever that she was an outsider. Somehow, fate had willed it so. Shut out. There was no use. Out of them all, only the dowager Althea and Bashby III were real and sincere and kind. . . .

SHE went down a little later, fresh and cool in white linen, and found them waiting for luncheon.

Gloria said, "Well, *here* she is at last! *Now* can we eat, Gram?" Her tone was eloquent with scorn.

Dean slid to her feet with an audible sigh. "You'd think it was somebody else's birthday, the way I have to sit around and look patient. *Honestly*—"

"I'm sorry," Althea said, with an unhappy smile. "I had no idea you were waiting for me."

"Well!" Her Aunt Lucy Brewster's eyes widened. "Is it possible that you've found us lacking in the little ceremonies of—"

"Sit there, Dean," the dowager put in sharply. "And you here, Gloria. Perhaps we can have a meal in peace—without you two quarreling."

Laura Nickerson drew out the chair next to her mother-in-law's, with an elaborate air of interest. "And I suppose Althea is to sit *here*."

"Yes." The word was clipped sharply. "I like to sit next to people who aren't forever talking about themselves!"

To such a start did Dean's birthday luncheon get off, with everybody silent above their bowls of clam chowder, with Althea unable to swallow a spoonful, look-

ing very uncomfortable and very near tears, and then meeting Bashby's eyes across the table, unable to resist his amusing grimaces.

After the meal, he lured her off to his car. "You've got to do an errand in Chatham or somewhere, haven't you? Say yes! Lord, the family weighs me down sometimes! Aunt Lucy's pompadour can give me the jitters."

The dowager Althea appeared on the path, hurrying along after them as fast as her age would permit. "Bashby—Bashby Third! Wait a minute, do you hear? I say—wait a minute!" She was pulling a small white-feathered toque down over her snowy hair. "Where are you going?"

Bashby groaned. "I'll tell you—if there isn't a catch in it."

"Will that threshing machine of yours hold three people, Bashby?"

"You'd be surprised!" he grinned.

"Help me in!" she said imperatively. "Think you're going off and leave me to the mercy of those harpies? Bashby, I'll give you ten dollars if you'll promise to steal that rat your Aunt Lucy wears in her hair—before the party tonight."

Bashby released a gleeful roar. "You heard her, Althea! Swear that you heard her."

"I'll make it twenty!" said the dowager, with a severe frown. "Twenty-five—if I'm pushed."

"Consider yourself pushed—and the rodent in your hands by dusk!" He stepped on the gas, and down the broad highway they went, under the music of the pines, beside the throb of the sea. . . .

Hyannis—with its summer Fifth Avenue of shops representing the fashionable New York dressmakers, jewelers, furriers, shoe merchants.

"Want to tag along?" the dowager asked Bashby, as they climbed out of the roadster.

"Tag along?" he howled. "Has it occurred to you, Madame, that you're the tagger-alonger?"

"Give me your arm, you insolent puppy! Althea and I have some shopping to do. We won't drop you, however, unless you become a nuisance."

He gave Althea a pert look across the dowager's ample bosom. "How to be popular at seventy-five—in one lesson!"

The smug old lady ignored him. She said to Althea, "What are you wearing at the twins' party tonight?"

Althea smiled. "That ravishing Chanel model of mine—"

"You mean that pink thing?"

"The pink—and only—thing," amended Althea blithely. Such utterly ridiculous happiness, walking along here beside this bosomy old person who held so steadfastly to your arm. Such utter, absurd happiness!

"You're not," decided the dowager briefly. "You shall never wear that limp rag again."

"Spoken like a lady—and a Nickerson," added Bashby, with a droll moué down at the white hair, and a wink for Althea.

"But, Gran, is this to be a nudist party?" Althea said innocently.

"That's low humor, my dear," the dowager told her briskly, failing to keep the usually grim mouth from turning up a bit at the corners. "Are you coming into Maison Joseph's with us, Bashby?"

"Am I? Do you think I'd pass up seeing that blonde who mannequined the dress you bought for Dean last week?"

"Behave yourself!" she snapped. "You haven't the intelligence of a baby!"

"See here, leave my I.Q. out of this!" he pretended to fume, as they passed through the smart doors of the leading dressmaking establishment represented at Hyannis during the summer season.

THERE were many gowns displayed—but there was a gown of yellow, so pale and fragile and lovely that it took Althea's breath away when they paused before her with it, ruffles cascading to a sheer, trailing length. There were other dresses—but *that* dress! Althea sat staring at it as if in a dream.

"Try that one on," the dowager said presently.

The vision in the mirror, that gazed back at Althea presently, had a charming white face and tumbled black hair and eyes as big as plums.

The attendant said, "It was made for you. It's divine."

Althea smiled. "Don't speak above a whisper. I know I'm asleep. It can't be true!"

"Step through this way, please," the girl beckoned.

Althea emerged into the open salon. She stood flushed and thrilled, smiling across at her grandmother.

"Don't tell me now—let me guess," Bashby tapped his brow thoughtfully. "I know—Zasu Pitts, without the monocle. Am I right?"

"Will you shut your absurd mouth?" demanded the dowager. "Althea, go and take that dress off. Girl, let me see—no, those snaps are not securely sewed on. Look it over and see that everything is taken care of, wrap it up, and charge to Mrs. Abasheba Nickerson, Silver Sands, Dover Bay."

But Althea stood looking at the reflection in the long mirror. Always she had dreamed of a gown like this—soft and rich, in lines that flowed unbroken, fashioned by the hands of an expert. If *he* could see her now—*this* Althea, on the threshold of the world he had adopted—what would he say? Would he tell her again that he had never loved her—that she was a flower along the road, and only that? Would he say that one must love lightly, live lightly—

"Will you *please* go and take that thing off?" the dowager asked again. "The girl is waiting."

Bashby was standing beside her now, eying it thoughtfully and not without admiration. He jerked a thumb toward the dowager, whispering sibilantly. "Sh—don't talk to her! Maybe she'll go away!"

Althea turned to her grandmother. Perhaps she imagined it, but the old lady's eyes seemed misty. Fragile gown and all, Althea fled to her, dropped her lips to the faded cheek. "You're a swell person!" she cried, then fled to the dressing room.

Bashby said to his grandmother, "Shows what a little Irish blood can do for a Nickerson. I'd like to have known Jack Glynn. You must have been an awful dope to call that shot out of bounds when he

pulled a young Lochinvar with Althea's mother. I'll bet he was a good egg—with a good-looking girl like her."

"She's the image of my Althea," the dowager said unsteadily.

"Say, look—who *was* Jack Glynn? A murderer, or something? Come on, give me the lowdown."

"He was band master at the hotel in Chatham. He was a poor, uneducated Irishman—"

"Don't you just wish you had it to do over again?" he asked bluntly, meeting her eyes.

"Don't be a nuisance, young man." Her voice tried to be stern. A tear dropped down her cheek. . . .

CHAPTER FOUR

AGAINST A GOLDEN MOON

THE moon was a blur of cut gold melon, low in the northwest sky. It shed a pale radiance across the whispering sheet of sea, across silver sands—through the broad window where mull curtains stirred, across the canopied four-poster bed across which Althea lay. Against the lavender scented sheets she smothered brief sobs.

It wasn't the aunts' strategic warfare, nor the cousins' open scorn, nor the dowager's gruff kindness, nor Bashby's precious understanding—nor Hendrick Bloomer's kiss at the party tonight. It was something less tangible that was responsible for those tears. It was hunger which nothing could relieve. It was thirst which nothing could quench. It was loneliness so immeasurable, so overwhelming, that it gutted her resistance like flame across tow, and left her shaken and weary.

In her hand she crushed a much-fingered note—read and re-read a thousand times.

Listen, Althea:

What's the idea? Where in Sam Hill are you? I climbed up those back-breaking stairs one night last week—the night I told you I was coming. No soap. Like a fool, I went back today. Strange faces at the door. No speaka da Engleesh. Miss Glynn? Who's she? Where *are* you? Not that I'm staying awake

nights over it—but the least I can do in memory of your father is to try and keep an eye on his irresponsible offspring.

Impatiently yours,

CORNELIUS DARE.

Well, there it was. Figures don't lie. Nor words down in black and white. How could anybody with an ounce of pride ever think of the brute again? Cornie, whose voice once had been sweeter music than the south wind; whose words of love had given her something she would never know again. Gone, the old Cornie. Gone, *love*.

The door opened quietly, closed. The sobs stopped abruptly.

"Are you awake, Althea?" It was the dowager's voice.

"Yes." But Althea did not stir. The dark head was buried in a wrinkled knot of tear-stained sheets.

"Overstimulated," decided the dowager. "So am I." She went to the window and looked out at the night. "That's the trouble with these late parties."

No answer.

"I was a fool to sit up so late, when those idiots refused to go home until such an hour! I need my rest, with that long trip ahead of me tomorrow. I should have used more sense."

"Trip?" came the muffled echo of a voice.

"Yes. New York. Business."

Althea sat up breathless, tear-stained cheeks disregarded. She swung her feet to the floor, poked about for her mules, slid her feet into them. "New York!"

Silence. Complete, significant silence.

Then, "Too bad Hendrick is taking you on that sailing trip to Provincetown tomorrow. But you can rest, I suppose, the next few days."

"I—I'm not going sailing," Althea said, dry-lipped.

"No?" The dowager yawned convincingly. "Well, then, you can come along with me. I'll enjoy it more with a female companion. That young lawyer there in New York that Gideon Snow sends shadowing me gets on my nerves. Anyone would think I didn't know my way about! You can't talk gloves and corsets

and stockings to a fresh young lawyer like that. He's bolder even than Bashby."

Althea was shivering now with excitement. "Cornie—Cornie!" her heart was crying. "Will I see you again?"

"Now get back to bed and go to sleep. Remember, people who travel with me get up early in the morning. I don't like this lally-gagging around until noon!" She went out briskly, closing the door with incredible gentleness after her, and Althea blew her a kiss from hot, trembling hands. . . .

THEIR suite at the Waldorf-Astoria was luxury beyond imagining. This was the New York that Althea had never known, the gay, glittery other side of the world. Cornie's side.

Just to be back under the same sky. Just to pass the big stone apartment house in a taxicab—the house where he lived and had his offices. Just to see the things he saw, the same hordes of people, the same sun, the same stars! Something happened now to Althea. Something brushed the gravity from dancing eyes, and put there instead the flame of hope, the brightness of blossoming dreams.

Summer—and Manhattan hotel roofs blooming with restaurants under gay striped awnings. Manhattan, fascinating even with its wilting heat, its frequent storms, its aliveness and excitement.

The dowager proved to be the most amazing person. No dull, preachy shows for her. Lively things, with dancing and music. And a ride through the park, and through again—with anything but the sort of comment one would expect of a person of the dowager's years. No art galleries. No concerts. And shopping until they both were—according to the dowager herself—blue in the face. Sports things for Althea, and evening things, and incredibly expensive accessories.

A walk up Broadway after the theater one night, a sudden shower, delay in securing a taxicab—and the next morning a different programme.

"I've been taking it a little too fast," decided the dowager in a croupy voice, with a flush on her cheek and a degree

of temperature. "Got my shoulders damp last night, Althea. I've been on a spree—the first spree I've had in years. I'm as bad as Bashby. I don't know when I've had enough. Now what I need is a day in bed. Go on out and have a good time by yourself. You must have friends here," she said, with an elaborately innocent smile, but her eyes covered Althea like a hawk. "Look 'em up. Do you good."

That was the day that Hendrick Bloomer arrived. Ostensibly on business. Yet he came straight from his hotel to Althea's, to call.

Now Hendrick was a reasonably nice sort of person—thirtyish and kindly, and never the man to live lightly, to love lightly. Straight as an arrow flew his mind, toward the thing he wanted to do or the thing he wanted to have. Serious. Without much humor. And militantly avoiding things and people and situations distasteful to him. His lips were not meant to be curved to a whistle, nor curved to a kiss; nor his eyes to hold captive in dark, warm depths the secret of earthly magic; nor his smile to woo the heart of a girl from the limbo of broken dreams. Granite he was, like the stern and rock-bound coast from which he came—but the glance of that dancing eye had been his undoing, the lilt of that husky voice, with heartbreak in it—heartbreak which he could never mend. But it lured him on.

"What are you doing here in this wicked town, Hendrick?" the dowager demanded.

"Business," he said briefly, uncomfortably.

"Be about it then," she told him seriously. "As a matter of fact, you're just in time. She's in need of a companion, for I'll be laid up for a day or two." Quizzically she observed Althea from a guarded eye.

Hendrick's color darkened. It was not his art to parry a thrust with the swift repartee of a Bashby—or a Cornie.

"Perhaps you have other plans," he said to Althea.

"Hendrick Bloomer, that's no way to make up to a girl!" chided the dowager.

And when they had left her behind, Althea and Hendrick made their way along the hot, sunny street, and Althea said, "She's awfully outspoken—but she means well."

"She's the finest woman I've ever known," he said seriously.

Althea laughed softly. "I like you for that, Hendrick. I like you a lot, for that."

He touched her arm with warm pressure. "Is that the only reason?"

"Not entirely."

"Mind if I'm curious about the other—or others?"

"No. You're comfortable, Hendrick—except when you feel that you have to kiss me, as you did the night of the party."

"You were beautiful."

"There were a hundred beautiful girls there. Did you make the rounds?" she asked lightly.

"Don't ride me like that, Althea!"

"I'm not riding you."

"You wouldn't if you understood. You see, I love you. I came over here to ask you to marry me," he blurted out.

She said, "Please—please don't, Hendrick. Don't say that to me."

"Why?"

"Because I don't believe in—love."

"Been burned, eh?" he asked grimly.

"It's lunch time, Hendrick."

"Of course. Any place in particular you'd like to go?"

She thought back, remembered the name of a fashionable restaurant that Cornie had once mentioned. Things and places and people he had mentioned lived irrevocably in her heart, assuming an importance nothing else could touch.

"Okay!" Hendrick was apparently pleased. He hailed a cab. . . .

"I have come here," Hendrick said, when the waiter departed with their order, "to be near you. I didn't know that I couldn't get along without you—until you'd gone. Life was aimless, uninteresting."

She hadn't known until now that she wasn't going back. She told him so. She said, "I belong here, you see. My roots are here. I missed it—too horribly."

He looked stunned at her words. He said, "You can't, Althea—not now. You've got to come back. It would break *her* heart. You've given her new life. You've given it to me."

But she shook her head and closed her eyes, and breathed deeply of the air of Manhattan—and in a blur she seemed to see Cornie's eyes smiling at her. Cornie. She wondered, "Will I be strong enough not to see him, not to go to him, or to reach out and pick up the telephone and call that number? Will I, I wonder?"

And Hendrick talked to her, in a voice gentler than she had ever dreamed possible, but she heard him vaguely. It wasn't Hendrick sitting there. You could pretend it was Cornie. You could pretend—

They went later to the Macbeth Galleries, because now and then Cornie had mentioned going there. It pleased Hendrick—for of course he did not know. He grew voluble on a certain school of artists, while she stood before the painting of a thatched cottage in Ireland, and wondered if a way, way back there had been other Cornie Dares going about carrying ecstasy in their arms for dark-eyed girls, and heaven in their smiles. . . .

THEY found the dowager flushed and breathing thickly on their return. She smiled up penitently at Althea. "I *would* ride on the top of that bus yesterday, in the wind. And walk up Broadway last night in the rain. Pity I can't have a little outing without getting sick. Disgusting! Althea, call the desk and have them send in a doctor. No use fooling around with a cold at my age."

Althea stiffened at her words. *Call a doctor!* Her brain seemed to whirl around at this unexpected circumstance that meant Cornie. She said, after a moment, in an admirably controlled voice, "Of course, you must have a doctor. I'll call our old doctor—the one who took care of father for years." It made Cornie sound very staid and mossy. She fled to the telephone, gave the number to the operator.

A girl's voice answered her—the nurse,

of course. Doctor Dare was expected any moment now. What was the name? Mrs. Nickerson, at the Waldorf? Room number? Yes, she would give him the message the moment he came in and she was sure they could expect him soon.

Words were said in that interlude until his arrival, but Althea was not aware of them. She hurried about, busying herself in an attempt to make the dowager more comfortable. Then she fled to her own room, with trembling fingers went through her gowns to find one suitable—and decided on a flowered chiffon, with dashes of red in it here and there, and tied around her ribs with scarlet velvet. It wasn't possible—it couldn't be true. He was coming here. Cornie. And the flag of her pride still waved in the breeze! She had not had to take her colors down.

There! He was at the door of the reception room now. Hendrick, at a word from the dowager, went to admit him. She could hear his voice, "Mrs. Nickerson?" It took her poise and dissipated it as mist before the sun. Trembling, unsteady—yet walking in the clouds—she went out to meet him, stood there, pale and shaken, yet lovely, and stretched out her hand.

"Good evening, Doctor Dare!"

"*Althea!*" An incredulous frown, a wide-eyed smile, swift hand catching limp hand. "They said a Mrs. Nickerson wanted to see me." He paused sharply. "Are you?"

"My grandmother is ill," she chose to say archly. "A bad cold. Oh, by the way—this is Mr. Bloomer."

Cornelius frowned curiously, took Hendrick's hand, looked again at Althea, a searching, strange look that caught Althea's heart on golden wings and bore it up to the stars. He feared—he *cared*. Shock was written on his features, in his eyes. She saw that he was changed. Thinner. Gaunt, really. Lines of care between his eyes. Nervous. Uneasy. Haunted.

She forgot the others here—she forgot everything in the world but that this sweet moment yielded her the sight of him, the sound of his voice.

"Are you well, Cornie?" she asked anxiously. "What has happened to you?"

He smiled, with a hint of the devil-may-care expression that he had worn in the other days. "Of course, I'm well." He took her two hands, glanced down at the ring finger, glanced back at her. Did she fancy that faint breath of relief?

"What's it all about, Althea? You've got a lot of explaining to do—walking out like that without a word, and refusing to answer my letter. I felt responsible—"

"*You* felt responsible!" Her laugh was edged. "Now you're being funny."

"Where did you go? What's it all about? Grandmother, did you say? Your mother's people, eh!"

Hendrick said, in a chilly tone, "I'll come back later. If your grandmother is sleeping, we'll use those tickets for the theater tonight." He bowed stiffly to Cornelius, took Althea's hand for a moment in his own, and went away.

"Who's the grim Puritan?" Cornie asked with an amused smile. "Don't tell me he's the big moment."

She might lie, but her eyes could not. Always, before him, they were helpless. In the old, careless way, he swept her to his heart.

"Miss me?" he said, after a while.

"Still hate yourself, don't you, Cornie?" But her lips trembled.

"What have they done to your hair?" He touched it curiously.

"I happen to be the patient," came the impatient voice from the next room.

They turned and went in.

THE dowager's eyes were fixed on the doorway as they entered. She gave Althea a shrewd glance, turned to Cornelius Dare, appraised him sharply.

Faltering introductions were achieved. "The last time I saw Althea," Cornie was saying with a smile, "she was about to run away with a man—and it turned out to be a grandmother."

"Well, be careful, or this time she'll run away with a grandmother, and it will turn out to be a man." You could take that for what it was worth, but there was

a definite significance back of those words.

Cornie's eyes met Althea's for one brief, speculative moment. Then he seated himself beside the bed, drew out a stethoscope, and laid his bag aside.

"Acute bronchitis," he diagnosed presently. "You'll have to stay in bed for several days."

"I'll need a nurse," she decided brusquely.

"No," protested Althea. "Unless you don't want me to take care of you."

"Of course I don't want you! I want someone who makes a business of it. Send one in directly, Doctor Dare. Run along now, and leave me alone. Talking makes me nervous—and you're a regular magpie, Althea. I'll have this prescription filled, and—there are some things I want to talk over with Hendrick. There's a man with some sense in his head."

"But Hendrick has tickets for the theater for us," Althea told her.

"Hendrick will spend the evening with me!" decided the dowager grimly. "That's final. I haven't had a chance to say a word to him since he arrived—with this gallivanting around. You go and amuse yourself for a change, young lady."

Althea stared at her, wide-eyed. What had come over the dowager?

"I've been known to pinch-hit on occasions," Cornie said, grinning. "I amuse some people very much. Perhaps I could amuse you—in a pinch—Althea."

"Don't keep her out late, young man!" growled the dowager immediately—almost too soon. "She never knows enough to come home. Run along now, lad, and get into your dinner jacket. It doesn't take Althea long to dress. Girls nowadays wear practically nothing, anyway."

Althea, speechless, returned Cornie's gay salute. "Will an hour give you time enough?" he asked.

"If the nurse is here by then," Althea said. She knew it wasn't true—it *couldn't* be. Fate just didn't go out of its way ever to achieve a tryst for her with Cornie.

He was gone now, and she moved about casually, trying to still her thunder-

ing heart, trying to seem aimless, idle, indifferent.

"It was the devilish charm of an Irish eye like his that was your mother's undoing," the dowager brooded. "Pluck your heart off your sleeve, child, and hide it away. Don't let it be a man's for the asking; not a man like that, leastways."

"I don't know what you mean," Althea faltered.

"Give me credit for having an eye in my head!" The voice was hoarse but firm. "He'll never make you happy. *Never!*"

"We're just—friends," Althea said.

"Hendrick, now—he'd walk beside you all the days of your life, and shield you and comfort you. You'd know security, and peace. You wouldn't be lying across your bed in the light of a waning moon, crying out your heart for him."

"Shall I get you some broth, Gran?"

"No—nor you wouldn't be wincing at the sound of music that spoke of love. You wouldn't be snatching at happiness like a hungry child near a sleeping vender's cart, to steal a bright apple or a golden pear—or grapes with dark red wine deep inside. . . ."

"I must dress, Granny—"

"Yes," whispered the dowager, on a faltering note. "God help you!"

ALTHEA chose the gown of sheer pale yellow that trailed after her dancing feet. She sat across from him on the roof of a smart hotel, while an orchestra breathed music to the stars, and the night hung low and sweet about them. Above the gray-brown eyes the dark hair drifted—above the eyes that tonight rivaled the stars.

"What has happened to you, Althea? You're you, and yet you're someone else that I never saw before—all glitter and laughter!"

"I've learned to live lightly—and love lightly," she shrugged. "You taught me how, Cornie. It's your secret."

People moved out to the dance floor. The night was made for love. The music, the stars.

"Dance?" he said.

She slipped into his arms. His hand found her hand. This was what lay on the other side of the world—his world. This was the thing called paradise. You moved through it, and lived, and did not die of utter ecstasy. You spoke and laughed.

They danced in enchanted silence, returned to their table. He said, with a queer smile, "I feel as if I've come upon something I'd laid away in a drawer a long time ago. A treasure that I'd forgotten."

"Or maybe a flower that you picked along the way one time," she dared remind him, raising a cocktail to her lips.

He frowned thoughtfully, reddened. "You never forget, do you, Althea?"

"Sometimes. But you say such memorable things, Cornie!"

His hand crept across the table. "You were always there—waiting. I knew it. I knew that you loved me." He seemed to be trying to explain something to her—to himself. Something baffling and disturbing, and terribly true.

"How could you have helped knowing?" she asked, with a glittering smile. "I should have let you guess—or ask—only you wouldn't have noticed—and maybe you wouldn't have asked. But it's water under the bridge now. Another day—Let's drink to *this* life, the life that knows no yesterday, and no tomorrow."

"What have they done to you?" he wondered, searching the bright misty eyes. "Is it a gay life there, Althea—full of the things you never had? Tell me about it."

She did, in her charming, colorful way—painting a picture of the new life, of the people, of Silver Sands, and the sea. And he watched her thoughtfully, as if she were a stranger he had never met before, a stranger from some far country where once he, too, had walked in another day.

"Remember," he said, with an impulsive smile, as if to lure her back to more remote memories they two had shared, "the day we went down to Coney Island, and you almost drowned?"

"And you ate six hot dogs—"

"How about you?" he blustered.

She laughed in glee. "And we went on that terrific scenic railway, and I practically died!"

"You made an awful racket," he mused, smiling. "I couldn't hear for a week."

"And the day I baked the Lady Baltimore cake for you—because you'd been given tea one day at some grand patient's house—and you raved and raved about it, and I wanted to surprise you."

"Sure—and pepper got mixed up with the figs in the filling."

She was almost hysterical now—nervous, excited, happy—oh, so ridiculously happy. "Is that nice?" she demanded. "You would remember the pepper in the filling, rather than the texture of the cake."

"I guess I'm like that, Althea," he said slowly.

Penitent now, she touched his hand across the table. And he caught it impulsively. "You were always the cleanest thing in my life—and the finest."

She smiled vaguely. "Not in your life, Cornie—beside it, perhaps; close to it, as close as you would let me be. Shamelessly close."

"Let's get out of here." He plunged his hands through his hair abruptly. "That music—come on, Althea."

But not to dance. They went out.

On the way, two men spoke to him. Althea glanced at them. Two rather curious looking men in dinner clothes—not like Cornie, not like men she thought he would know. They spoke to him rather insolently, familiarly. They halted Cornie, but he moved on without introducing her.

And one of them said, "Baltic is looking for you."

Cornie nodded without answering.

"No foolin', Dare!" came the sharp words.

THEY reached the street, found a cab. They rolled along through the warm summer evening, his hand groping for hers, his arms holding her to his heart.

"You make me think of sweet clover along the country roadside—and the fresh brown loaves my mother used to make

when I was a kid—and all the clean things I ever knew. Althea, I want to be washed in something and be clean again.”

“Clean!” she whispered. “Cornie—you?” Her laughter was cool and clear, like water over smooth stones. “As if you’re not!”

He said huskily, “Althea, you’re so far away from me—so high—untouchable—and yet I hold you here, and kiss your sweet mouth as if I had the right.”

“Why do you talk like this?” she said unhappily. “Why do you say these things, Cornie?”

He was silent, staring off ahead at lights that made a brilliant necklace along the avenue.

“I know you don’t—love me, Cornie. We’re just—friends. I guess I just—well, I’ve known you so long— You’re a self-made man. You’ve realized your ambitions—and they were pretty startling ones, Cornie. You deserve the place you’ve won in the world, and nobody is more proud of you than I am.”

“The place—I’ve won in the world,” he repeated, and dropped his head sharply to hers, with a hushed cry. “Oh, my God!”

His strange humility was more than she could bear. She must be sensible and brave—put behind her this emotion—for he was where he wanted to be, where he had worked to be. She must no longer bare her heart to him, she must not let him see that she cared.

“When you marry Stephanie Dubois,” she told him, “your social position will be secure. You should marry her, Cornie. She can give you the rest of the things you want. You won’t be really happy unless you keep climbing—higher and higher.”

He did not answer her for a while. “Stephanie—” he mused aloud then, and caught her to him sharply with a convulsive embrace.

Still she laughed, pride keeping her voice from breaking now.

“Summer nights make fools of us all, don’t they, Cornie? In the cold light of tomorrow this will be forgotten; and Stephanie and Hendrick will be real again.”

“Hendrick—” mused Cornie. “That fellow, eh?” His arm tightened about her. His lips brushed her hair. “Why should I despise that harmless-looking chap?” he asked hoarsely then. “Why do I, Althea—when I’m not fit to touch your hand?”

“You’re queer tonight, Cornie.” There was fear in her voice.

“Maybe you’d call it queer,” he said slowly. “Maybe I’m just beginning to see things as they are. You’ve done it.” He laughed again, holding her tightly to his heart. “You’ve been there all the time, hidden away from the filth and the sin. Clean and fine—and decent, Althea.”

She raised her eyes anxiously. “Cornie, what do you mean—?”

He kissed her then, reverently, gently. “I’ve made a mess of my life. I got off on the wrong track. I thought I knew what I wanted, but I was wrong—and it’s too late now.”

“Too late—for love?” she whispered, pride melting now before that helpless love.

“Yes, Althea. Too late for love. . . .”

He left her at the hotel shortly, stood beside the cab as she fled inside not looking back; stood there until the chauffeur impatiently demanded his fee. Then, with white face and grim lips, he smiled at the fellow, tossed him a bill and struck off down the street, with the haunted air of a man stepping from one world into another. . . .

A strange doctor appeared at the Nickerson suite the following morning. The nurse admitted him and brought him in to the dowager’s bedroom, where Althea and Hendrick sat beside her bed.

Althea went forward abruptly, cold fear darting down her heart. The strange doctor addressed her. “I’m Doctor Wingate,” he said. “Doctor Dare has asked me to follow up this case.”

Across the room, the dowager’s eyes met Althea’s, with more of pity than she had ever seen in them. Althea said stonily, “This is my grandmother, Mrs. Nickerson.” And, turning to Hendrick, “And my fiancé, Mr. Bloomer.”

The doctor murmured polite acknowledgments.

The dowager said, with a ring in her voice, "Well, you two—off somewhere this morning? Books at Brentano's?"

"No," said Hendrick, with unwonted exuberance, "emeralds at Cartier's!"

CHAPTER FIVE

BITTER REVELATION

SHE followed the picture they made, binoculars poised—Bashby Third, in his cat-boat, headed toward Monomoy Point in a race with young Josh Berry. She followed that boat of Bashby's with anxious eyes. For there to the south dark clouds gathered, and a chill wind seemed to rise from the sea and creep through her. Althea hugged her arms to her sides. Always in her heart was the yearning concern for Bashby—so gloriously young and gay and reckless.

He had taken one look at the big square-cut stone on her left hand, after her return from New York the month before, and he had looked at her thoughtfully. "On the lever—*Bloomer?*" he had asked, and his attitude on the matter was made crystal-clear through that sharp, breathless inflection.

She had nodded, not meeting his frank eyes. He had stretched out his hand. "Good luck, Althea—joy, and all the rest of it, if he's what you want."

If he's what you want. Bashby knew. You couldn't fool Bashby.

The dowager Althea called from across the garden. "Come in here, Althea. The wind is rising. Next thing, you'll have a cold. You don't take care of yourself at all."

"Why did he go out today, when the sky looked so uncertain?" Althea asked unhappily. "I'm worried about him!"

The grandmother was silent. She drew the white shawl more tightly about her, and crossed the lawn to Althea's side. "I've warned him repeatedly. He doesn't pay the slightest attention to me."

"It was hot when they went out. He never thinks to take an extra sweater. And he's still got a cough from that last cold!"

The dowager's eyes hardened. "His

mother is so busy doing nothing that she hasn't time to look after Bashby. I declare, this family would go to the dogs if there wasn't somebody who took life seriously!"

The wind whistled now through the garden, and dark clouds began to creep over the sun. Althea shivered, raised the binoculars again.

"The tide is coming in fast—and they're turning now to put in along the shore. Gran, do you care much if I take the little car and bring some hot coffee and a sweater and things out to Bashby and Josh? I can follow the road down to Monomoy. Bashby has taken me there several times in his Ford."

The dowager flung a furtive glance at Althea—a tender glance—but her voice was gruff. "Well, I fail to see why you bother your head with that young scamp! He walks right into danger, grinning." She turned back to the house. "Go if you wish—and give that boy a good piece of your mind—" But her anxious gaze turned back once more, though she walked on briskly, for a sight of that boat. . . .

THE road led through scrub pine and brush, along the dunes that skirted the sea. Here had been built a few scattered cabins, constructed to weather the severe storms, picturesque, lonely, fronting the broad expanse of sea. And, Althea knew, other cabins, like that of Clive Wynard, completely hidden from view of the passing stranger.

Her last trip along here had been on a melting hot day, with Bashby clowning, singing at the top of his voice, avoiding by miracles the deep ruts of the road, so accustomed was he to its winding course.

But today progress was difficult, for she had not gone far when the storm broke. Wind tore and shrieked at the protesting trees, lashed them. The tide was now high, and the surf pounded heavily beyond. Vainly Althea strove to keep track of the two boats out beyond, but the blinding rain shut them from her view. She drove on at a pace far too rapid for such a rough road, shut off

from the world in the deserted promontory of land. Now and then, she could catch sight of something tangible, and attempt to gauge location. If she could only see something that might look familiar—but what was there to look familiar to the casual eye she had turned on this road when with Bashby as companion, she had known those hours of complete relief from herself and her ever haunting thoughts?

She did remember the narrow lane that led off to Clive Wynard's place. There was the identifying signboard painted blue. That had amused her at the time. It seemed as though she should reach it before very long—though perhaps she had passed it without knowing, for the rain poured down in deafening sheets. But now it had abated a little, and she could see the cat-boats out beyond, comfortably close to the shore, yet at the precarious mercy of the tide-rips that boiled against the sands.

Ruts, deceiving puddles of water that held unpleasant depths—The next rut proved too deep for the speed she had kept in her excitement, and the car cried out in protest, and one side sank down with a groan. She knew that something desperate had happened to it, but she did not know that she had broken an axle.

She got out, took one frantic look, deluged by the new shower that had now taken up the rhythm with deafening *crescendo*—and plunged on through the rain, praying for the sight of a signpost painted blue.

Monomoy could never have been so long as that half mile seemed to Althea before she reached Clive Wynard's lane, and stumbled along the winding path through the brush and trees to his cabin, where it sat on a hummock facing the sea.

Wynard was a comfortable person of completely abstract manner, devoting his entire energies to his work.

"I'm ashamed to crash in on you, when I know how you cherish privacy," she greeted him breathlessly, dripping and forlorn. "But a succession of unfortunate incidents has landed me on your doorstep. Please let me get warm—and telephone my house. I'll play dead then."

He laid down his pipe, shook his nice brown head at her, and brought out some blue cotton pajamas. "Get into these, Miss Glynn—and I'll mix you a hot drink. We'll dry your clothes."

She wrenched off the offending garments behind a screen, shivering, grateful, uttering a brief prayer of thanks to a kind Deity that once Bashby had chanced to bring her here. "I started to drive through from Dover Bay, to bring hot coffee and sweaters to Bashby. He's pulled in about two miles down. I was worried about him."

"Don't waste your time," came the drawling voice. "That kid knows his stuff."

She came out presently, folding back the enormous sleeves, and stumbling along impeded by the legs of excessive blue cotton. Gratefully she drank the steaming contents of the glass he offered, standing before the fire, her gaze following the canvases that were littered along the wall and on chairs and on the mantel.

"I suppose he'll head this way," Wynard said, adjusting the binoculars and studying the shore line. "He thinks this is the Monomoy Athletic Club—or the general store, or something. Yeah—there he is now, the clown! He ought to be suppressed!" He grinned back over his shoulder at her. There was too much genuine admiration for Bashby in that voice, to believe those words. "He'll make it within an hour."

She sighed with relief. "I'll call the dowager then. She's worried." She reached for the telephone.

The dowager said, "—and it was bad enough when I had only Bashby to worry about. Why in heaven's name must you go traipsing off there in this weather, and—"

"But it wasn't this weather when I traipsed," sniffed Althea lightly.

"I'll teach you a lesson," said the dowager, in a tone that would have sounded mischievous from anyone else. "I'll send Hendrick after you—if I can locate him."

"Splendid!" mocked Althea, who knew that the dowager knew the secret hunger

of her heart. "But wait until my clothes are dried. I'm wearing a very fetching—if oversize—pair of gentleman's pajamas."

"Are you alone with that man?" the dowager's monotone pursued—and sometimes she spoke in monotones when she was amused.

"Yes, darling."

The connection was severed.

The man with his back to her, standing close to the long windows beyond, stroked the canvas with a thoughtful brush. She felt that already he had forgotten her presence. She stood looking out at the glorious panorama of wind-swept sea and sky, feeling the throb of the surf on the broad beach, catching the briny pungence of dashing spray, warmed and relaxed and happy, now that Bashby was safe, thrilled at this interlude that gave her even a brief respite from the circumspect life she had begun to live—as Hendrick Bloomer's affianced wife.

She moved about noiselessly, viewing the canvases in rapturous and appreciative silence. Wynard was a master. His style was authentic, forceful. The sea was undoubtedly his medium. There were canvases of ships, of the coast—yet there was one of a wooded glen, a sunrise. She moved along, studying each one. She came to a small painting of a girl, a very lovely girl. Yes—Wynard's signature was there in the corner. She had not known he did portraits. She moved along—And then she stopped suddenly, so still that her own heart seemed bedlam in this quiet room. For there, standing carelessly against the wall, was a pastel out of whose crayon lines shone Cornie's eyes!

She cried out sharply, helplessly, against her will, "Did you do *that*?"

He glanced around, a bit impatient. Smiled vaguely. Left his canvas for the moment and came over to where she stood. "Yes. Only last week. Curious that you should ask about it. Seems to strike you pretty forcibly. It's not exactly my type of thing."

"That's it!" she said breathlessly, welcoming any excuse to hide the shock it had given her. "I didn't know you—you did anything but—but water—and ships."

"Oh," he shrugged, "now and then—if the spirit moves me. I came across that fellow on the beach one day. He didn't see me at first. He was sitting against a rock, looking out at the sea. There was something about his face—I was striking about for a spot to sketch. I took out some cardboard and chinks, and tried to get him down."

"You mean—on this beach?" she tried to ask casually.

"Yes. He has a cabin farther on—next one down, he told me later. I'd never seen a man with eyes like that. He's lived, you know—had some desperate experience. Not old, but burned. Looks as if he's seen death a lot. The fellow haunted me."

"I wonder," she tried to say lightly, "what his name is?"

"Says it's Dan Strange. Appropriate." He shrugged. "Too young to have been in the war. I'll bet he has an interesting story."

She moved, after a while, to the window. Dan Strange. No. It was Cornie. She knew. Her heart told her. She followed the stretch of sand to that cabin beyond, with stark, hungry eyes. Dan Strange....

SHE left the rented Ford down the road, perhaps a hundred feet, toward noon the following day. The summer sun shone goldenly today, penitent and remorseful, after yesterday's terrifying interlude. A fresh, cool wind blew against Althea's flushed cheeks as she made her way along to the cleft in the trees that suggested a path—that *was* a path.

She moved along resolutely, without fear. She was wearing Hendrick's emerald. She had no intention of violating her promise. But she had *had* to come.

There was no response to her knock at the door—that cabin south of Wynard's. About it was an air of silence and loneliness that even the dazzling sunshine could not dissipate. She turned the knob, after a pause, and went inside.

A man's cabin—definitely so. Untidy, strewn. Bed unmade, table littered with unwashed dishes. Books lying about. On the shelves beyond, instruments lying in

disordered heaps—doctor's instruments and paraphernalia. Sheets of foolscap scattered about another table and over the floor. Cornie, his handwriting on dozens of pages; finely written words, medical words strung together in some thesis. A pen flung from impatient fingers and stuck where it fell in the rough boards of the paneling. The fallen embers of a dying fire in the grate.

She ran to the door, swung it open wide. Far down the beach, a figure moved, facing the wind—moved back now toward the house. She closed the door, watched him approach, watched the waves creep along the sand, way out beyond the dory he had drawn up on the beach.

He stood a moment in the open door looking at her, silent, hands clenched at his sides. And his eyes were so old and so hungry—and so beaten. And the smile, a twisted thing, not Cornie's.

"What are you doing here?" he said slowly, closing the door after him.

She tried to smile, to speak lightly, for lightness had been his code. "I just happened to be passing—"

"Sure!" His tone was an insult. His face was gray, drawn. Not the old Cornie. "How did you know I was here?"

She told him in faltering sentences. It was as if she told a stranger, someone who looked like Cornie, someone about his size.

He laughed harshly. "So you dropped by to give me the last laugh, eh?"

"I don't know—what you mean," she said, white-lipped.

"Oh, don't give me that stuff! Dumb like a fox, aren't you? You don't have to flash that green lantern on your left hand—I can see it."

"Cornie," she begged thickly, "what has happened to you? What has happened to your *soul*?"

His laugh was tortured, breaking. "Don't worry about my soul, Althea. That's all taken care of. It's down on the books—the whole story."

She went toward him with wooden steps, unable to help herself. She touched his arm, her fingers flamed at the magic of that contact. "Cornie—"

"Why did you have to come here? Why did you hunt me down, to laugh at me now?" he shouted. "You know the story. Well, pass it around to your friends around here now. It's a choice one."

"I don't know what you *mean*!"

"No, of course not! You didn't see it in the papers. You didn't read the juicy write-ups in the New York scandal sheets. 'Prominent doctor suffers suspension of license to practise medicine in the state. Failure to report gangster cases. Enjoyed huge income for several years, in secret contact with underworld. Death of Jake Epstein, detective killer, exposes shady practise.'"

She dropped back, numb hands against her lips. She cried out, but there was no sound. "No—no!" she whispered at last. "You didn't, Cornie—"

His eyes were wide and red with agony. Perspiration stood in beads on his forehead. He wiped his mouth shakily, went to a cabinet and took out a half-emptied bottle, drained the contents.

"Cornie!" she cried desolately.

"Go on back to your rich Cape Codder!" he roared. "Marry the bird. Leave me alone, will you? I'll be checking out of this place before you have the whole colony sitting outside my door taking pictures of the notorious M.D.!"

She stepped back, sick at heart, stricken. She found the door, turned for a last glance at him. "You don't need to—check out of here. I never—saw you before. I never heard of such a person as Cornelius Dare. And if I had, I'd be ashamed to admit it—to my friends and my people. You're quite safe from further intrusion."

She went out and down the brambly path and down the road to the waiting car. She did not cry. She knew she could never cry again—nor laugh—nor bear the sound of music. Her heart was dead in her breast.

She started the little car, drove on. She did not see him through the trees as he stood watching the sun point out the last flash of her white dress there against the dunes. She did not hear him cry out to

the infinite silence of the sea, "God! Where are you? Why didn't you make me see—in *time*?"

CHAPTER SIX

AFTER LONG DARK

NEVER had Althea seemed so gay as in the days that followed that memorable one. Her fixed, bright smile might have deceived the others, but Bashby, dancing with her that night at the club, frowned down speculatively. "See here, woman, what's it all about? You're not happy. If it's that bird, Bloomer, just say the word. I'll sock him—with pleasure."

"Silly!" She shrugged, smiling whitely. "Why do you pick on poor Hendrick?"

"There, you see? No girl ever loves a man that she refers to as poor this or poor that."

"You know a lot about girls, don't you, Bashby?"

"Not much about some girls. You're one of them. Don't be a sap, Althea, and marry that bird. Lord, it gives me the creeps! You ought to have more respect for your children. Give them a break. How would you like to be weighed down all your life with the thought that he was your father? I'm warning you, Thea—they'll be a bunch of intellectual brats, and there won't be a smile in a carload."

"Bashby—why don't you like Hendrick?" she asked seriously.

"Why don't I like olives—or asparagus?" he groaned. "How do I know?"

"He's always nice to you," she reminded him. "Only this morning, he told me he was going to take you with him tomorrow to try out his new boat. He's crazy about boats, isn't he?"

"Well, that's different," shrugged Bashby, grinning. "That doesn't include a life sentence. He's a good sailor, I'll say that for him—but, sweet hell, his humor is heavy!" He shook his head desolately. "You know, women are an incalculable species. Take you, now—Lord, you're the kind of clown that I can just picture being married to some good-looking fool who never had a serious thought, thank

God—and could charm the birds off the trees!"

Her head went back sharply. Her throat was a mountain over which her breath labored. Yet she laughed gaily.

"You don't know the essential Althea, I'm afraid."

"Don't I?" He searched her unhappy eyes. "Maybe you think I don't. Listen, Althea—come clean. Who is he?"

"I don't know what you're talking about." She glanced away.

"Oh, yes, you do! The look in your eyes wasn't put there by a dud like Bloomer. I've known him all my life. He never rang the bell, exactly, with me. He wasn't meant to walk down the aisle with a girl who has been plagued by the nightingale."

"You make my past sound rather questionable, Bashby."

"The dowager knows," he told her. "We've held conference. If you want the truth, she's het up over it. You've gotten under the woman's skin. She didn't know it was in a Nickerson to foal a colt like you."

"Bashby—" But she could say no more. Her eyes were bright with tears. Her lips were gay with a twisted smile.

"Okay, Althea. You're game. But I've got a feeling that somehow, some day, those brats are going to have a break."

And he gave her the same significant smile the next day as he strode down the porch with Hendrick beside him. That secret, knowing smile which said so much—which somehow gave her heart and made her believe that fairy tales did occasionally exist outside of books—and Ireland. . . .

HENDRICK paused to slip an arm about her, to tilt up her chin for his good-by kiss. "We're trying out the new boat today, Bashby and I. It looks like a trim craft. I've called it *Althea*. That's why I count on it. Next time, you'll come along?"

She nodded. She was thinking helplessly, "Oh, Hendrick, if you only knew! I'm never going to marry you. Bashby's right. That isn't escape."

"Good-by," she said. "Good luck!" And threw a kiss at Bashby, impulsively, helplessly. And she stood there, looking far off down toward that distant beach on Monomoy, where a cabin stood.

The dowager said, from her chair at the end of the porch, "That boy was bad enough before you came. He's never had the proper respect for people. Now he's ruined." Her needles clicked briskly. "It's getting foggy. I told him to stay home. He laughed at me."

"I noticed that," Althea smiled.

Their eyes met, held in silent understanding. Needles again, clicking busily.

"Want to run over to Hyannis today?" the dowager asked presently. "I had a card from that linen shop. Thought you might like to order some sheets and things—specials, you know."

Althea rose abruptly. "No—I guess not, if you don't mind." She went inside, paused beside the piano, sank to the bench, fingering the keys.

"We'll go for a ride then," decided the dowager crisply, and the song was finished. "Get into your things. I want the air." Perhaps she had heard the tears in that voice. . . .

So they went out in the fine coupé which Althea loved to drive; rode, at the dowager's suggestion, up to the pretty tearoom that was hidden away on a narrow country road, stopped by the Grants, where the dowager chose to call, and came bowling home toward six, each silently apprehensive as they saw the fog rolling in from the beach, and gradually shutting Monomoy Point from sight.

Althea said, "Oh, they're all right, Gran. Hendrick has handled boats for years—and Bashby is a born sailor."

"It was a new boat," the dowager remembered. "Well—they *would* go! I'll not allow myself a moment's apprehension about Bashby Third. Not one moment!"

Evening. . . . "All I can say," the dowager blurted out, toward nine o'clock, "is, thank heaven Laura and Bashby Second are in Boston. That woman would have me practically distracted." The aged Althea was pacing back and forth, trying desperately not to appear nervous.

Ten o'clock. The fog horn sounding dismally off Chatham; a penetrating damp lying over everything.

Eleven o'clock. No word, no sign of them.

The dowager telephoned the coast guard. Yes—there was a boat in distress off the shore. They were cruising now, trying to locate it.

Midnight and after—and the telephone disturbing the awful quiet of that room where the dowager and Althea sat pretending to play cribbage.

Althea snatched off the receiver.

"Hello—this is Clive Wynard. Who am I speaking to?"

"Althea Glynn."

"Good! Listen now. There's been an accident. Something has happened, and—"

"Bashby?" she said, in a short, smothering breath.

"Yes—but he's okay now. On the level. I've got to get back there right away. He knew his grandmother would be worried."

"Back where?"

"To Strange's cabin. Strange picked them up. Heard them off the shore and managed to locate their yawl in the fog. He saved your cousin's life. Bashby will come through. God, what an experience!"

"And Hendrick?" she added, dutifully.

But Wynard's short, cool, mysterious laugh answered that. She cried, "I'm coming! At once!"

The dowager was standing stiff, and braced for the news.

"You must let me go," Althea told her in a low, tense voice. "You must let me go to him."

"Is he—alive?"

"Yes—yes."

"Get my camel's hair coat out of the front closet—and that woolly hat—that mountain-climbing thing I bought for myself in New York. And wrap yourself warmly, too."

"You can't go! It's damp—and dark and dangerous!"

Old Althea's eyes flashed.

"I've never seen the place yet I can't go—because it's damp and dark and dangerous!" snapped the dowager. "Come along!"

THE small, closed car rumbled along at a fair pace under Althea's stiff fingers.

"—and do you mean to sit there and tell me that *that* man is actually *living* down here at Monomoy, and—and—"

"Why should I have told you?" Althea said, with a lump in her throat. "It wasn't a pleasant story. I never expected to see him again."

"Oh, well," spoke the dowager, with the voice of a prophet, "to look at him you'd know he wouldn't go on living along a straight line with never an eye to right or left. Born for adventure, I suppose—and trouble. That's the way with his race. It's in your blood, too. You'll never know a minute's peace the longest day you live. You'll always want what you can't have. . . . Now, do you suppose this will help to settle Bashby down? God knows what's happened to him. And what was it the painter chap said about Hendrick?"

"He didn't say," answered Althea thoughtfully. "He just—laughed."

"Hm!" said the dowager thoughtfully. "That's queer—knowing Hendrick."

The car plunged along in the still night, with only the sound of the fog horn out beyond, and the rumble of the wheels in the ruts. Driving was difficult, with the lights making only a thick gray blur before them. For a long time they drove along in silence. Then the dowager cried, "Look out! There's a man!"

He was walking in between the car tracks, and his white shirt loomed up so sharply and suddenly that the car slewed a bit as Althea applied the brakes. The man looked up. They were very close to him.

"Hendrick!" Althea cried, and threw open the car door.

He stepped aside, stared at her whitely. She had never seen him like this before.

"What happened? Where are you going? Tell me—Bashby—is he all right? Why did you leave him?"

He stood there looking at her, haggard, shaken. She laid her hand on his arm, and he drew away.

"Come, get in, Hendrick!" came the

dowager's solid, impatient voice in this world of fantasy.

"No." His voice was a stranger's voice. "No." He turned away from them, started on.

Althea went stumbling after him in sudden fright, caught at his arm. "Hendrick!"

He looked down at her white face. "Go on now, Althea—and forget that you ever knew that name." He swung away from her without another word.

She ran back to the car, after a moment of fearful speculation. "Gran—I don't understand. Gran, I'm afraid."

"Get in the car, Althea. Something very serious must have happened. Hurry!" She took out her handkerchief, fumbled in her bag. "And you're not afraid. A Nickerson is never afraid!"

SHE had to drive to the painted blue sign, and measure her distance down the road from there. And then at last she came to the cleft in the trees. Together, hand clinging tightly to hand, they made their way down the path to the dim light in the little cabin some distance there in the clearing.

It was the dowager who turned the knob firmly, and went inside. She stood for a moment taking stock of what she saw. There were three men in the uniform of the United States coast guard. There was Clive Wynard standing near the blazing fire. There was Bashby on a studio couch, bandaged and very white, lying there actually grinning at her—and there was Cornelius Dare, sitting hunched back in a big chair, looking neither to left nor right, but staring steadily, woodenly, at the flames, a bandage on his arm.

The dowager said, in a curiously tight tone, "Is he badly hurt? I'm his grandmother—tell me, please!"

"Hi, dow'ger!" echoed the game voice from the couch beyond.

She went to him, face twitching, hands gripped stonily before her. "I told you not to go out in that boat," she said sternly, tears dropping down her cheeks. She dropped with difficulty to her knees beside him.

He grinned faintly. "Sounds natural!"

"Would you mind very much telling me what happened?" she asked, with a sweeping glance around the room, where surgical instruments and gauze and bowls of water were scattered.

But Althea could stand it no longer. She fled to Cornie—dropped her wet cheek to the bandaged arm.

"You're hurt, Cornie! Oh, my dear!"

He smiled at her as if in a dream, weakly, vaguely, his voice thin, less than a whisper. "Lose your way?"

He closed his eyes, and a smile of content crept over his features. She knelt there, feasting her gaze on that dear face—Cornie, *hers*, no matter what happened. Her own. . . .

"—and there was an accident aboard the boat," Wynard began, addressing the dowager. "The fly wheel caught Bashby in the leg. Double fracture—nasty gash, too. Fog was thick. He was bleeding to death. I just happened to see the lanterns on the shore when the show was over—sensed something was wrong, and came trekking down here. But by that time Bashby was all bandaged up—fracture set, and—"

"Yeah, thanks to that guy over there!" said Bashby, nodding toward Cornelius. "Took a chance and picked us up in the fog—got us ashore. No one around. Just him. I was snuffing out. Couldn't breathe—too weak. Just bleeding to death. He got me in here. I was losing blood by the quart. Had to have a transfusion at once, I guess—or it was curtains. No one else handy, so he came through with his own blood—besides giving me the transfusion. That's the kind of guy he happens to be."

"—and I had no idea he was a doctor," Wynard was saying thoughtfully.

"But," cried Althea sharply, "Hendrick—he was here, wasn't he? Hendrick—there was his blood to give!"

"No—there wasn't his blood, Thea," Bashby said slowly. "Hendrick couldn't see it that way, I'm afraid."

"You mean—" the dowager said in clear, emphatic tones, "that Hendrick Bloomer refused to come through—at a time like that?"

"Or words to that effect," Bashby said wearily. "But, oh, Lord, Thea—what a break for those brats we were talking about!"

The dowager got to her feet, went over to Cornelius Dare. She laid a trembling hand on his shoulder.

"The tempering fire was merciless, wasn't it, Cornelius?" she said, while Wynard and Bashby watched her, wide-eyed. "But it's left a fine piece of metal."

Bashby said, "Maybe I'm goofy! Where do you get this Cornelius business?"

"Well," said the dowager softly, "that happens to be a long story, my dear. Perhaps Althea will tell you some day."

But Althea did not hear them. For close to her cheek, he was whispering, weak from the terrific ordeal he had just experienced, "I'll fight my way back, somehow—back out of hell—to your feet. And maybe you'll see me there, and give me some of your strength."

"Only if you love me," she told him. "Only then, Cornie."

"If I love you!" he groaned. "What else is there in my life but you? What else has there ever been?"

And the world was shut out. The shadowed portals belonged to yesterday. Life lay ahead of them now, bright and golden with promise.

(The End.)



LYMAN
ANDERSON

Lin felt as if he were a-top a continuous series of dynamite explosions. The horse's spine became a steel rod, coiling and uncoiling, pounding, pounding. . . . (Page 87.)

FATE RIDES THE RODEO

By

L. P. Holmes

CHAPTER ONE

SHADOW OF THE PAST



LD BUCK DESMOND stared intently at the slim, sun-browned young puncher before him. He growled, "What did you say the name was?"

"Capell. Lin Capell."

Desmond grunted. "I knew a family by that name years ago. There were two brothers, George and Dave."

"Dave Capell was my father."

Desmond straightened, pulling away from the corral fence against which he had been leaning. His bushy brows drew down. He spoke softly.

"Dave Capell's boy, eh? I remember you now. You were a skinny-legged kid of about ten, then. Son, the folks in this valley have long memories. Anybody packing the name of Capell ain't going to be very popular in these parts. For your own good, I recommend you keep on drifting and hit for a job somewhere outside of Bannock Valley. I know some outfits over past the Desolation Rim, and I can give you a letter that ought to get

you a job. C'mon up to the house with me while I write it."

Lin Capell took a deep drag on the brown paper cigarette he held in his fingers, then tossed the butt into the dust of the corral.

"Thanks," he said tersely. "The job I want is right here in Bannock Valley. That's why I rode in. I left a good outfit to come here."

"I see," murmured Desmond. "Yeah, I savvy. Well, it was a mighty raw deal that the Gallatins and the Schells pulled on your family, son. I've always claimed that. But hell! What can you do about it, single-handed?"

"I'm not sure yet," Lin admitted. "But I've got some ideas."

Desmond cleared his throat. "You can't lick them two families alone."

The puncher's eyes narrowed, gleaming chill gray through the slitted lids. "I wonder," he said softly. "I aim to try, anyhow. How about that job?"

Desmond shifted his dusty boots. "I got to live in Bannock Valley and get along with the other people in it."

Lin shrugged. "I don't aim to start a thing, while I'm riding for you, Mr. Des-

mond. Before I cut my wolf loose, I'll give up the job. Dad always spoke well of you. Said you were the only square-shooting man in Bannock Valley."

Desmond stared at the ground. "Is he dead now, son?"

"Yeah. It'll be five years ago come next August. He never got over that last big fight. He was wounded, you know—shot in the back. Left him paralyzed from the waist down. Either a Gallatin or a Schell bullet did that to Dad. I aim to find out which one."

Desmond lifted his head, staring far out across the heat-drenched miles of the valley, to where a dark rift showed in the timber-clad slopes of the San Miguel Mountains. "One time Dave Capell dragged me out of a freshet flood in Grizzly Canyon. I'd have been a goner if it hadn't been for Dave Capell. Okay, lad, you get the job."

They shook hands.

Lin said, "I'll be mighty careful that I don't bring you any trouble, Mr. Desmond. Thanks a heap. I'll earn my salt."

"I know you will," Desmond said gruffly. "You got all the ear-marks. Yonder's the bunkhouse. Stow your war-bag. You and me'll eat dinner alone. My riders are all out along the Desolation country, combing roughs for strays. They won't be in for grub. They're aiming to do two days' work in one, because old Alec Gallatin is throwing a big doin's tomorrow and the boys are kinda expecting an invite."

"I heard something about that in Big Pine when I come through this morning. Barbecue and rodeo stuff."

Desmond nodded. "He throws something of the sort every year. The whole valley will be there, Injuns and Mexicans included."

A shriveled little Chinaman stepped from the door of the cookshack and beat a steel triangle into a melodious jangle. As Desmond and Lin started for the building, a rider jogged into view around the corner of the feed shed at the lower end of the stake and rider corral.

Desmond grunted. "Here comes that expected invite. It's Starr Gallatin, the

pride and joy of Alec Gallatin's ornery old heart."

THE girl was a striking brunette, graceful and sure in the saddle. She smiled at Desmond.

"If that dinner bell means what it says, I'm going to eat with you, Mr. Desmond," she said.

Her voice had a curious husky tone to it that caught at Lin. He eyed her swiftly.

Desmond doffed his floppy old hat. "Sure, Miss Starr, you're just in time. It's eating time right enough. And meet up with Lin Capell, a new rider I just took on. Son, this is Miss Starr Gallatin."

Lin met the girl's searching glance. He noted that her eyes were a deep, lustrous brown, shaded by an amazing sweep of lashes. She was vivid and handsome.

"Glad to know you, Lin Capell," she said cordially.

"Sentiments returned, Miss," Lin drawled.

The girl left her saddle with flowing ease, dropping the reins of her palomino pony to the ground. She laughed. "This is the usual formula, Mr. Desmond. You and all your riders are invited to Dad's brawl tomorrow. Most folks would come anyway, I suspect, but Dad insists on giving out as many regular invites as possible."

Desmond chuckled. "We'll be there, lock, stock and barrel."

During the meal, Lin did a lot of listening. Desmond and the girl chatted idly, exchanging commonplace items of friendly gossip, having to do with the weather, condition of the feed, price of beef, and finally the death of a so-called badman at the hands of one of the Schells.

"Dad was pretty mad about that shooting affair," said the girl. "He heard that Bud Schell forced the fight, and that Pecos Silver wasn't hunting trouble at all. As he gets older, Dad seems to believe more and more in law and order. He and Pete Schell had quite an argument over the affair."

"I'm afraid your dad and us older fellers will never live to see the true meaning of law and order in Bannock Valley," Desmond said. "We're a long way off the beaten path out here. Law and order will be a long time getting here. The might of the gun has always ruled Bannock Valley pretty much. Still will, I reckon."

"That's what Pete Schell told Dad," nodded the girl. "But Dad said it was going to have to stop. He never did believe in this promiscuous shooting."

Lin Capell's lips tightened at this statement, but he kept his face bent over his plate, saying nothing. A sardonic coldness filled his veins.

At the finish of the meal the girl addressed her first remark at Lin. She turned her dark eyes full upon him. "Even though you have just arrived in Bannock Valley, you also are invited to the ranch tomorrow, Mr. Capell."

Lin's look was steady, unreadable. He nodded. "I'll be there. Thanks." His tone was soft, but flat, with neither rancor nor enthusiasm in it. The girl colored faintly and turned back to Desmond.

"Before I forget it, Dad wants you to bring that pet outlaw buckner of yours, Mr. Desmond. What is it you call the brute—Mud-pup, isn't it?"

Desmond laughed. "That's right—Mud-pup. There'll be some ambitious boys do some high tumbling if they crawl that old devil. It's a go. I'll bring him."

The girl left shortly after that, with a smile for Desmond and a slight nod for Lin.

"Grand girl," said Desmond softly. "She's been made a lot over, by all the punchers in the Valley. It looks as if Nick Schell has the inside road now, I hear. I reckon Pete Schell and Alec Gallatin would like to see Starr and Nick hitch up. That'd tie the two families together purty strong, and increase their power in the valley."

"They run things now, don't they?" asked Lin. "Someone in Big Pine hinted that to me."

Desmond shrugged. "They make a stab at it, but they're pretty careful not to

step on my toes. I'm no trouble hunter and I mind my business, but in a showdown I won't take any rawhiding from the Schells or the Gallatins. If it pleases them to think they're lords of creation, I don't care—providin' they leave me alone. I sorta explained that to Alec Gallatin one time, and he seemed to understand."

Lin smiled. "I getcha. You've got the ear-marks."

BY sun-up the following morning, Buck Desmond and his riders were on their way to the Gallatin spread, leading with them the outlaw buckner, Mud-pup.

"Look at him," grinned Donny Decker to Capell. "You'd think he was the most amiable, harmless hoss in the world, without a ounce of ambition in him. But I'll tell a man he's raw dynamite under a trusting rider."

Mud-pup was a raw-boned animal, a dirty brown in color, carrying its head low and shuffling along as though the effort was almost too much for it.

Lin nodded. "They had a hoss up on the Jingle-bob where I used to ride. Some idiot named it Sugar-pie. That bronc would trail you around like a dog, rubbing its head against yuh, sniffing in your pockets for sugar or cookies. It'd nibble yore ear if you'd let it. It was just naturally the most affectionate doggoned hoss I ever saw—until you cinched on a saddle and forked it. Right away Sugar-pie would proceed to bust you plumb loose from your belt-buckle. I've know'd fellers who swore they'd counted every nail in the ridge board of the Jingle-bob haybarn, they was chucked that high and far by that loving hypocrite of a hoss. Me, I'd rather fork the kind that come out fighting and squealing. Somebody else can have these sad-eyed, mournful-looking brutes."

Donny laughed. "You and me both, cowboy."

Buck Desmond had four riders besides Lin. Donny Decker, Ernie Shore and Buster Reams were all young fellows, cheery and full of fun. Tex Alward was older, a lean, gaunt, quiet fellow of mid-

dle age, who acted as foreman on Desmond's Diamond D. They had all accepted Lin with quiet good-fellowship. Lin liked them all.

As the four younger punchers set the pace, Tex Alward dropped back beside Desmond. "Capell shapes up," Tex drawled. "The boys like him. But tell me, Buck—he ain't by any chance connected to the Capells that used to be in Bannock Valley, is he?"

"Yeah," said Desmond. "He's Dave Capell's boy."

Alward's eyes narrowed. "Did he just drift in—or come a-purpose?"

"A-purpose. He's got some sort of idea in his head, but he promised me he wouldn't start anything while riding for the Diamond D."

"He's biting off quite a mouthful."

"So I told him, but that didn't seem to worry him none. He strikes me as being a pretty deep kid, level-headed and smart. I reckon he knows what it's all about."

"Even if he quits you before he makes a break, Gallatin and Pete Schell will blame you for giving him a job in the first place," said Alward thoughtfully.

Desmond spat into the dust. "Let 'em. Mebbe if that kid starts a real big show, it'll be the best thing for this whole valley. I been watching Alec Gallatin and Pete Schell for a long time. More and more they're running Bannock Valley. Well, I'm not forgetting that them two had a hand in running the Capell family outa here. They might get the same idea about me and some of the other smaller outfits any time. If, as you've heard it said, Starr Gallatin and Nick Schell should make a match of it, that would tie the two families powerful close together. I've just about come to the point where I'd like to see something happen before they get too thick. It might prove safer in the long run."

Alward squinted through the dust haze. "There's more than just words in what you say, Buck. Well, time'll tell."

DESMOND and his riders reached the Gallatin headquarters just before nine o'clock. The ranch stood on a

wide, slightly raised flat beside the Cold Spring River, with a grove of sycamores all about.

Lin Capell surveyed the place with calculating eyes. It bespoke wealth and power. Many people had already arrived. Corral fences were lined with tethered saddle ponies. Buckboards stood about. Where the shade of the sycamores was heaviest, close to the river bank, long tables and benches of rough lumber stood, with fire-filled barbecue pits nearby.

The Diamond D men turned the Mud-pup into a corral with a number of others of its ilk, tethered their ponies and looked around for entertainment and excitement. Ernie Shore took Lin in tow, introducing him here and there among the rapidly thickening crowd. There was much laughing and jollity, for everyone seemed eager to make the most of the occasion and have a good time.

Lin said little, but watched and listened a lot. Presently he saw Starr Gallatin, sauntering arm in arm with a heavy-set young puncher. The fellow had the florid complexion, china-blue eyes and tow-colored hair of Dutch ancestry.

Ernie Shore spoke drawlingly at Lin's elbow. "That's Nick Schell. Folks say she's gonna marry him. They sure seem right fond of each other."

Lin shrugged, smiling slightly. "That's the way things are in this world, Ernie. Young folks will fall in love."

Ernie grinned. "Do tell. What long whiskers yuh have, gran'paw!"

Lin chuckled. He liked Ernie Shore better all the time. "When you see Alec Gallatin and Pete Schell, point 'em out to me, Ernie."

Ernie jerked his head. "Over yonder—talking to the boss. Gallatin's the big feller with the bull voice."

Lin's glance was thoughtful. Gallatin was big and dark, with a certain arrogance. Schell was shorter, inclined to a slight waist-line, and a general look of untidiness. He had the distinguishing marks of the entire Schell family—china-blue eyes and tow-colored hair.

Donny Decker and Buster Reams came pushing through the crowd. "C'mon,

Ernie," exclaimed Decker. "They've started wrastlin' down yonder along the river. Bud Schell's throwed a challenge at the whole wide world. Buster and me entered you for our outfit. C'mon and do yore stuff. We want to see that swell-headed Dutchman taken for a ride."

Ernie frowned. "If it was anybody but Bud Schell I'd say yes, Donny. But you know Bud's temper. Should I throw him, he's liable to get sore and go for his gun."

"If he does he'll get horse-whipped," said Donny. "The crowd won't stand for anything like that. C'mon, bashful. You're it."

Lin followed the rest to a little green meadow by the river, where a crowd of punchers had gathered. A lot of yelling and laughing was going on. Two of the crowd were rolling and tumbling on the ground, puffing and grunting with their efforts. As the Diamond D boys came up, the wrestlers ceased their efforts and got to their feet, red of face, sweating, but grinning good-naturedly. The crowd cheered them uproariously.

As things quieted a bit, Donny Decker stepped into the center opening. "If Bud Schell is still ambitious, Ernie Shore is willing to try him a heat. How about it, Bud?"

Bud Schell was almost an exact replica of his brother Nick. There was a certain sullenness about his face, however—with lines of fast living about his narrow lips. And his eyes were hard, like blue glass.

"I made the challenge, didn't I?" he growled. "That takes in Shore, or anybody else who feels ambitious."

With these words he sailed his hat to one side and unbuckled the twin gun-laden belts criss-crossed about his waist.

Ernie Shore was not carrying a gun. He took off his hat and spurs and handed them to Lin to hold. "If I don't come back to claim 'em, they're yours, Lin," he grinned.

AS the two contestants stepped out toward each other, Lin measured them visually. Schell appeared the blockier, more powerfully built of the

two, but Ernie Shore possessed a smoothness of movement and lightness on his feet that told of superb coördination of brain and body. Schell's face was drawn into a scowl. Ernie's features were impassive.

Schell lowered his head and rushed, as though he would bear his lighter opponent down by sheer bulk. Ernie, crouching low, slid into position, thrust out a hip and used Schell's charge to send the heavier man whirling in a flying mare.

Schell landed hard, rolled over and got up, cursing. It seemed to Lin that Schell's eyes had suddenly turned red, the killing red peculiar to animals of the weasel tribe. Schell advanced more warily now, his big, stubby hands spread clutching before him. He and Shore came to grips and writhed here and there, each trying to force the other from his feet. Schell seemed to give a grunt of satisfaction, once his hands were safely on his adversary, but each time he tried to whirl Ernie to the ground, Ernie foiled him by sheer speed and cleverness.

"Schell'll get him," muttered a puncher near Lin. "Schell's like a bull when he gets going. I got ten bucks that says Schell'll win."

"I'll take that—and ten more if you want," came a swift drawling answer.

Lin looked around to see Tex Alward digging into his pocket.

"Ernie is plenty good at this stuff," Tex told him. "You watch him."

As the minutes crept past and Schell found himself unable even to get Ernie Shore on the ground, let alone pin his shoulders, his anger grew. He clawed desperately, tearing Ernie's shirt from his back. The bigger man was panting now, and cursing steadily. Suddenly, with an amazing show of strength, Ernie sent Schell tumbling. But as he darted forward to take advantage of Schell's momentary discomfiture, Schell whirled and kicked out with both feet. It was a foul move, but effective. The kick caught Ernie squarely in the pit of the stomach, wringing a gasp of agony from him and sending him reeling to the ground, yards distant.

Ernie struggled to his knees, his face pallid and drawn with pain. Schell, with a snort of triumph, plunged for him, wide open in his eagerness to pin his man. But Ernie was not through. He drove himself forward beneath Schell's reaching hands, caught Schell about both knees, then heaved upward with all his strength. The next moment Bud Schell went flying through the air, a great, uncouth projectile, arms and legs waving helplessly. The crowd scattered, and Schell struck the slim bole of a sycamore tree head on.

THE impact would have crushed the skull or broken the neck of an ordinary man, yet all it did to Schell was daze him momentarily. But that moment was enough for Ernie Shore. He was on Schell like a cat, and had rolled him over and pinned his shoulders before Schell could get the cobwebs out of his brain.

Then, amid the roaring applause of the crowd, Ernie walked over to Lin. Ernie's face was still white from the effects of the kick, but he was smiling and his eyes were jaunty.

"I won the go but lost my shirt," he said.

Lin said, "I'll ride the river with you any old time, cowboy."

Tex Alward slapped Ernie on the shoulder. "Good work, kid. He had it coming, after that dirty kick. I thought you were finished for a minute."

"Me, too," said Ernie. "Felt like a mule had landed on me."

Schell was on his feet again now. His face was twisted with fury, but he said nothing as he went over and reclaimed his guns. He strapped them on carefully, and tied the bottoms of the holsters against his thighs with buckskin thongs. Then he came straight for Ernie.

"You've got just one minute to get your hands on a gun, Shore," he rasped. "You and me ain't through, not by a damn site. We're gonna settle this thing finally, one way or the other."

There was a roar of protest from the crowd, but a hurried scattering, just the same. Lin Capell and Tex Alward remained by Ernie.

Ernie said, "Forget it, Schell. No need to get shooting mad over a wrestling match."

"You heard me," growled Schell. "Get a gun. I'm not going to tell you again."

Tex Alward spoke. "Pull in your neck, Schell. You can't run a blazer like that on Ernie with me around. Ernie downed you fair and square—why not be a man and admit it?"

Schell's move was lightning fast. There was just an arc of gleaming steel as one of his guns was out and the muzzle buried deep into Tex Alward's body.

"I've heard it said you were a bad man from Texas, Alward," Schell sneered. "I aim to find out just how bad. And *now*."

Lin Capell still held Ernie's spurs in his hand. He used them now, in a bitter, slashing blow that landed on the wrist of Schell's gun-hand. The sturdy steel bit deep, and the heavy gun slithered to the ground.

Schell screamed a curse, whirling, snatching with his sound hand at his other gun. But Lin had his own .45 out now, and he slammed the barrel across Bud Schell's head with vicious force. Schell's knees buckled and he went down in a heap, senseless this time.

"I hope," drawled Lin softly—"I hope I didn't bust my gun. I'll probably need it—after this."

CHAPTER TWO

GUN-WHIPPED

THE crowd of punchers surged around, jabbering excitedly. Tex Alward looked at Lin, then said to Ernie, "Looks like the Diamond D garnered a real hand when the boss hired Lin. Much obliged, Lin."

Before Lin could answer, there came a sudden quieting of the crowd and a lane opened through them. Alec Gallatin and Pete Schell came hurrying up. From the other direction came Nick Schell.

"What's going on here?" Gallatin roared. "Who hit Bud?"

Lin looked Gallatin square in the eye. "I did," he drawled. "He had it coming."

Tex Alward was quick to back up Lin.

"That's right, Alec. Ernie and Bud had a wrestling match. Ernie won. Bud turned sour and tried to start a gunfight. I tried to call him off, and he stuck a gun into my ribs. Mebbe that was as far as he'd have gone, but there was no telling. Lin here took no chances. He gun-whipped Bud plenty."

Pete Schell rose from his knees, where he had been examining Bud. He fastened his blank, china-blue eyes on Lin. "Who," he demanded hoarsely—"who in hell are you?"

"The name is Capell. Lin Capell. Rider for Buck Desmond."

Pete Schell and Alec Gallatin stood motionless for ten long seconds. Then Gallatin spoke.

"Did you say your name is Capell?"

"That's it," said Lin. "Capell. You've heard the name before, I reckon."

It seemed to Lin that a strange pallor went over the faces of Gallatin and Pete Schell. But they soon recovered.

"I'm going to wait and hear what Bud has to say about this before I pass judgment," Gallatin snapped. "One thing I don't stand for on this day is fighting. And if you fellers started things, you'll have to drift."

A new voice sounded, a voice with a soft, husky throatiness that sent a peculiar little thrill through Lin Capell.

"There's no need of waiting, Dad. I saw the whole thing. It's all Bud's fault. He was hunting trouble—and found it."

Lin turned and found Starr Gallatin standing at his side. Her head was bare, and the dark glory of her hair reached just to his shoulder. It carried a faint, haunting fragrance to his nostrils.

Gallatin stared at his daughter, frowning. "You mean, Starr, that—that this Lin Capell was justified in gun-whipping Bud?"

"Exactly that," said Starr, an emphatic ring in her voice. "Bud was crazy mad at being thrown. He'd have shot someone, if Mr. Capell hadn't quieted him."

Alec Gallatin nodded and turned to Pete Schell. "That settles it so far as I'm concerned, Pete," he said. "Starr's word is good with me. I ain't gonna feel sorry

for Bud now. He knows my ruling against starting trouble during one of my fiestas. You and Nick better get him off somewhere and cool him down."

Pete Schell stared long at Alec Gallatin. Lin thought that he had never seen such hard, unreadable eyes as those of Pete Schell. Then Schell shrugged and turned to his other son, Nick, who was standing scowling, his glance fastened on Starr Gallatin.

"All right, Nick," barked the elder Schell. "Grab Bud's ankles. We'll take him down by the river and cool him off."

Lin watched them depart, then looked down at Starr, surprising her eyes upon him. "Thanks a heap," he said gravely. "That was spunky—and fine of you—Miss Gallatin."

For a moment the girl's glance remained steady, then she looked away, flushing slightly. She said very softly, "Bud Schell is a beast."

She looked at Ernie Shore and dimpled. "Don't blush so, Ernie! You can borrow another shirt over at the bunkhouse."

Ernie was red as a beet. He grinned shamefacedly. "I feel bare as a molted chicken. Thanks for the idea, Miss Starr. Here goes to steal a shirt. C'mon, Tex."

Alec Gallatin laughed, but to Lin the laugh seemed a trifle forced. "All's well that ends well," he said tritely. "Capell, I'm sorry for being quick in my judgment, but this is one day when I want everybody to be friends and have a good time. I won't abide fighting or quarreling of any sort. Let's all forget it. Starr, you take Capell in tow and show him around. I got to get busy at the barbecue pits."

He hurried away, leaving Lin and the girl alone.

"If you object to Dad's suggestion, of course I'll fade out," said Starr laughing a trifle uncertainly.

"There ain't a thing I'd enjoy more," said Lin slowly. "But how about Nick Schell? I don't want to be the cause of any more trouble."

Starr tossed her head. "Nick has absolutely nothing to say about it. I'm tired of—oh, come on!"

She tucked her slim, brown hand in the

crook of his arm and tugged him into step with her.

THE next hour was very pleasant for Lin. The charm of Starr Gallatin got into his blood, stirring it to a warm, heady satisfaction with life.

As they moved here and there through the ever thickening crowd, Starr introduced Lin to various people. The younger ones hailed him in unaffected friendliness, but a few of the older folks, on hearing his name, became gravely thoughtful. Lin missed none of this. He wondered just how many of the older men of Bannock Valley carried guilty consciences. The younger people did not remember the Capells, but the older ones certainly did.

Lin was having plenty of trouble with his emotions. On coming to Bannock Valley he had had the firm determination to hold nothing but animosity for any and everyone bearing the name of Gallatin or Schell. But he found it impossible to feel that way toward Starr Gallatin. To the contrary, his feelings were going exactly opposite. The girl fascinated him. The strange, husky melody of her voice and the warm touch of her hand on his arm kept his heart at an uneven tempo. Buck Desmond and Tex Alward, unobserved, watched Lin and Starr.

Desmond laughed softly. "Lin's gonna find it tough ever to crack down on Alec Gallatin now, Tex. That girl will soften his hate plenty. She's got the kid plumb dizzy right now."

Tex shrugged. "Mebbo so. But she sure ain't smoothing Lin's path so far as the Schells are concerned. Look at Nick yonder, watching 'em. He looks sour, and mean as a sick wolf. Just the same, I'm kinda betting on Lin. He's regular—and a fighter. I'll always feel that Bud Schell would have plugged me cold if Lin hadn't acted like he did."

In their aimless sauntering, Lin and Starr suddenly came face to face with Nick Schell. Nick's face was congested with anger and jealousy, his eyes moiling. Lin felt Starr stiffen a little.

"They're starting to eat," Nick growled.

"You promised to sit with me at dinner, Starr."

Starr hesitated. Lin wasn't the only one whose emotions had gone through an unsettling during the past hour or two. Starr had felt a fast-growing interest in the lean young puncher at her side. The swift, stalwart defense of his friends, that he had shown when he subdued Bud Schell, had first set her to secretly applauding. Physically he was lean and hard. She liked his cool, grave eyes and his tawny hair. She liked the quirking smile about his clean-cut lips and the smooth, set line of his jaw. Beside him, Nick Schell looked gross—clumsy and uncouth.

For the girl's sake, more than anything else, Lin relinquished her to Nick.

"Sure," he drawled. "I didn't know it was that time of day already. Thanks a heap, Miss Starr, for showing me around and introducing me to folks. I don't feel like a stranger any more now."

He bowed slightly, then turned away and went in search of Ernie and the rest of the Diamond D boys.

He found them grouped about a slender wisp of a girl, a girl with red hair and freckled face, and dancing blue eyes.

"Ha!" exclaimed Donny Decker. "The conquering hero comes! And about time, if you ask me. Lin, meet Sally Ryan. Sally's her company name, you understand. Generally she answers to Red, or Brick-top, or Carrots, or Prairie Fire, or most anything of the sort. She's got a tongue like the sting of a scorpion, and the disposition of a bob-cat. No lone man is safe around her. She'll scalp him in a jiff."

Sally laughed delightedly as she nodded to Lin. "Don't pay any attention to the babble of a child like Donny, Mr. Capell. He's just one of those harmless nuisances."

Lin chuckled. "His description doesn't scare me a bit, lady. Me, I'm looking for a dinner partner. How about it?"

Sally laughed joyously. "I could kiss you for that, Lin Capell! Your offer is accepted, sir."

She slipped to his side, took his arm, then made a face at the bewildered Donny.

"Run along, children," she mocked. "I'm eating dinner with a *man*."

Donny was vastly crestfallen, as Lin and Sally headed for the table. He scratched his head. "The son of a gun!" he muttered mournfully. "Can yuh beat that!"

Ernie Shore laughed. "You had it coming, Donny. But cheer up. Sally's looking back and beckoning to yuh. Let's all grab a seat."

They flocked down to one of the tables and took their places beside Lin and Sally. Sally flashed a gentle smile at Donny and made way for him at her left hand. She leaned over and patted his arm. "Don't be a complete idiot, cowboy," she murmured. "Sally still loves you."

THEY had a hilariously good time. The table groaned with the weight of good food, and hungry appetites made the most of it. Sally Ryan sparkled with life and wit. Laughter and friendly banter were continuous.

Near the head of the opposite table, things were not going so happily. Starr Gallatin sat there beside her father. Next to her was Nick Schell, his expression still sulky and savage. Pete Schell was there also, but Bud was nowhere in sight.

A good many times during the meal, Starr's glance sought out Lin Capell, and there was an unusual moodiness about her. Sally Ryan did not overlook Starr Gallatin's attitude.

"I think," she told Lin quietly, "that right now is the first time in her life that Starr Gallatin ever envied me. She'd give anything to be in my place right now. How do you do it, cowboy? What's the secret of your fascination?"

Lin grinned. "You'll have me cuffing your ears in a minute!"

Sally made a face at him and slid close to Donny. "Lin Capell is threatening me, Donny. Make him stop, will you?"

Donny laughed. "That's a large order, but I'll do my best, Carrots."

Buck Desmond, finished with his meal, came over to his crowd. "Which of you fellers are going to ride today?" he asked. "Gallatin wants the entries in. How about

you, Buster? You're about the best we've got in our spread."

Buster became serious. "I'll try it if you say so, boss. But my back ain't any too strong yet from that strain I got last week."

Desmond shook his head. "Then we won't use you. Ain't worth risking being laid up. Lin, you ever do any peeling?"

"Some," Lin nodded. "I've forked a few tough ones."

"Will you represent the Diamond D then?"

"Yeah, I'll try it, Buck. But don't any of you jaspers start betting good money on me. Mebbe I won't last two jumps outa the chute."

Ernie Shore said, "I wonder. Something tells me you're a man of many talents, Lin. I ain't what you'd call rolling in wealth this time of the month, but what I got I sure aim to risk."

"The same here," Buster Reams chimed in.

"And likewise," added Donny, "I got fifteen bucks, and it ain't doing me a bit of good in my pocket. I aim to run it up to thirty or nothing."

Buck Desmond laughed. "You're the candy kid, Lin, looks like. Mebbe I'll risk a dime or two on you myself."

CHAPTER THREE

RIDING HIGH

THE rodeo events started right after dinner. A large central corral was used as an arena. The crowd lined the fence three thick all around, oblivious of the heat and dust. Lin found that the bronc topping would be the last event on the program, so he sought a place of vantage to watch the rest of the fun. Trick roping was the first event, and the winning choice soon settled between two men, Nick Schell and a gay young puncher named Sparky Holland.

Nick Schell was plenty good with a rope, Lin could see that, but there was a grim dourness about his work, a certain cruel efficiency that left it without color. On the other hand, Sparky Holland went at the job with a dash and flair that soon

made him a favorite with the crowd. In the end, the innate showmanship of Holland swayed the judges in his favor also, and he was declared winner.

Nick Schell said nothing when the verdict was finally given, but his brows drew more tightly together and the heat grew in his eyes.

Sally Ryan, standing at Lin's side, didn't miss these signs. "I've known the Schells for a good many years," she said softly. "They're all alike, father and sons. They hate to be beaten—in anything. They can't take it."

"A man who can't bear to lose should stay out of competition," Lin answered. "Me, I've been beaten so much, it feels kinda natural. Shucks, it's all in fun anyhow."

"Nothing is fun with the Schells," murmured Sally. "The whole universe begins and ends with just one thing—themselves. Nick Schell will be your most dangerous rival in the bronc busting, Lin. If you beat him, he'll hate you to your dying day."

Lin's eyes narrowed. "Reckon I can stand up under it."

At the last moment, Donny Decker decided to enter in the steer roping. Ernie Shore laughed. "This will be good. Donny was never cut out for a rodeo performer. He gets flustered too easy."

Sally Ryan sniffed. "He's game to try, anyhow, Ernie Shore!"

Ernie grinned at the loyal little red-head. "I suppose that ought to squelch me complete, Sally. But I got ambitious too. I'm trying the bulldogging."

The steer-roping brought disaster to Donny Decker and howling glee to the crowd. A rider named Hobe Ringgold worked first and set up a time of fifteen seconds flat. This stood as the best until Nick Schell made his try. He tied Ringgold exactly. Then came Donny Decker.

Donny was after his animal fast, and made a good throw, but his pony betrayed him. As Donny dashed up to the prostrate steer, pigging string open and ready for the tie, the pony gave a little slack in the riata. The struggling steer got one hind leg free and began kicking

wildly. Donny made a vallant attempt to snag that whipping leg and received a tremendous kick right in the pit of the stomach.

Donny went over backward, gasping for air. The steer kicked loose, got to its feet and raced down the corral, leaving Donny flat on the ground in inglorious defeat. The crowd went into hysterics. Donny got slowly to his feet and went back to the chute, his face crimson. Sally whisked away from Lin's side and ran around the corral to comfort Donny. Lin looked at Ernie, grinning.

"That little red-head is all wool and a yard wide," he chuckled. "She's going to mother Donny and soothe his injured pride. She'll do to take along, that girl."

"When they come finer than Sally Ryan, they'll be wearing wings," was Ernie's comment.

Hobe Ringgold and Nick Schell now made one more try apiece to settle the tie. Ringgold was first, and turned in another fifteen-second job. Schell came out, glowing and determined. But it seemed the gods of chance were against him. He drew a tricky, dodging steer and used a precious fraction of a second making absolutely sure of his throw. The time was announced at fifteen and two-fifths seconds. Schell cursed and jerked his pony cruelly as he led it out of the arena.

ERNIE SHORE hitched up his chaps. "I'm gonna have a job on my hands," he drawled. "Schell will be a wild man in the bulldogging. He'll manhandle his steer to a fair-ye-well. He's sore as a pup."

"I still like your chances, cowboy," said Lin. "You look good to me. I got twenty-five bucks that says you'll win."

Ernie's gay smile creased his bronzed face as he shrugged and headed around for the chute. Someone moved into the place he had vacated. Lin looked down to find the dark head of Starr Gallatin at his shoulder. She met his eyes briefly, then glanced away.

"I tried to be nice to you this morning," she said. "Didn't I do a good job?"

"Meaning?"

"Meaning that you've avoided me ever since, as though I was the plague. Sally Ryan is mighty sweet—but she and Donny Decker—"

"That's right," said Lin gravely. "That pair of kids give you a warm feeling inside. But I've heard folks say that you and Nick Schell were sorta lined up the same way Sally and Donny are. Engaged, mebbe."

"Then you've heard lies," Starr burst out, in low-voiced anger. "Why can't people keep still? I'm always hearing the most ridiculous rumors about myself. People in this valley seem to take fiendish delight in discussing me and everything I do. But I'm not engaged to Nick Schell—nor to anyone else. Furthermore, I don't intend to be."

"That's a big order," Lin said softly. "But I can understand people discussing you. You're like a flame. You stand out. Naturally folks are going to notice you. You've been in front of my eyes ever since I met you at the Diamond D yesterday."

She flashed him a quick look, her eyes unreadable. "That's much better," she murmured. "I hope—Ernie wins."

The bulldogging had begun. Each attempt was sharp-cut, vivid. First the hurtling steer, then the drive of man and horse. Lean, muscular bodies darting arrow-like from the saddle. A confused moment of struggle between man and steer. Then the thud of the fall. Dust, action, the baffled bawl of the thrown animal. The short, panting breaths of the rider.

Nick Schell hurtled into the arena, stocky and powerful. He threw his steer with a vicious slam, incredibly fast.

"Eight and a fifth seconds," the judges announced.

The crowd cheered. Lin said, "Ernie will have to step to beat that. Schell is mighty capable, any way you take him. Yeah, he's plenty good."

Starr nodded. "True—in some ways. In others—" She finished with a shrug.

Lin saw Ernie rise into his saddle. Buck Desmond and Tex Alward were beside him, talking to him. Ernie nodded. His

usual easy smile was gone now. His mouth was set, determined, his eyes slitted.

The steer was turned loose, a blocky, powerful brute, hard to handle, hard to get off its feet. Lin saw Ernie lift his pony into action, dart after the lumbering steer. Then a gasp broke from the crowd. Tossing all prudence aside, Ernie left his saddle in a long, terrific dive, a dive that carried him free in the air for a good three yards. The slightest miscalculation of distance, the slightest swerve or dodge of the steer at that instant, and Ernie might have met serious injury. At the least he would have failed utterly. But his gamble won. With the full power of his impetus and hurtling weight, he made his grip and applied the necessary neck twist. The steer went down with a crash, landing so hard it literally bounced.

The crowd howled its approval. It was a full minute before the judges could make the time announcement above the cheerings.

"Shore wins. Seven and three-fifths seconds!"

Lin's eyes were shining. "I sure admire that boy," he said. "He's a stem-winder for fair!"

"Bronc busters next," bawled an announcer. "Come and get the bad news, you saddle hawks."

"Gotta leave," Lin said to the girl at his side. "This is my event. I'm wondering—say, do you believe in good-luck charms?"

Her glance was slightly puzzled. "In what way?"

"Well," Lin drawled, "one time at a rodeo show I saw a girl give her handkerchief to a buckaroo just before he went to top some salty ones. He won."

Lin saw her cheeks color. She hesitated, then reached up and wadded a wisp of a handkerchief in the breast pocket of his shirt. She laughed, a trifle unsteadily.

"That carries my good wishes, cowboy," she said.

Lin patted the pocket. "They'll have to pitch plumb lofty to pile me now!" he said.

LIN headed around the big corral toward the chute, in which the first buckner was already being saddled. As he elbowed his way through the exuberant crowd, someone fell in step with him. It was Bud Schell, face set and masklike, eyes bloodshot and savage. Bud had been drinking.

"You've got this one day of grace, feller," he rasped, biting the words out hoarsely from the corner of his mouth. "For Alec Gallatin's sake, nothing will be started today. But tomorrow will be another story. If you're wise, come another sunrise you'll be a long way from here, heading out of Bannock Valley for good. No Capell ever had a right in Bannock Valley. No Capell ever will. You won't be told again."

Cold fire sprang in Lin's blood; a still, frigid anger that raced through his veins and left him ominously relaxed, but with every sense and instinct alert.

"Come tomorrow morning, I'll still be in Bannock Valley, Schell," he said levelly. "I'll be here—and looking for you. I got a job ahead of me, one I've been preparing for since I was a kid. I'm going through with it. The Capells owe a debt to the Schells. I'm going to pay it off."

"Your polecat breed killed my uncle. You made a helpless cripple of my father. You filled the lives of the Capell women-folk with grief. And you did it by shooting good men in the back."

"You thought you'd broken the Capells forever. But there was one you overlooked because he was a kid then. But the Capells have long memories. Mine is the best of the lot."

"Here's one final thought for you to chew on. You, or any of the rest of your breed, never saw the day when you'd have a ghost of a show looking at me through smoke. You'll find it out when you try. And when the pits of hell open for you, Schell, don't say I didn't warn you."

Something in the bitter intensity, the cold ruthlessness of Lin Capell's tone, caught at Bud Schell's vitals, giving birth to a grim spectre of fear. His step faltered. He stopped, staring malignantly at Lin's lean figure, pushing steadily on

through the crowd. Bud Schell chewed his lips and went in search of his father.

At the chute, Lin found Buster Reams checking over his saddle. Buster had stripped the hull from Lin's pony and was testing the cinch and latigo. He grinned up at Lin.

"Gotta make sure things are right, Lin. You got some tough old onions to cook. You've drawn the Hashknife outfit's outlaw, War-bonnet, for your first ride. He's mean, War-bonnet is. One of them rubber-legged circle buckers."

Lin nodded. "Let him spin, Buster. The way I feel right now, he'll be just another horse."

Ernie Shore came over. He noted the still, cold fire in Lin's eyes.

"Don't take life too serious, Lin," said Ernie. "Any horse can be rode."

Lin shrugged. "Wasn't even thinking of that, cowboy. You kinda rubbed Nick Schell's nose in the dust on that bulldogging. You took a fool chance, but you sure put it over."

"I had to do it to beat him," Ernie said. "Nick's shore getting wringy, after being beat in everything so far. You know, he kinda fancies hisself as the best all-around man in the valley. He'll be riding for blood, Lin."

"Shouldn't wonder," said Lin coolly. "But he's wasting his time. Any hoss that throws me today will have to buck himself clear outa his hide."

The blare of the announcer's voice cut through. "Watch the chute! Toby Reed coming out on Crow-hop!"

The gate of the chute slammed back and a tangle of rider and horse shot out into the open. Dust beat upward, the crowd yelled. At the fifth jump Toby lost a stirrup and pulled leather to save himself. The timer's gun cracked and the pick-up riders dashed in. Toby had disqualified himself by pulling leather.

Toby came back to the chute grinning. "Go ahead," he told his joshers, "raw-hide me. But life's too short to git proud on a hoss. I was done anyhow, and I couldn't see no sense in taking a tumble. Now I'm gonna sit on the fence and laugh at the rest of you."

Four more rides were made, and the odds ended up even with these four. Two of the riders stuck. The other two got piled. Nobody was mad, and the vanquished riders joined Toby.

Lin's turn came. The War-bonnet horse was a stocky sorrel with a rolling eye. As Lin lowered himself into the saddle, Ernie laid a hand on his knee. "This bronc will do all his bucking on a dime, Lin," he said. "Keep your eyes high. You watch the ground, and he'll have you dizzy before you know it."

Lin found a strange pleasure in the explosion of muscular force beneath him. It fitted his mood exactly, gave outlet to the turbulent emotions that Bud Schell's words had unleashed. War-bonnet did his best, but Lin was still poised easily in the saddle when the timer's gun sounded and the pick-up riders closed in. The crowd cheered its appreciation of a real ride.

Lin crawled over the fence and rolled a cigarette. The Diamond D boys gathered around him joyously. "Boy," yelled Donny Decker, "I *know* my fifteen bucks are safe now. You sure looked good up there, Lin."

Came the announcer's voice. "Nick Schell coming out on Rainy Day!"

Schell made a mechanically perfect ride, scratching his mount in the approved manner, fanning its ears with his hat, holding the reins high and easy in his left hand. He got a round of applause fully equal to that which had followed Lin's ride.

"It's going to simmer down to you two," predicted Buck Desmond. "But you still look good to me, Lin. I'm gonna circulate and pick up a few more bets."

Desmond's prediction came true. The other two surviving riders were both dumped at their second attempt.

Tex Alward sauntered up. "Schell drew old Mud-pup for his next turn," he announced. "You get Green River, Lin. There's riding ahead for you two."

Lin went out on Green River, a raw-boned, powerful blue roan—a crashing, punishing buckner that knew all the tricks.

A GAIN cold fire mounted in Lin. This contest with one of the Schells had taken on significance. It was more than

just a competition of skill and balance and endurance. With Lin it had become a question of proof—proof that a Capell was a better man than a Schell. It was the crystallization of all that Lin had thought and felt through the years. He rode Green River to a last foaming, raging finish. As he climbed the fence amid the thunder of applause, a thin trickle of blood was seeping from his nose.

The Diamond D boys swarmed around him. Donny Decker dashed off and came back with a water soaked handkerchief, to cleanse the blood from Lin's face.

"Gawdalmighty!" panted the youngster. "That was riding, I'll tell a man! Schell's gotta stay with Mud-pup like nobody ever has yet, or he hasn't a chance."

They all crowded to the fence then, to watch Nick Schell come out on Mud-pup.

The horse stood deceptively docile while being saddled. It sagged sleepily on three legs, head low and innocent. Buster Reams grinned happily. "Mud-pup looked just that way the time he tossed Bill Anson clear over the blacksmith shop, one day in Big Pine. The dynamite is brewing, and it'll pop just as soon as Mud-pup clears the chute."

Buster was a good prophet. Lin Capell had watched a lot of famed outlaws at work, but he never saw the equal of the terrific, driving, mad eruption of horse-flesh that now took place. There was no beginning or end to this animal. A whirling, mad, four-footed dervish, a dynamo of fire and fight. A roar rose from the crowd, then fell to a regretful sigh. Nick Schell was twisted off balance, where he hung gamely for a moment. Then he was thrown clear, to roll end-over-end in the dust. He got up, staggering dizzily, his face black with anger and mortification. One of the pick-up riders swung to the ground, offering his hand to steady the thrown rider. But Schell threw the proffered arm aside and came over to where the Diamond D boys were larruping Lin joyously about the shoulders. Schell looked at Lin savagely.

"You won because you drew a lot of cream-puff buckers," he growled. "You had all the luck."

"Aw, g'wan!" burst out Donny Decker. "He beat you fair and square, Schell. Be on the level about it."

Schell glared at Donny. "That loose jaw of yours will get you into trouble one of these days."

Lin's face had tightened to the old, fighting set. "If you feel that way about it, Schell, I'll make you like it whether you want to or not."

Lin vaulted the fence and crossed to the judges, speaking directly to Alec Gallatin.

"Schell feels that he got the worst of the drawing," he said crisply. "Mebbe he did at that. I aim to make it an equal break. I'd like to try a ride on Mud-pup. How about it?"

Gallatin shrugged and turned to the other judges. At his question they stared at Lin, then nodded. "Understand, young feller," said one of them. "You don't have to do this. If Schell is sour about it, it don't affect our decision any. There's always some luck in the draw."

"I savvy that," said Lin. "Just the same, I want a ride on Mud-pup."

"Fly to it," grinned the judge, "it's your funeral. If you make a ride of it, I'll shore buy you a drink."

Alec Gallatin accompanied Lin over to the announcer. Gallatin looked worried. "Why not let it stand, Capell?" he said. "No use moving to stir up trouble. Nick's liable to get hostile."

Lin's lips quirked in a cold smile. "A Capell always was a better man than any Schell ever born, Gallatin. I aim to jam that fact down the throats of everybody in Bannock Valley."

Gallatin said no more, but a queer, hunted expression came into his eyes.

Lin made known his intention to the announcer, who looked amazed and then turned to Gallatin for instructions.

"Go ahead," Gallatin said. "Announce it."

The announcer cupped his hands. "Ladie-es and gentlemen! At his own request, Lin Capell of the Diamond D, winner of the bronc busting contest just finished, will make a ride on Mud-pup. *Watch the chute!*"

For a moment there was silence. Then came a roar of enthusiasm. This slim, tawny-haired young rider, with the lean, clean-cut features, had made a hit with the majority of the crowd. They cheered wildly.

But Donny Decker and the rest of the Diamond D boys were fit to be tied.

"Now he has upset the beans," Donny moaned. "Schell put out the bait and Lin grabbed it. He can't ride Mud-pup. No man can."

"Keep your shirt on," soothed Ernie Shore. "Lin knows his business. It's just barely possible, you know, that Lin Capell is the best rider ever to put foot in this valley. And win, lose, or draw, you got to hand it to him. He's got what it takes."

On the opposite side of the corral there was another person who heard the announcement with a fluttery feeling in her heart. Starr Gallatin had watched both of Lin's previous rides with bated breath and glowing eyes. Something about him reached out and caught her up, setting her heart to thundering, her eyes to shining. In his pocket, over his heart, he carried her handkerchief—her favor—which he was carrying with the splendid nonchalance of a knight of old. She found that she was gripping the rail of the corral with a vehemence that left her hands strained and aching.

Buck Desmond, Tex Alward—all the Diamond D contingent—grouped around the chute as Lin cinched his saddle onto the lazy, relaxed, deceptive carcass of Mud-pup.

"If there was any pet trick this brute used most, I'd put you wise, Lin," said Tex. "But he knows all the tricks. He's just plain hell a-wheelin'."

"It'll probably be a pretty good scrap," Lin said. "Buck, tell 'em to call the pick-up riders off. This goes to a finish."

Donny moaned again. "He's asking for it, he's asking for it!"

Lin grinned. "Donny, you old wet-blanket, if it'll make you feel any better, go order me a bunch of flowers. Put 'em on my grave. Okay, boys—turn him loose!"

The crowd had been quick to grasp the

significance of the pick-up riders drawing aside. They began to yell and they kept it up. The announcer could barely make himself heard.

"Lin Capell—comin' out in a finish fight—on Mud-pup! *Watch the chute!*"

CHAPTER FOUR

THE TRAIL STRAIGHTENS

IT seemed as if the horse realized that this was to be a fight for absolute mastery, a raw, smashing battle to a finish. Mud-pup started out almost easily, bucking straight ahead, as though to get the feel of this human clamped upon his back. Lin was not deceived. He rode those first jumps easily, conserving his strength for the heavy going, sure to come.

Half way across the corral, Mud-pup got down to work in earnest. He began whirling round and round, the tempo speeding up. Lin raked the horse from shoulder to flank, yanked off his hat and fanned the laid back ears. He got instant response.

Mud-pup squealed, a knife-like sound, vicious and demoniac. And he turned loose every pent ounce of ferocity in him. Lin felt as if he were a-top a continuous series of dynamite explosions. The horse's spine became a steel rod, coiling and uncoiling, pounding, pounding, pounding—

The sight and sound of the crowd grew hazy, indistinct, farther and farther away. It vanished altogether in the awful chaos of physical punishment that Lin was taking now. Each shock ran up his spine to the base of his brain, until it seemed a red-hot coal was there, growing and growing. Blood was on Lin's lips, in his mouth—salty, hot blood. His own.

He felt the wild brute rise up and up, then topple swiftly backward. Starr Gallatin, watching through tear-blurred eyes, screamed. It seemed that the slim figure of the rider had been blotted out by the crashing body of the horse. But as the animal surged anew to its feet, there in the saddle again was Lin Capell, indomitable, beyond defeat.

Lather encrusted the horse now, rolls

and gobs of it, spattering pale-yellow in the air. Mud-pup reared again, as if to go over backward. A clubbed fist between the ears drove the brute down, where the mad cataclysm began anew.

It seemed to Lin that he had been riding this equine tornado for eons. He was riding purely by instinct now. His mind had long since absorbed all of that terrific pounding it could. His body was a scalding torture. Every nerve was afire, shrieking for surcease, for rest. But instinct kept him in that saddle—instinct and a grim, cold unconquerable will to win, which sprang from some deep well within.

Gradually the horse weakened. Its squealing fell away to short, coughing grunts. Lather fell from it in dirty flakes.

It was Ernie Shore who read the inevitable finish.

"Mud-pup's licked—he's licked!" Ernie yelled. "His tail's down. He's licked! Oh, you Lin! Ride him, ride him—you've got him licked, cowboy!"

Mud-pup began to run. He was through, as Ernie had yelled. He circled the corral once, then stopped, legs spread wide, head down, flanks heaving spasmodically.

For a moment Lin sat still in the saddle. His hat was gone and the sun glinted on his tawny head. His face was a blur of blood, which poured from his nose and mouth. There were men in the crowd who cheered—and there were women who wept. Starr Gallatin was sobbing brokenly.

Slowly, very slowly, Lin dismounted. His knees buckled as though he would fall, but he straightened, holding to the horn of his saddle. Slowly he stepped up to Mud-pup's head. One arm went about the gallant brute's neck. There they stood in the slanting sunlight, victor and vanquished.

THE crowd swarmed into the arena. Back by the chute, Buck Desmond turned to Tex Alward. His voice was choked and thick.

"From here on out, everything I own goes into the fight to help that kid win back what was taken from his Dad years ago."

Tex nodded. "Yeah. I ride the river with Lin, too."

Ernie and Buster and Donny had Lin now. Despite his struggles, they hoisted him to their shoulders. Their eyes were wild, their throats hoarse from cheering. Lin grinned at them and made the best of his precarious position. He finally fought free of them and headed for the river, to wash up.

The chill water was like some magic salve. The touch of it cooled and soothed him. The fire at the back of his skull left, and his taut muscles relaxed.

Someone dropped down beside him. It was Starr Gallatin, her face still pale, her eyes misty.

"That was magnificent, Lin," she said softly. "You made history in Bannock Valley today. And I'd like my favor back. It means something now."

Lin patted his shirt pocket, shaking his head. "I feel I earned that favor. I aim to keep it. It meant plenty to me all the time. There was one time—in there—when I figgered I was a gonner. But I remembered what I was packing, and that kept me in the fight."

Starr nodded. "All right. And you certainly did earn it! Never have I seen such a ride!"

Lin grinned. "Never do I want to tackle another like it. Mud-pup is a horse, I'll tell a man!"

It was inevitable that the crowd should seek Lin out. They showered him with praise, much to Lin's discomfort. Nowhere did he see either of the Schells. Ernie told him that he had seen the three of them riding away, right after Lin's victory. "Sour as sand owls, they looked to me," Ernie said, "but who cares?"

With the approach of sunset, the crowd began to dwindle. Buckboards were hitched and went rolling off. Saddle ponies jogged out into the dusk. The day's fun was over, people were going home. Buck Desmond gathered his outfit around him, ready to leave.

Alec Gallatin came up, his brow furrowed, his eyes shadowed.

"I'd like a few words in private with you, Capell," he said.

Lin looked at him steadily, then nodded. "All right, Buck, you and the boys needn't wait. I'll catch up with you."

As the rest of the Diamond D rode off, Lin stepped from his saddle. "Shoot," he said.

I CAN put two and two together," Gallatin said. "I think I know why you're here in Bannock Valley, Capell—and I know just about what you're thinking. You're probably wrong, and I reckon you'll find it out in time. But what I wanted to say to you was for your own good. If you're wise, you'll shake Bannock Valley dust from your boots tonight. If you don't, your chances of leaving this valley alive are plenty slim. Believe me, I know."

Lin's eyes slitted. "That makes it plumb unanimous, Gallatin."

Gallatin looked puzzled. "I don't get you. What do you mean?"

"Bud Schell gave me the same warning—or mebbe, to be more exact, the same threat. But threats never did scare me. I reckon I'll stick around."

"Don't be a fool!" rasped the cattleman. "I'm not making any threats. I'm giving you a well meant warning. I know the people in this valley, know 'em through and through. I know how some of 'em work—and it's not pleasant."

"So my old Dad told me many times before he died," said Lin, with low, savage bitterness. "I understand you were present at that demonstration."

Gallatin stiffened, his eyes meeting Lin's steadily and squarely. "I was there at the finish. I half killed a horse getting there. And if I hadn't arrived when I did, no Capell would ever have left this valley alive. And that takes in women and kids. I killed one man that night. It wasn't a Capell. It was one of the raiders who wouldn't quit when I told him to. I had no hand in that raid—nor in the planning of it. It's true I didn't get along any too well with the Capells. I was younger then—and hot-headed. They were the same. We quarreled over things we'd have laughed at, had we been older. But I had no hand in that raid, and I put a stop to

it as soon as I learned it was going on. That's gospel, Capell—whether you believe it or not."

Lin was thoughtful. "I'd like powerful well to believe that, Gallatin."

The cattleman shrugged. "I don't expect you to. I've heard the story so many times, connecting me with that hellish raid, that I've given up trying to deny it. I was there at the end of it, and I was recognized. But nobody ever gave me credit for the reason I showed up."

"It's been on your conscience," Lin said. "I could see that, the way you looked when you heard my name."

"That's right," said Gallatin simply. "I've never been able to forgive myself for not arriving in time to stop the whole thing."

Lin was merciless. "Yet you're still good friends with them that did it."

Gallatin shrugged. "The years go by. And the older I get, the more I want to live in peace, and with the good-will of them around me. There wasn't anything to be gained by carrying the fuss along. After all, it was somebody else's fight, not mine. And I had done all I could to stop it. Time has a way of hazing things over. On hearing your name I was disturbed most with the thought that your being here might start trouble in Bannock Valley. I don't like trouble any more—even if it's the other feller who's having it."

"You're afraid of the Schells," Lin said.

Alec Gallatin nodded. "In a way I am—yeah. Not when it comes right down to brass tacks, you understand. In a pinch, I'm afraid of no man. But Schell nature is explosive. It's dangerous. If they go on the rampage again, there's no telling who they'll hurt. And as I said before, I don't want trouble, not anywhere around me. Reckon I'm getting old."

Lin was silent, building a cigarette. His lean head nodded slowly.

"I reckon I understand," he drawled quietly. "But you've got to consider my side as well as the other feller's. I'm not leaving Bannock Valley, Gallatin—I'm sticking. And the men responsible for the

breaking up of the Capell family are going to have to pay me. I can't see things any other way."

The cattleman shrugged. "And that's that, looks like. Well, if I was in your place—and your age—I'd probably feel the same. Just the same—well, I'd like to feel that I was your friend, Capell. I'd like to be sure there was no quarrel between us. Before Gawd, I never harmed a Capell."

Lin's glance was swift, keen. His hand went out.

"I believe that. Shake. Friends it is."

SHORTLY after sunup the following morning, one of Pete Schell's punchers jogged up to the Diamond D. He sought out Buck Desmond and handed him a scrawled note. It read:

Desmond:

Fire Capell or you'll answer to me.

PETE SCHELL

Buck Desmond read the words over twice, cursed savagely and whirled to Tex Alward. "You pack a pencil, Tex? Let's have it!"

Placing Schell's note against the side of the feed shed, Desmond wrote his answer across the back of it.

Go to blazes.

DESMOND

He handed the note to the puncher. "Give that to Schell," he growled. "Tell him he's overplaying his hand. Tell him to turn his wolf loose—and be damned to him. That's all."

The puncher nodded, took the note and rode away. Desmond stamped about, swearing steadily.

"Well?" drawled Tex. "I'm plumb curious."

"Schell had the doggone gall to order me to fire Lin Capell, or take the consequences. Said I'd answer to him if I didn't. By Gawd, I've side-stepped that poison-hearted outfit long enough, Tex. From now on out, the first one of 'em who looks cross-eyed at me—I knock his ears down. I told him to go jump in the lake."

Tex smiled grimly. "Good work, Buck. The Schell crowd are overdue. Well, them who hunt trouble long enough 'most always bump into more than they can handle. I'm wondering which side Alec Gallatin will take."

"I'm finding out right now," Desmond snapped. "Cinch my kak on a bronc."

The first person Buck Desmond saw at the Rocking G was Starr. She greeted him with a bright smile, very attractive, in a simple gingham dress, as she pattered about among the blooms of a little flower garden.

"Your dad around, Miss Starr?" he asked.

Starr nodded. "He's in the house, talking with Pete Schell. Go right in, Mr. Desmond."

"Thanks," said Buck, swinging to the ground. Glancing around, he saw two Sleeping S broncs standing ground-reined in the shade of a nearby sycamore. Down below the corrals, where two Rocking G riders were greasing the wheels of a buckboard, stood Nick Schell, looking on.

Buck went into the house and, guided by the sound of voices, found his way to the little outside room Alec Gallatin used as his office. Buck clumped along heavily to let them know of his approach, and the voices ceased. He paused in the doorway of the room, glancing swiftly over the two men seated in there. He saw that Pete Schell was sulky, and that there was a glint of anger in Alec Gallatin's eyes.

"Howdy," said Buck. "Go ahead with your talk. Mebbe it'll interest me."

Gallatin nodded toward a chair. "Schell and me are about through," he rasped. It seemed to Desmond that there was a slight emphasis on the word "through." He took the chair and built a smoke. Then he looked directly at Schell.

"I got your note," he drawled. "And I answered it. Nothing wrong with your gall, Schell. My answer was that you could go to blazes."

Schell snarled. "You're inviting trouble, Desmond."

Buck shrugged. "You push your jaw out far enough and somebody is sure to hit it, Schell. I'll run my own business my own way. For a long time now, you've

acted like you were the big boss in this valley. You've tramped on the toes of a lot of us smaller ranchers, and never so much as begged our pardon. A man can take just so much of that sort of treatment before he bows his neck. Mine is bowed plenty now. Don't ever get it into your head that I'm scared of you, Schell—I'm not."

Gallatin was looking from one to the other of them, his expression puzzled. "Is this argument private?" he asked.

"None a-tall," answered Desmond. "Schell sent word to me this morning that I better fire Lin Capell or take the consequences. I aim to take the consequences. I come over to find out where you stand on the same proposition, Alec."

"I just told Pete where I stood. I'm minding my own business. As far as I'm concerned, young Capell can spend the rest of his life in Bannock Valley, and all the time he's here, him and me'll be friends."

Pete Schell snarled, his china-blue eyes slitted and moiling. "Yah!" he blurted. "You're turning soft, Gallatin. I can remember a time when you used other tactics with the Capells."

Alec Gallatin came to his feet, his eyes flashing.

"Now is a good time to nail that lie you've been careful to keep alive, Schell," he rasped. "You know damn well I had no part in the raid that just about wiped out the Capells. You know that I nigh killed a horse getting there to stop it. You know that I gunned Soapy Coulter because he suggested wiping out every last Capell, women and kids included. So you try and circulate that lie any more and I'll jam it down your throat. Also and besides, I'm changing the stand I just said I was taking. I'm not only gonna be friends with Lin Capell, I'm backing him every step of the way. Chew on that!"

Pete Schell stood up.

"So that's how the sign reads, eh?" he sneered. "A new band-wagon has come rolling along and you're climbing on it. Well, I see days ahead when you'll wish you were back on the old one. That goes for both of you!"

He picked up his hat and swaggered out. Desmond stepped over to Gallatin, his hand outstretched.

"I reckon I just heard the true part you played in that Capell raid years ago, Alec. I had you figgered wrong all the time. I'm apologizing. Shake!"

"I'm fed up on Schell," Gallatin fumed as he wrung Buck's hand. "For years I've been trying to get along with him, to humor him in this and that—always because I couldn't see no sense in fighting. But I'm through with him now. And if he starts something, by Gawd I'll finish it for him!"

CHAPTER FIVE

"I'LL BE WAITING"

THE next week passed quietly enough. Less than a dozen men knew of the ominous cloud of trouble gathering over the calm and pleasant stretches of Bannock Valley, or recognized its cause. Most of these men said nothing. They went about their daily toil, waiting and watching. As the days rolled peacefully on, one into another, some of these men began to hope that the trouble would not break after all; that the Schell threat was only bluff. They hoped that in the realization that other powerful outfits in the valley were entirely out of sympathy with their stand, the Schells would back down.

Lin Capell was not fooled, however. A certain tenseness, a wariness, was with him all the time. He was ever on the alert when riding the range. He kept off the tops of ridges, was careful at all times not to outline himself against the sky, where he might make a target for a dry-gulching bullet. In the end a showdown was inevitable. Lin knew that. He knew that it would come, even if he had to force it himself. He had carried the determination to pay the long overdue debt too long to forget it now, and his conviction that the payment was justified was too great.

One evening he slipped away from the Diamond D and headed his pony for the Rocking G. He had not seen Starr Gallatin since the day of the fiesta, and he

could not stifle his longing for the husky trill of her voice, the glow of her eyes, and the magnetic quality she possessed for him.

When he had first come to Bannock Valley, it had been with the firm conviction that anything connected with the name of Gallatin or Schell would be anathema, an object of everlasting hate to him. The set-up was different now. Alec Gallatin had looked him in the eye and told the truth of his connection with the ancient raid. He and Lin had struck hands with words of friendship between them. And Starr Gallatin, slim, dark and vibrant, had reached out one small, brown hand and taken Lin's heart.

Lin could not as yet analyze his true feelings toward the girl. His past years had been filled with but one thought, one determination—the rendering of payment in full for the foul deed that had brought the Capell family from high estate to a broken clan, scattered and stricken. There had been no women in his life. There had been no room for them in his hard, bitter scheme of retribution.

Since meeting Starr Gallatin, however, a new element had moved into his life. The old, long thought-out lines of procedure had become somewhat confused. He had had to take time out and formulate a new course of action. No longer was it merely an open issue between himself and those who had despoiled. Now he clearly understood that this feud between himself and the Schells bade fair to pitch the entire valley into battle of some sort. Buck Desmond had told him frankly that he was backing him to a finish. In a showdown, Lin believed that Alec Gallatin would string along with his interests. And in spite of his grim determination to carry through his original plan of punishment and retribution to the Schells, Lin hesitated at bringing others into his quarrel and having them pay some price for their support of him. With these thoughts in his mind, he was somewhat moody when he reached the Rocking G.

He jogged up to the ranch house through the warm, purple dusk and found Starr and her father sitting on the porch

of the house. They both greeted him with unaffected pleasure. Starr in particular seemed a little breathless at his arrival. She came down the steps to meet him, a gliding, shadowy figure, an unreadable warmth in her eyes.

"This saves my self-respect, Lin," she told him softly, as she laid her hand in his. "Not hearing a word from you, nor seeing you for a week, had me worried. I don't believe I could have stood it another day. I'd probably have ridden over to the Diamond D tomorrow."

Lin gripped her hand tightly. "That makes a pair of us," he said. "I couldn't stay away any longer, Starr. Something is wrong with me. There's a hunger in me I never knew before. I—"

She reached out a fragrant palm and placed it against his lips. "Not now," she whispered, her voice unsteady. "Dad's on the porch. You can tell me all that later."

Lin smiled and followed her up on the porch. Alec Gallatin got up and stretched out his hand.

"Evening, lad," he rumbled. "Glad you rode over. How's things been with you since the fiesta?"

"Quiet," said Lin. "Been working and waiting—pretty watchful."

"Nothing has happened?"

Lin shook his head. "Got a hunch something will break, though, before long. I'm not going to sleep on the job."

"That's wise," said Gallatin. "Don't I wish there was some way to settle this matter without—"

"There's not," Lin said, a grim note coming into his voice. "Mebbe my outlook on this thing seems pretty warped and vengeful to you. But nobody knows—well, some of the years I been through."

Gallatin was silent a moment, his face set in brooding, thoughtful lines. "You go ahead, lad. I wouldn't preach to you. I think mebbe I understand better than you imagine. And I'm glad of this chance to let you know that I'm playing your hand with you. But don't take no fool chances. Let them make the first move. Then when you call 'em, Buck Desmond and me'll be behind you."

"The more thought I give this affair,

the more I'm coming to realize that the Schells never have been what you'd call an asset to Bannock Valley. They've took to tromping higher and harder all the time. Sooner or later some sort of break would have come anyhow, I reckon. They're that kind. Well, I got some letters to write and some tally sheets to work over. I better get at it."

STARR curled up in a hammock and Lin pulled up a chair, building a cigarette. As he lit it, Starr studied his face in the match glow. A quiet, brown mask of a face it was, with the slow push of the night wind ruffling his tawny hair. A strong face, with grim angles about it, yet a boyish, very appealing face.

He spoke with sudden forcefulness. "Before I hit this valley, there was just one clear trail ahead of me. I knew that trail, every foot of it, for I'd thought it out and gone over it in my mind a thousand times. Now—I don't know. A lot of different currents seem to have got hold of me, pulling me in different directions. There's just two of 'em that are direct and sure. One of them is pushing me to a showdown with the Schells. That's sure and strong. The other—well, it's carrying me just as strong. I—I hardly know how to say what I want to."

He paused. Starr stirred. She spoke softly, a huskiness in her voice.

"I'll wait, Lin. Only—don't say a word that you don't mean."

Lin grinned at that.

"It's like this," he went on, a trifle desperately. "I've led a pretty tough life. Had my dad to take care of—had a long line of memories to drag at me, and a trail of vengeance to chart. I'm set on that angle. Nothing can change me there. Now you've come into my life."

"You take hold of me, girl. Outa nowhere, seems like, you've stepped into my life, looming so strong and big you just about blot out the sight of everything else—except the Schells. I never knew that life could hold the color and the warmth and—and the dreams that it does, until I met you."

"How I'm gonna come out of this show-

down with the Schells, Lord only knows. I aim to find out—quick. And if I do come clear, Starr, then I'm riding direct to you. I aim to take you in my arms and tell you all that's in here." He tapped his breast lightly.

Starr sat up very straight. She looked at him, her eyes warm and luminous as caressing candlelights.

"I—I never knew that anyone could be so simply honest and decent as you, Lin Capell," she said softly. "I can only say that when you come to me finally, I'll be waiting."

Lin got to his feet, half stepped toward her, then snapped to a stop, tall and straight. "No," he said. "Not now. I've got to wait until that other is finished—until it's finished for better or worse. I'm—well, good night, Starr."

He went off the porch swiftly, Starr followed him as far as the stairs. She stood there, her hands creeping to her throat, her eyes straining through the darkness, picturing the lithe, lean strength of him as he swept into the saddle.

"Lin," she cried, a sob catching at her throat. "Lin! Be careful! Please, for the sake of both of us!"

His voice carried to her, grim with unalterable purpose.

"By tomorrow night—one way or the other. *Hasta luego!*"

Then remained only the departing patter of swiftly churning hoofs.

Starr Gallatin stood for a long time, there on the steps, the new-born radiance of the heavens filtering down upon her. Her lips moved, and twice she spoke his name, very softly.

"Lin! Lin!"

At last she turned slowly, went into the house and sought her father.

SHE perched on one arm of his chair and slid a soft arm about his neck. She indicated the tally lists he was frowning over.

"What's the big meaning behind all this work of yours, Dad? For years you've struggled and toiled and made sacrifices to build up the Rocking G herds, to expand the Rocking G range. Why?"

Gallatin scratched his head. "Doggone it, child, that's a tom-fool question! Why d'you suppose?"

"For me? To make my future secure?"

"That's right. You knew it all the time, but you're leading up to something else. You can't fool me. Where's Lin?"

"He's gone," said Starr, making an unsuccessful attempt to keep her voice steady. "He just left. He—he—oh, Dad, he's going to call a showdown with the Schells tomorrow. And I'm afraid. If anything happens to—to Lin, this ranch won't mean a thing to me."

Alec Gallatin pulled the girl to his knee, leaned back and stared at her, frowning. "Hm-m!" he rumbled. "So that's it, eh? You've gone and fallen in love on me; that's what you've done. You've let that lean, tawny-headed fire-eater of a kid just walk right off with your heart. I wondered why you've been moping around so the last week. You—you're quite sure, honey?"

She nodded. "Quite sure, Dad. It's—well, those things happen to people, I guess. And we don't know just why or how. But if anything happens to Lin Capell—"

Alec Gallatin cleared his throat and blinked. He drew the girl to him, holding her tight in the curve of his arm. "I've never let you down yet, Starr. And I'd be the poorest shucks of a dad in the world if I was to fail you now. I'll see the kid through, no matter what the cost. He's worth it. Now you run along to bed and let your ole dad take care of things."

Starr rewarded him with a kiss and went to her room.

Alone, Alec Gallatin sat for some time in frowning silence. Then he picked up his hat, blew out the light, and tiptoed from the house. Down at the bunkhouse he went into a period of tense conversation with Hobe Ringgold, his foreman. Ringgold went with Gallatin to the cavy corral, where Gallatin roped and saddled a bronco.

Ringgold watched Gallatin ride away into the night. Then he shrugged and turned toward the bunkhouse once more. "It had to come some day," he muttered.

"I'm old at this game. I know the signs. But the Schells won't take it—not easy. There'll be blood agin the sun tomorrow."

The Diamond D was asleep when Alec Gallatin rode in. He went quietly to the ranch house and tapped on Buck Desmond's window until he awakened him. Then, across the windowsill, these two grizzle-headed cattlemen talked for a long time.

"If it wasn't that the kid would never forgive me for stepping in ahead of him, I'd get Tex Alward and go see those Schells tonight. Tex Alward is hell a-wheelin' with a gun. And I ain't so bad," Desmond said. "Between the two of us we'd have the slate wiped clean in jig time. But Lin feels that part of the chore is his. We'll have to let him lead off, Alec. But you can bet we won't be far behind."

Gallatin rolled a cigarette as he prepared to leave. "Hobey Ringgold, Dick Patrick, and Mossy Bell will be waiting up at the old ford at the river bend tomorrow morning. Soon as Lin leaves, you cut in and pick us up, Buck. Then we'll trail the kid and back up his hand."

"Keno!" said Desmond. "G'night, Alec."

CHAPTER SIX

BLOOD AGAINST THE SUN

LIN CAPELL awakened to the realization that this day was to be the sternest in his life. Much would happen, and more would depend on what did happen. Within the next twenty-four hours he would taste either the ultimate victory or the bitterest dregs of defeat.

The issue might have been side-stepped. It might have been postponed. But the frame of mind that gripped Lin could harbor neither weakness nor delay. It seemed as though some inner fire had seized him and was driving him on.

He ate his breakfast in a preoccupied frame of mind, joining in none of the banter indulged in by the other riders. Ernie Shore did not say anything at the meal, but he did not miss Lin's mood.

And when Lin drifted down to the cavy corral and shook out his rope, Ernie jogged his elbow.

"If that look on your face means anything, cowboy, I'll trail along," Ernie drawled. "I ain't the best hand with a gun. Neither am I the worst."

Lin tossed his loop and went up the rope, hand over hand. "You're staying home and minding your own affairs," he said over his shoulder, his voice gruff. "It's always the fellow who's helping out that gets hurt. And I don't want your worthless life on my conscience."

Ernie grinned. "Listen to the man talk, will you!" he told the snubbing post. "Why, that thick-headed rannahan thinks that friends are only good to talk to. I don't reckon the idea ever hit him that real friends are folks who'll stick through thick and thin, in good going and bad. I see where I'll have to knock his ears down to drive some savvy into him."

Lin swallowed. This Ernie Shore was a prince. But it was a lone hand Lin meant to play. He spoke grimly, almost harshly.

"You stay put, cowboy. Else I'll nail your pants to that snubbing post and leave you there to starve."

Ernie said nothing more until Lin had cinched his saddle into place. He had rolled a cigarette and was sucking at it thoughtfully. When Lin swung astride and settled himself in the leather, Ernie stepped forward and laid a hand on Lin's chap-covered knee.

"Listen, you stubborn knot-head! You ain't fooling me one little bit. I know what's on your mind. See that you make a job of it. If you don't, why, me and the other boys will pick up where you leave off. Bud Schell makes a big play of being a gunfighter. At that, he's pretty good. He had to be, to fan Pecos Silver down. Silver was pretty smooth with a gun. Just the same, I'd say that Nick Schell was more dangerous with a .45 than Bud. Not so fast, mebbe—but more certain. Don't overplay your hand. I don't suppose it'd be a bit of use trying to argue you out of the idea?"

"None a-tall, Ernie," said Lin, his voice

smoother, more quiet. "This thing started a long way back. Just as long as I stay in Bannock Valley, it'd have to come some day. And I aim to stay here. Chuck your fears. I'll be riding home, right-side up. So long."

He spun his bronco and loped away. Ernie stared after him, frowning. Hardly had Lin disappeared when Buck Desmond came hurrying up, followed by Tex Alward and the rest of the gang.

"Cinch on your kaks," ordered Desmond. "We're ridin'."

LIN rode straight to the town of Big Pine. He was restless, in a chill, tense way. It seemed that his senses were inordinately sharpened. Along the trail to town he saw and heard things that he usually never particularly noticed; the flicker of movement as a coyote flitted past the point of a hog-back, the gleam of the sun on a starling's wing.

He found Big Pine drowsing lazily under the warm blanket of morning sun. He tethered his bronc in the shade of the blacksmith shop and sauntered slowly along the single street. There were several saloons in the town, and Lin moved past each one, glancing through the open doors as he did so. Aside from the bartenders and a swamper or two, the places were empty.

Noon came and passed. Lin killed time. He talked lazily with the blacksmith, a brawny-armed Scotchman named McDougall. He lunched on crackers and cheese purchased at the store and killed an hour chatting with Hoskins, the owner of the store. At three o'clock he was back at the blacksmith shop.

Big Pine was coming to life. Riders drifted in, gathering at the bars and card tables of the saloons. Buckboards came rattling down the street, funneling dust behind them. Ranchers and their wives filled the store. One man brought a team for McDougall to shoe.

Each entry Lin marked, waiting, waiting. And then, an hour before sunset, the Schells showed up, father and both sons. They stopped at the largest saloon, the Starlight. A certain tenseness gathered.

With the dust left by the hoofs of the Schell horses still winnowing in the still air, a compact group of riders drifted up to the old rodeo corral, set somewhat apart from the town. Here they dismounted, and awaited the orders of Buck Desmond and Alec Gallatin, who led them. All day these men had lain out in the brush beside the east trail, waiting for the Schells to show up. Now they were moving in to back up Lin Capell's hand.

Desmond turned to Ernie Shore, who was stamping about impatiently. "Ernie, you and Tex go down back of the Starlight. Stay there out of sight until you have to do your stuff. Buster, you and Donny git down to the other end of town and wait. The rest of us will spread around this end. Don't let Lin see you—or the Schells either—but when things break, get into it quick."

The riders slipped away, vanishing into the purple shadows gathering on the east side of the different buildings.

CAPELL walked to the door of the blacksmith shop, and stood warily looking over the street and its occupants. A sandaled Mexican came shuffling past. Lin tossed him a dollar.

"Listen, *amigo*. You go into the Starlight and tell the Schells that Lin Capell is in town. Savvy?"

The Mexican ducked and grinned, palming the dollar deftly. "*Si, Señor. Si.*"

Lin saw the Mexican disappear into the Starlight. The saloon was about a hundred yards distant. When that distance had been cut approximately in half, a sauntering puncher who was about to enter the place was brushed roughly aside and Bud Schell, followed by his brother and father, came lunging into view. They saw Lin immediately, and stopped short.

Lin walked steadily forward. The Schells spread out, at a hoarse, barking order from the father. In the shadow of the Starlight, Ernie Shore crouched, his lips a white, thin line.

"They get Lin," he blurted hoarsely, "and I blow 'em down."

"There'll be a pair of us, Ernie," said Tex Alward.

Lin moved closer. Thirty yards—twenty-five—twenty. Bud Schell cursed, his hands flashing down at the guns sagging against his thighs. Lin's right hand, swinging as he walked, swept forward. Miraculously it was tipped with blue-black steel, that spat a wicked, crimson tongue.

The slug caught Bud Schell at the waistline, sending him back, doubled up. He toppled forward on his face, without getting off a shot.

But now Nick Schell and his father were in action. Nick's first shot crashed into Lin's left thigh, whirling him half around, dropping him to the ground. Pete Schell's first bullet lifted Lin's hat cleanly off his head. Supporting himself in a half-lying, half-sitting position, Lin loosed his second shot with painful deliberateness. But at the blare of the gun, Nick Schell spun like a dervish, ran straight into his father and staggered backward, his spurred heels beating in the dust.

Pete Schell, squatting like a huge toad, was blasting lead furiously. Lin lifted his gun once more, only to have something strike his forearm a terrific blow, hurling his weapon aside.

An uncouth roar from his snarling lips, and Pete Schell went bounding forward, not unlike some kill-maddened ape. He stood over Lin, raised his gun to pump more lead into his victim's defenseless body. At that moment, with a sobbing curse, Ernie Shore fired. It was a long shot, but Ernie did not miss. Pete Schell turned a half somersault, clear over Lin, and flattened out as though he'd been hit with a post maul.

Then the street filled with running, shouting men. The rumbling echoes of the gunshots faded out.

Ernie Shore and Tex Alward were the first to reach Lin. Ernie's face was white and working as he dropped on his knees and made a swift examination. He fumbled clumsily at Lin's limp wrists, trying to find a pulse. Tex Alward pushed him out of the way.

"Lemme handle this, Ernie," the gaunt old Texan said quietly.

As Buck Desmond, Alec Gallatin, and the men of their outfits came racing up,

Tex straightened with a sigh of relief, and made his announcement clearly.

"Hard hit, but alive. Shoulder wound is the worst. But he's a stout young cub and oughta make the grade. Get Doc Kerchival. Ernie, you're the strongest—pack him easy over to the hotel."

Buck Desmond lingered behind, to look over the Schells. Hobey Ringgold gave the information. "Bud and Nick are done for. One bullet apiece, and dead center. Old Pete is alive. Whoever took that cut at him creased him neat as you please. He'll live to eat misery."

CHAPTER SEVEN

TRAIL'S END

THAT night, in the dingy hostler's room at the livery stable, five men sat in stern, grim conversation. One of them was Pete Schell. His face was white and lined with defeat. His head was blanketed with bandages. The other four present were Buck Desmond, Alec Gallatin, Tex Alward, and Hobey Ringgold. Alec Gallatin was speaking.

"No use trying to dodge the issue," he said. "Tonight we're talking straight, Schell. You know and I know what was the main reason of that raid you pulled years ago. It was to get hold of the range the Capell family controlled. You offered me half of the range if I'd join with you, and I told you to go to hell. But you made the raid and you hogged the range.

"It's on that stolen range that you've built your herds and your hold on this valley. But the past has a way of catching up with a man, Schell, and it's caught up with you today. You can't ride roughshod over the rights of other folks forever. Sooner or later you push your head into something that won't give way.

"More than once I figgered you'd tie into the Rocking G and wipe it out if you thought you could get away with it. Bud and Nick were getting ornerier all the time. They were starting gunplay at every chance. Your whole brood were liabilities to this valley, not assets. Now the reckoning day is here. Bud and Nick

went for their guns once too often. You were lucky—or mebbe unlucky—time will tell. But one thing is sure, you're through in Bannock Valley, Pete Schell."

Schell blustered, but defeat was in his eyes. "You can't run me outa Bannock Valley," he blurted. "You got me down now—you can even take my range away from me and make it stick—but you can't run me outa Bannock Valley."

Buck Desmond spoke. "We're not taking range away from anyone, Schell. We're merely seeing that the rightful owner gets back what has always been his. As for running you out of the valley, we won't have to do that, even if we intended to. There's others who'll perform that little chore. Too many men in this valley have felt the weight of your greed and meanness. Too many of them have been bullied around by you and yours. It's their turn now. We'll leave it to them to start you traveling. The deck's closed, Schell. You might as well realize it."

Schell got unsteadily to his feet. "Where's my hoss?" he snarled. "I'm leavin'."

He rode away into the night, a warped, beaten man, without friends, without kin. And it was around midnight that a great, livid glare lit up the night far out to the south. Attracted by it, ranchers and riders hurried over the miles. But they were too late to do anything about it. The headquarters of the Schell ranch, the seat of the heretofore mighty, was a raging mass of flames.

Men said that Pete Schell died in those flames that tragic night. Some said it was by accident, others swore by deliberate intent. Still others said that Schell had touched off the ranch buildings, then ridden out of Bannock Valley forever. At any event, he was never seen or heard of again. . . .

A MONTH had gone by since the day of that street battle by which the inhabitants of Big Pine would date time. It had been a hazy, weird, jumbled

month to Lin Capell. He had come out of the shadows slowly.

As he grew stronger, he had visitors. Starr Gallatin was very faithful, very gentle with him, yet a little distant. Ernie Shore spent hours at Lin's bedside, as Desmond and the other Diamond D men did. From them he learned the story of the fight's aftermath. He learned of the burning of the Schell ranch, and of the disappearance of Pete Schell.

"Get well in a hurry, son," Desmond grinned. "You got plenty of work and responsibility ahead of you now."

Lin listened with sober thoughtfulness, but right now he was not nearly so interested in worldly fortunes as he was over Starr's mood. He couldn't understand why she should be so aloof. Before he could find this out, he was moved from the hotel room. To his surprise he was taken to the Rocking G and placed in a cheery, sunny room, where he could look out across the sun-drenched range, and where the wind, sweet with the scent of distance, could play about his face. Here Doctor Kerchival visited him for the last time.

The doctor had been gone but a few minutes before the door opened and Starr came in. She was in gingham, starched and spotless and cool. Lin thought she was the most gorgeous thing he had ever seen.

She dropped on her knees by the side of his bed, smiled at him and kissed him on the mouth.

Presently she settled back, her feet curled beneath her. "The night before that dreadful, dreadful day, you promised to tell me all that was in your heart, Lin, when you came back to me. I told you I'd wait, and I have. But I'm awfully impatient."

He held her hand in both of his. There was much for him to tell, and he was still engrossed in the telling when the afternoon slipped away and the dusk came weaving its restful banners across a valley that was once more filled with peace. . . .

(The End.)



"That's the post at El Teb," Trent said bitterly. "The Arabs have surprised it. They're done for." (Page 110.)

HANDS OF THE IDOL

By

Major George Fielding Eliot

CHAPTER ONE

FOES STRIKE IN THE DARK



IN the native market place of the oasis El Tazelt, men walked softly in the afternoon sun, each with a furtive glance for his neighbor. For in the center of the market place stood a gallows, and from its cross-bar swung a corpse. The ghastly shadow lay black across the sun-baked square—and across the hearts of those who passed. Beneath the gibbet two native *goumiers*—police troopers—huddled.

From the end of the narrow street, which led away from the market place to the gardens surrounding the palatial Hotel Transatlantique, a grim-faced young man looked upon the sullen crowd, the gallows and the troopers with eyes that glinted like steel. He was tall, slender with the resilient slenderness of a rapier, and was very smartly attired in the khaki of the French colonial army. The green badges on his collar proclaimed him a Legionnaire; his polished riding-boots with their bright spurs told that he was a cavalryman; the double gold stripes on his cuffs and on his scarlet, rakishly-worn *kepi* an-

nounced that he held the rank of lieutenant. A lieutenant, then, of the cavalry regiment of the Foreign Legion, stationed at Sousse, from whence the motor-buses set out into this fringe of the Sahara in Southern Tunisia.

There were other things of interest about this officer. Across the left breast of his tunic stretched a row of ribbons. The blue and red of the Colonial Cross nestled beside the green and yellow of the far rarer *Medaille Militaire*, and the crimson of the Legion of Honor was not lacking. He stood there, tapping his boot with his riding-crop, while his gray eyes missed nothing of what was taking place in the teeming square.

His gaze came to rest, presently, on a girl who had just paused beside the gambling *goumiers*. A tourist, certainly. The lips of the officer tightened. She had no business here alone; orders had been given—

He started across the market place toward her, just as she lowered horror-widened eyes from the gibbet.

"What—what did he do, to be hanged?" she asked, in faltering French.

The *goumiers* looked up, startled. One of them answered.

"Assassin," he explained, and added a gesture as of one firing a pistol.

"Oh!" The girl shuddered.

"It is not quite true, that, mademoiselle," said a calm voice, speaking perfect French.

The girl turned swiftly. At her elbow was a burly man so muffled up in a brown burnous that nothing could be seen of his features save his remarkable eyes, dark and burning like pools of molten lava.

"This is no common murderer," he went on. "He was engaged in—ah—a political affair. Certainly one of these dogs of goumiers was killed in the resulting disturbance, but—"

"That will do!" the crisp, clipped accents of the young officer cut in. The goumiers sprang to their feet and snapped to the rigid posture of the salute. "Corporal," the lieutenant went on, "take this man to the office of the *commandant de place* and keep him there till I arrive. Mademoiselle, this is no place for unescorted ladies. Permit me to conduct you to your hotel."

The girl's eyes flashed.

"I am not aware, monsieur," she said, "that I have the honor of monsieur's acquaintance."

She meant to be quite crushing, but the lieutenant was not easily crushed. His hand closed on her arm, gently, but with unmistakable firmness.

"Permit me to conduct you to your hotel," he repeated.

"How dare you!" the girl began angrily, but was interrupted by the man in the brown burnous.

"Upon what charge am I arrested, *monsieur le lieutenant*?" he demanded.

"You are arrested because I order it!" the officer snapped. "What are you waiting for, Corporal?"

The goumier grabbed the man by the shoulder. "Get along with you," he commanded roughly.

The man in the brown burnous laughed low inside his cloak and moved slowly, almost disdainfully away, followed by the corporal.

"Now, mademoiselle, if you please," repeated the inflexible lieutenant.

"I won't go!" the girl cried. "Oh, I think you're hateful—I think all you French are hateful, the way you treat these poor natives! This one hanged, that one arrested just for speaking to me!"

A crowd of staring natives was collecting, watching the officer and the girl with unfriendly yet fearful eyes. In the forefront of the crowd stood two hook-nosed, rascally-looking villains whose striped haiks proclaimed them desert Arabs, yet they did not look like Arabs. They had the air of belonging to a more ancient and more evil race. Their beady eyes were fixed on the girl's flushed and lovely face.

"There is no time to argue, mademoiselle. Come along," the officer said sharply. "Clear this crowd away, goumier. Keep them moving."

The officer, retaining his grasp on the girl's arm, propelled her toward the hotel.

"I regret, mademoiselle, to have seemed rough with you, but there was very real danger. There are unusually stringent orders in force throughout this district, which is not under civil government, but is a military zone. Please accept my apologies if I have been rude."

"I think you have been *very* rude," the girl said. "And you have spoiled my day."

"I am sorry, mademoiselle. But here we are at the hotel; and here is your *conducteur*."

A fat little man in the white uniform of the C. G. T. came hurrying up, wringing his plump hands.

"Ah, Mademoiselle Marsland! So glad I am to see you safe!"

"No thanks to you!" snapped the Legion Officer. "What do you mean by allowing a lady of your party to wander off alone into the native quarter, *conducteur*? You were informed of the special regulations on that subject before you left Sousse, weren't you?"

"*Mais oui, mon lieutenant!*" wailed the guide. "But this mademoiselle, she is American, and who shall say no to an American young lady?"

"See that it doesn't happen again," the lieutenant said curtly. "If there's any more laxness, I'll send an official report to your

superiors." He turned to the girl, lifting a hand to the visor of his *kepi* in salute. "Mademoiselle, I am Lieutenant Trent of the Bureaux Arabes. If I can serve you in any way during your stay at El Tazelt, command me. Good afternoon."

He turned on his spurred heel and strode away. Despite her anger, Sally Marsland's eyes followed him with an interest she would not admit.

"The Bureaux Arabes?" she repeated. "Conducteur, what is that?"

"Intelligence service," the guide answered. "Department of Native Affairs. The officers of that service are picked most carefully. They are everywhere, they see everything, they know everything that goes on from Algiers to the Gulf of Guinea, from Casablanca to Sousse. Ai-ee mademoiselle, I hope that lieutenant makes no report about me. If he does, *zut!* I am out of the job!"

"I'll stay in the hotel all evening, and we're leaving in the morning, so I suppose there'll be no more trouble. Don't worry, conducteur."

JOHN TRENT turned at the door of a whitewashed building, beneath a tricolored shield bearing the initials of the French Republic. An Algerian soldier-clerk sprang up from a desk just inside the entrance and hurried forward.

"*Mon lieutenant!*" he babbled excitedly. "*Monsieur le commandant* wishes you to come to him immediately. There's the devil to pay. Corporal Achmed's been found stabbed, in an alley off the market square."

"The hell you say!" Trent strode toward the door of the commandant's office. Achmed was the trooper whom Trent had ordered to take the man in the brown burnous to headquarters only a few moments ago. And now he was dead!

Trent shoved open the door and entered, saluting a parched, gray-mustached little man who leaned wearily back in a swivel chair behind a desk littered with papers, engaged in questioning two *goumiers*, who stood at attention before him.

"Did Achmed bring a prisoner in here before they got him, *mon commandant?*"

was Trent's sharp, interrupting question.

The little major turned tired eyes on his subordinate. "No. I had heard nothing of him since he went out on death-watch detail this morning, until these two men, on patrol, found his dead body and brought it in. It's back in the squad-room. Stabbed once—neatly—right to the heart. What's this about a prisoner?"

The commandant gave the impression of being bored to death with the whole affair. But Trent knew that Commandant Lepage was one of the keenest minds of the whole bureau. Not for nothing had the General placed him in command of this crucial district, here on the turbulent frontier between French Tunisia and Italian Libia, with rumors of native risings and raids on caravans pouring in daily and only a woefully weak garrison to support him.

"I sent him in with a rascal I didn't like the looks of," Trent answered. "Man in a brown burnous—heavy-set, about my height, big brown eyes, dark complexion. Not a native, I think; more likely a Greek or a Levantine, or perhaps an Italian. He seemed sympathetic with Ali ben Daoud, a-swing out there on the gallows—described the raid on the hotel as a political affair—"

"A political affair! Ye gods!" interrupted the major, suddenly sitting up very straight.

"Precisely my reaction, sir. I thought he'd bear questioning," finished Trent.

"Get out, you two!" rasped Lepage at the troopers. "Give that description to your sergeant; have the oasis searched for this fellow in the brown burnous. Hurry—it's getting late. Bring him in without fail."

"*Oui, mon commandant!*" The *goumiers* hurried away.

Trent dropped into a chair, and in terse words told the major just what had happened in the market place.

"The plot," he wound up, "thickens, eh, Major?"

Lepage nodded glumly.

"I can't understand it," he said in his dry voice. "They're after women—white women. That's certain. First we have the attempt to carry off the hotel manager's

daughter a week ago. At least a dozen rascals involved, all of whom got away except this Ali ben Daoud. He won't talk; obviously he's afraid to; he goes in trembling silence to the gallows.

"Second, the raid on the caravan bringing Mademoiselle Franchette, the explorer, back from the interior. Twenty mounted men; they try for no loot, just grab Franchette and make off. Luckily for her, they run into a Spahi patrol. Franchette saved, one raider killed, nobody caught.

"Third, we have a report from Sousse of a deliberate broad-daylight attempt to snatch an Englishwoman right off the street. Three men concerned; two killed while resisting arrest, the other stabs himself to the heart while the goumiers are dragging him to the station.

"All these various men appear to be Arab tribesmen, yet not one of our officers who has seen them can tell to what tribe they belong by their appearance and dress—except ben Daoud, and he was just a rat from the slums of Sousse. Our native agents are just as much at fault, and indeed appear to be afraid to even look at the dead men. Now we have this stranger in the brown burnous speaking to your Mademoiselle Marsland in the square, talking of this accursed business as 'a political affair'—and stabbing the policeman who was bringing him here. It is too much. I have served in North Africa all my life, but I must say that I cannot understand it."

"I know it's queer," Trent agreed. "This business of trying to kidnap white women—snatching for ransom—why, the devils know they can't get away with anything like that in French territory!"

"I know, I know. That's why I hanged ben Daoud so publicly—as a warning. Trent, I'm not so sure that it is ransom these would-be kidnapers are after!"

"Not ransom!" Trent repeated. "Then in God's name what *are* they after?"

"You may or may not have noted from the reports, Trent," the major went on, "that all three of the women concerned are young and pretty. And Mademoiselle Marsland—?"

"She's beautiful," said Trent.

"Ah—so?" The major twisted the scraggly end of his mustache and permitted himself a dry chuckle. "Well, Trent—"

"Sheik stuff, eh? They couldn't get away with that, either. The Spahis and troopers would follow them to hell, and they know it."

"As you say, my good Trent," the major agreed. "Yet it is my considered opinion that there is some hidden motive some devilish, horrible motive, behind all this. The attempts are too persistent, too well organized. And who are these unknown tribesmen?"

"They are not concerned alone," Trent pointed out. "Ben Daoud is a Sousse scoundrel with a police record; there were Arabs of the Beni Gherza tribe in the raid on the caravan. The Spahi adjutant is sure of that."

"*Bien!* But these strangers will be the leaders, *n'est-ce pas?* Who are they, and why are they after white women?"


Trent shook his head. He started to admit that he didn't know and couldn't guess, when the telephone on the commandant's desk emitted a preliminary click and then rang with that insistent shrillness peculiar to French phones.

The commandant spoke into the instrument, listened a moment and ejaculated a curse.

"They're at it again!" he snarled. "Some trouble at the hotel. Mademoiselle Marsland. Get over there, Trent—quick!"

CHAPTER TWO

THE WHITE SHEIK TAKES CAPTIVES

HEN Sally Marsland reached her room in the Hotel Transatlantique she looked about at its luxurious appointments with a queer sense of unreality. Out there in the square, the corpse on its gibbet, stark death in all its ugliness; here, spotless linen, soft rugs, electric lights and a purring fan.

It was almost incredible. Sally had the feeling that the dark forces of the hidden, the real Africa, had reached out for a moment and laid their savage fingers on her heart.

What nonsense! Why, she had heard it said a hundred times—one was safer in these desert towns than in New York. Danger? Nonsense!

Yet there might have been those who would have said that lovely Sally Marsland, with her white shoulders putting to shame the soft sheen of her white evening dress, with her green slippers and green scarf and her serene blond beauty, might well be the focal point of a fantastic and impossible romance. A light knock sounded and she turned.

"*Entrez!*" she called, and one of the hotel servants, all in white save for scarlet cummerbund and chechia, entered. He bore a note on a silver tray.

Sally took it wonderingly. It was addressed in a bold hand to Mademoiselle Sally Marsland, Hotel Transatlantique.

"Where did you get this?" she asked.

"An Arab boy brought it, mademoiselle, and ran off as soon as he had given it to the porter," the servant answered.

"*Bien.*" The servant salaamed and went out. Sally tore open the note. Swiftly her eyes scanned the message. For an instant her heart seemed to stop beating.

Mademoiselle: You are in grave danger. Come to the small veranda at the east end of the hotel at once. I will speak to you there. Above all, do not show this note to your *conducteur* or the police, or you are lost.

A FRIEND.

Could the note be from Trent? It must be. But then, why had he not signed his own name? Why had he, a French officer, not come boldly to her with his warning? What was he afraid of?

Should she go? She glanced at her watch; there was yet a quarter of an hour before dinner time. She rose, her decision taken. She'd see—

Again a soft knock on her door. Again she bade the knocker enter. It was another servant with another silver tray, bearing this time, not a note, but a crystal cocktail glass and a small plate of canapes. He set the tray on her bedside table and withdrew.

Sally was grateful; a drink was just what she needed.

The liquor warmed her instantly. She

drained the glass, and reached forward to replace it on the tray. It struck the edge of the tray, slipped from her fingers and crashed to ruin on the polished floor. Sally, aware of sudden dizziness, sat down on her bed. The room seemed suddenly darker. The door was opening slowly, slowly and stealthily. She tried to scream, but could not. A man in a striped haik, one of those hook-nosed, villainous-looking men she had seen in the market place, was peering round the edge of the door, peering at her with glittering eyes. Sally tried to rise, but her limp muscles would not obey; she fell back against her pillow.

It was horrible. She could see the man enter, close the door, glide toward her, and still she could neither move nor cry out. Terribly aware of what was happening, she could not stir hand or foot to save herself, could not even call for help.

A second rascal, also in striped haik, entered behind the first. They came forward, one on each side of the bed, and in their hands were bands of cloth with which to bind and gag her. They bent over her—

The wooden jalousies at the window rattled; a voice spoke a single sharp, outlandish syllable. Sally managed by concentrating all her powers to turn her head.

Just within the window, a long-snouted automatic pistol leveled at the two intruders, stood a big man in a brown burnous—the man of the market square.

"So, you dogs!" he said in low but vibrant French, as though anxious that Sally should hear and understand. "You have dared to act without my sanction, eh? Have I not told you mademoiselle is mine?"

The two snarled. One took a step backward, lost his balance and fell, snatching instinctively at the little night-table as he did so and bringing it down with him. Table, lamp, tray and plate crashed to the floor with an appalling clatter. Instantly, outside somewhere, a startled servant cried out in Arabic.

"May Allah destroy you, fools!" spat the man in the brown burnous. "We dare risk nothing now. Out this way! Quick!"

He plunged through the window and

was gone into the night. His companions lost no time in following. The next moment the door burst open and the fat conducteur rushed into the room with servants at his heels.

"*Dieu!* What has happened, mademoiselle?" he cried.

Sally could not speak, though she tried. The conducteur stared at her a moment, then spun round.

"You, Hamid! Telephone to the *commandant de place!* And you, Ali, get the doctor. Run!"

Sally closed her eyes, fighting for self-control. When she opened them, it was to look up into the stern face of Lieutenant Trent. He was looking at her, though speaking to the guide.

"Where is the servant who was on duty in this corridor?"

"He is not to be found, *mon lieutenant.*"

"*Diable!*" growled Trent. "Must I station a trooper in every corner of your wretched inn? Well, Doctor, what's the verdict?"

Sally realized that a bespectacled man in uniform was doing things at her other side; her eyes caught the glint of a hypodermic syringe.

"Just in time, I think, Trent," said the doctor gravely. "One of those accursed vegetable drugs; paralyzes the motor centers temporarily, without affecting the senses. I think I've given the counter-agent quickly enough to bring mademoiselle round in a few minutes. You'll find, I'll wager, that she is perfectly aware of everything that has happened."

"I hope so," said Trent. "Mademoiselle Marsland, can you hear me? Can you understand what I am saying?"

Sally tried to speak, and this time she succeeded.

"Yes," she said. "I can—understand."

The numb, helpless feeling was leaving her; she found she could move her arms and legs. She sat up, staring round at the men. Her head spun crazily, but save for that she was herself again.

The doctor nodded with satisfaction. "I was just in time."

"Good work!" Trent was steadying Sally with a sinewy arm behind her shoul-

ders. "Now then, conducteur! Get yourself and your chattering apes out of this. Mademoiselle, can you tell me just what occurred?"

In a faltering voice Sally told him about the cocktail, the men in the striped haiks, the final intruder in the brown burnous.

Trent stepped to the door, snapped a few orders. The oasis was to be searched, patrols sent out on the desert, a special guard posted round the hotel. He returned to Sally.

"You'd better take it easy for a while," he suggested. "I'll tell the conducteur to have your dinner brought up. Don't be afraid; there'll be a trooper at your door all night."

Sally found herself resenting this calm arrangement of her affairs.

"I'm not sick," she said. "I'll go down to dinner with the others, if you don't mind."

"Look here!" said Trent, in English that had a decided Western tang. "Where do you think you are? This is a French military zone on the edge of the Sahara Desert, not Oshkosh, or Idaho Falls, or wherever you come from. You'll do as you're told!"

Sally gasped. To think that he'd let her stumble along with her phrasebook French, laughing at her all the time, of course, when he spoke—when he was—it was too much!

"You're American!" she accused him.

"Certainly. Wyoming born and bred."

"Did you send me a note tonight, Lieutenant Trent?"

"No. Why?"

"Here." She produced the crumpled paper. He gave it one glance and jumped to his feet.

"Brigadier!" he shouted.

A trooper answered at once.

"Have '*aux armes*' sounded instantly. Turn out the whole garrison. No one is to leave the oasis without a written order signed by an officer. Double guards on all routes. Go!"

The man fled.

"Where did you get this note, Miss Marsland?" Trent said.

"A servant brought it—one of those who were here just a minute ago," she stammered, frightened by his tone and the orders he had given. "Why? What's the matter?"

"Matter? My God, the handwriting! It's the writing of the most dangerous scoundrel in all North Africa—a man I'd give anything in the world to lay my hands on—the White Sheik!"

"The—the White Sheik?"

"Exactly. He's the center of all this unrest. He's stirring up all the tribes of the interior. God knows what he'll do or where he'll stop if he's not—whew!" he broke off suddenly on a sharp whistle. "I'll bet he's the man in the brown burnous. He's fond of writing us mocking little notes after he pulls off a coup. He's after you, Miss Marsland— That's plain. I wonder if it all hooks up with these other affairs. Maybe I've got something—maybe it's a chance—come along, Miss Marsland. I'll have to ask you to go to the commandant with me right away."

Outside, a bugle blared in the sharp imperative notes of the call to arms.

"But my dinner!" Sally wailed.

"Your dinner'll have to wait."

Sally went, and under the coldly appraising gaze of Major Lepage, she told her story without embellishment.

"And to think I had my hands on the rascal!" Trent groaned, when she had finished. "He's the White Sheik, all right. It all checks up—and it's like his accursed arrogance to come boldly into El Tazelt."

A grizzled French sergeant burst into the room.

"Last report just in, *mon commandant*," he cried. "Everything's bottled up tight, but three horsemen passed out along the road to El Teb just before the order got to the vedettes to stop everyone. I've sent a patrol of troopers in pursuit. Further orders, Major?"

"No. Carry on as you are, Sergeant," the Major groaned. "They got away, Trent. We were just too late, as usual. The goudiers will never catch them. They never do."

"That fellow must be the devil in person," muttered Trent. "Well, sir—what

are we to do about Miss Marsland? It'll hardly be safe to let her go back to Sousse in the tourist car, with the White Sheik's eye turned in her direction."

"I can't spare an escort," Lepage said flatly. "Let's see. Here—I've got it. We'll start the car out at once, and radio both Sousse and the intermediate post at El Teb to be on the lookout for it and to patrol the route. Even if the White Sheik shakes off the patrol at once, he'll not be expecting the car until the usual hour tomorrow. I'll recommend to the General that no more tourists be permitted to leave Sousse until this affair is settled and the head of Monsieur the White Sheik is stuck on a spike over the Kairouan Gate."

"But how horrible!" Sally gasped.

Lepage looked at her.

"Mademoiselle," he said, in icy tones, "I am not here to make excuses for my Government, but I may assure you that if you knew the details of the outrages this man has incited, you would be thankful to your God that you did not fall into his hands tonight." He rose. "I wish you a safe journey, mademoiselle. Lieutenant Trent, see that my orders about the tourist car are carried out at once."

"As ordered, *mon commandant*," Trent saluted, and held open the door for Sally. Once they were outside again—

"Well, Miss Marsland, there goes your dinner," Trent said. "When the old man says at once, he means at once. You'll be rolling in ten minutes."

TEN minutes, Trent had said. But the lash of his voice and example stirred the conducteur and the hotel people to such activity that the big twelve-wheeled desert car was actually moving away from the hotel in a minute under that time. The chauffeur sat in front, with an armed guard provided by the C. G. T. Behind, in the three spacious seats, were the tourists—Sally, the bridal couple—a chattering pair from Brooklyn—a professor from a Southern college and his wife, and a loud-voiced, check-suited person who persisted in telling everyone he met the painful and lengthy details of the privations by means of which he had saved the price of the

tour out of his salary as a hardware salesman in Cleveland.

The car rolled swiftly along through the native quarter, passed the last buildings, and stopped at the sharp challenge of a mounted vedette. A corporal of tirailleurs materialized from the shadows, searched the car carefully, scrutinized the face of each of the passengers, and stood back. The car moved on beneath the dark canopy of the desert sky, studded with the splendid stars of the African night.

Sally leaned against the soft leather seat, munching the sandwiches she had secured to take the place of her lost dinner.

Her mind was a turmoil of confused, excited thoughts. Who was this White Sheik? Was he really the man in the brown burnous? Was he in love with her? What would happen if he caught her? Would Trent rescue her— She saw the silhouettes of a patrol of goumiers galloping over a sand ridge; the sight steadied her. Nothing could happen to her, to any of the others. The strong arm of France held a protecting shield above her.

Presently, she slept.

She woke to the blast of rifle-fire. Horsemen, their burnouses fluttering behind them, swept over the ridge to the east, like great winged eagles black against the moon. Closer at hand were bright flashes, the spiteful crack of high-powered rifles. The guard was firing back; suddenly he leaped straight up from his seat and tumbled out of the car.

"Allah!" rose a great cry from the swooping horsemen, as the soft drum of hoofs on the hard-packed sand grew nearer.

Sick with horror, Sally saw that the professor's wife lay limp in her seat. The professor, mumbling incoherently, was trying to cover her with his body. A mounted Arab galloped up to the car, laughed, and fired three shots from a pistol. The professor slowly slid down to the floor beside his dead wife. The bridal couple were out on the desert, running crazily, hand in hand. A dozen Arabs coursed them like hares, pistols cracking.

A high-pitched voice shouted commands

in Arabic, and three Arabs swarmed over the side of the car. One seized Sally, tearing off her hat and veil. Her golden hair gleamed in the moonlight, and the Arab gave a shout of satisfaction.

His two companions had pounced on the hardware salesman, who shrieked in vain for mercy. In a moment he lay dead in the sand.

Paralyzed with horror, Sally sat still, incapable of movement. She saw the Arabs riding back from the pursuit of the bridal couple; two dark forms sprawled on the sands, silent and motionless in the pitiless moonlight.

The high-pitched voice rang out again. The Arabs who had slain the salesman seized Sally, and dragged her from the car. A horse was led up.

"Mount, mademoiselle, quickly," came the high-pitched command in French. She discovered the voice belonged to a bearded, eagle-nosed Arab in a gold-bordered haik, obviously a chieftain of some sort.

Beside him, an incongruous figure in the Arab saddle, the white-uniformed chauffeur sat smirking. A traitor—he had surrendered them purposely. Dully, Sally understood.

"Mount!" snapped the Arab chief. "We must be off—though if the word of the White Sheik is good, there is little fear of pursuit."

STRONG hands lifted Sally into the saddle. Some of the Arabs were looting the bodies of the dead—all dead, all the passengers in that car. Dead. Murdered.

Sally swayed in the saddle, clinging to its high pommel with both hands.

"Why do you not kill me, too?" she asked, staring at the grim chief.

"Because the White Sheik bade us bring you to him alive, woman," the other answered. "You are honored." He lifted his voice. "To horse! Will you spend the night here? We must ride!"

His answer was a loud, steady rat-atat-tat from the nearest sandridge. Two of the Arabs who were still mounted plunged from their saddles; a horse screamed. A

strong voice shouted, a voice that Sally seemed to know, eloquent of doom:

"En avant, la Legion! First troop, dismount! Automatic rifle groups forward! Second troop, ride round to the left to cut them off as they run! Fire at will!" A whistle shrilled.

Rat-a-tat-tat—rat-a-tat-tat!

Yells of terror rose from the trapped Arabs, yells in which the word "Legion" was clearly distinguishable. There was a rush for the horses. Too late. The mounted horse-holders were already down and the horses were scattering in panic.

Sally hurled herself from the saddle and scrambled under the car. The chief spun his horse and drove home his spurs.

Rat-a-tat-tat—

He flung his arms wide, shrieked "Allah!" once, and smashed headlong to the sand.

The remaining Arabs were running after the horses. Relentlessly the fire from the ridge picked them off, one by one. The whistles shrilled again, the firing ceased. In all that moonlit valley of death nothing moved; nothing lived save Sally Marsland, crouching underneath the great car—

No—she was wrong. A shadow stirred near the huge double wheel which was her bulwark. A shadow, silent but alive. It was crawling nearer. She caught a glint of moonlight on bared steel, then a flicker of white. It was the chauffeur.

"Mademoiselle!" he whispered. "You are alive? Where are you?"

Instinct warned her. He had seen the movement—and he meant to kill her. She had seen him mounted on an Arab horse, on terms of friendliness with the Arab chief, and he did not want her to live to tell of his treachery. He was beneath the car now, but she was crawling out on the other side. Ten paces away a dead Arab lay on the sand, and in his sash was a pistol, plain in the silvery light.

The firing from the ridge had ceased. All was still on the desert save the insistent mutterings of the chauffeur under the car, mutterings that grew louder.

"Mademoiselle! It is I, Hassan, the chauffeur! Have no fear!"

Sally ran to the dead Arab, snatched the pistol from his sash. It was heavy—a big Smith and Wesson .44. The brass glint of cartridges in its cylinder reassured her. Gripping it in both hands, she cocked the hammer. Hassan came crawling out, saw her, bounded to his feet, snarling.

"Stand still, Hassan! One more step and I'll shoot!" She was surprised to find how firmly her words came. She was being tried in the fires of Africa and proven.

A solitary horseman was riding full tilt down the slope from which the firing had come; a horseman who sat very erect in his saddle.

The chauffeur drew back his arm. He was going to throw the knife—

Sally's finger closed on the trigger. The big pistol roared, spat flame, kicking wickedly in Sally's grasp. With a yell of agony the chauffeur went to the ground, clutching a shattered shoulder.

"Attagirl!" came an encouraging shout from the horseman. In a spatter of sand he reined up beside her. Lieutenant Trent.

SALLY clung to his stirrup leather and wept. Trent slid from the saddle and held her with one arm, while his eyes went to the Arab whose pistol she held.

"Beni Gherza," said Trent grimly. "And that one, too. Well! Who'd you shoot, Miss Marsland?"

"Hassan," said Sally. "Hassan, the driver. He stalled the car here on purpose, I think. He was very friendly with the Arabs. He was mounted and ready to ride away with them when you came. Where are your men?"

"Right here," answered Trent. "Just me—and this." He patted the stock of the automatic rifle, which now hung in its boot from his saddle. "If I hadn't bluffed them, they might have rushed me," he added, "and these automatics have been known to jam—and that would have been just too bad. So Hassan was on the inside! Everybody else killed?"

"I—I think so," Sally muttered, sinking weakly to the sand.

"I'll have a quick look."

Trent ran first to the bridal couple, out

on the sand. He shook his head, doubled back to the car, went through it seat by seat.

"Thorough workers, the Beni Gherza," he growled, dropping to the ground again. "Now, Hassan."

He shook the wounded chauffeur roughly. The man groaned.

"Who bribed you? Answer me, dog!"

Hassan cowered.

"Answer!"

Hassan mumbled something in a broken voice.

"Sheik Achmed of the Beni Gherza, eh? He hasn't wit enough to think of a scheme like this, or the nerve to carry it out, unless he was backed up by some power he thinks adequate to protect him from the consequences. Can you ride, Miss Marsland?"

"Not now," protested Sally. "I—I just can't. I'm all in!"

"You'll ride, or I'll have to leave you here," said Trent grimly.

"Leave me *here*?" Sally choked out. "Oh, you couldn't!"

"I could and I will," said Trent. "Listen. Just after you left tonight, the post at El Tazelt was jumped by five or six hundred tribesmen. We got the Europeans into the fort, and the fort's holding out; but there's little food and less ammunition. Also, some sneaking devil pitched a grenade into the radio shack, and that cuts off our one means of communication with Sousse.

"The commandant picked on me to ride for help, because I had the best horse in the place. I've got to get through to El Teb—that's the next post—and radio Sousse for the Legion cavalry. You'll ride with me. If you can't make it, I'll have to leave you. It's a matter of duty—your one life against a hundred. Understand?"

He mounted without another word, and rode round the car.

"That's Achmed, all right," she heard him say, as he reined up an instant beside the dead chief. "He's paid for his crimes, poor devil. I wish I had killed the man that set him on instead."

Sally let him help her into the saddle without further protest.

"Hassan!" Trent said sharply. The treacherous chauffeur lifted his head. "Hassan, you are a French National. You have been guilty of giving aid and comfort to the enemies of France, of aiding by your treachery in the murder of six persons, of attempting yourself to murder Mademoiselle Marsland. It is impracticable to bring you to trial in the usual way, and to leave you here for your friends to rescue is not to be thought of. As the representative of the commander of this zone, and under the extraordinary powers granted to the military authorities in time of insurrection, I find you, Hassan, guilty of treason, of murder, and of attempted murder. I sentence you to death. In the name of the French Republic."

He drew his pistol.

"Commend your soul to Allah, Hassan."

The chauffeur did not cry out. He managed to draw himself up to his knees, bowed once toward Mecca, muttered an Islamic prayer.

"For God's sake!" Sally cried frantically.

The pistol cracked; Hassan slumped forward on the sand.

"Come, Miss Marsland. We ride for El Teb," said Trent, and snapped shut the flap of his holster.

THEY rode side by side up and out of the depression. The moon made a silvery path for them, eastward across the desert. The horses broke into a gentle canter.

"Must you be always killing people?" Sally said bitterly.

"Had to," Trent answered. "I could not leave the man there alive. He knew too much. One or two of the others got away; they will be back, likely enough. They might gather a few more and ride hard on my track if they knew where I rode, and why, and that I was not only alone, but hampered by a woman."

"But there were others alive—I heard them groaning. Arabs. You did not kill them," Sally objected.

"They were Beni Gherza tribesmen. They don't understand a word of French, save Achmed, their sheik, and he's dead.

They thought that ridge was lined with troopers of my regiment. But Hassan knew; so his execution was not only an act of justice, but a military necessity."

"I pray God," said Sally, in a low voice, "that I may never hear of military duty or military necessity again."

There was a long silence. Trent broke it.

"Miss Marsland," he said, in a voice which was suddenly rather weary, "this is no ordinary affair. These tribesmen have been quiescent for years. They have no unusual grievances. Something—*someone*—is behind it all; some extraordinary force is organizing them and urging them on.

"It may be religious fanaticism; they're capable of anything when some wandering marabout starts preaching a holy war. But I think a great leader of another sort has arisen among them, or has come to them from without. A man who not only can weld these scattered, jealous tribes together, but one who has some conception of strategy. This man they call the White Sheik—he's the man. He's no Arab either. But he holds them somehow—or they'd never dare lift their hands against the Tricolor. They've been taught too many lessons."

"It is their country," said Sally. "What right have you to come here and kill them?"

"That's beside the point," Trent said. "I'm a soldier, and I'm here, and I'll do my duty. We're faced with a practical situation. Either this thing is nipped in the bud, or it gathers momentum with every day, until a wave of insurrection sweeps up out of the desert over all Tunisia, a wave of fire and blood and massacre. If we can't check it now, we'll have twenty thousand tribesmen hammering at the gates of Sousse and Sfax; we'll have to have an army corps in here to subdue them. That will mean the loss of hundreds, if not thousands of lives, untold misery and suffering.

"Inasmuch—" a note of irony crept into his voice— "inasmuch as I'm unable to go to Paris and persuade the Government to turn the country back to its original possessors—who used it as a base for

piracy—I think I'm not far wrong in trying to prevent this insurrection from gathering any headway."

Sally didn't answer. She had no answer to this inexorable logic.

"What I can't understand," said Trent gravely, "is the fact that we've met no patrol from El Teb. They were ordered to send one out to meet your car. There are a dozen goumiers there, beside a half-company of Senegalese tirailleurs—plenty of men to spare a patrol. And that message went through and was acknowledged. We should have met the patrol long ago."

He reined in to a walk as the horses began wearily to ascend the slope of a ridge. Sally's eyes were on his face; the queer, nameless excitement—she would not call it fear—that she had felt that evening set her heart beating faster again. She was alone with this man on the desert; alone as only little human beings can be in the vast sweep of desert or sea. And, deny it vehemently as she would, she was glad—whatever happened.

He turned to her, and smiled. She smiled back.

"Wait here a moment, Miss Marsland," he said. "Hold my horse. I'll scout up to the top of that ridge on foot."

He tossed her his reins and dismounted, slipping the wicked-looking automatic rifle from its boot. There was a click as he fitted a loaded magazine in place, a sharp snick-clack as he worked the bolt. Then he moved silently, steadily up the slope.

SALLY'S eyes followed him. He was a soldier—a man and a soldier. He knew what to do, and how to do it. Yes, she told herself in bitter reaction, he knew how to kill. That was a soldier's trade.

He was nearing the top of the ridge; and all at once Sally began to wonder what that red glow was in the sky, beyond the black line of the ridge's crest. Not the lights of the fort; this glow wavered and danced, like the glow of leaping flames. It was very still here on the desert; the chill wind still blew, the darkness seemed peopled with moving shadows, as mackerel clouds swept over the moon.

Trent had reached the top of the ridge, crawling forward on his stomach through the sand. He lay there motionless.

Sally became convinced that those shadows *were* moving, closing in on her. Panic seized her, and she drove her heels into the sides of her mount. The startled animal reared, then plunged forward up the slope. Her grip on the rein dragged the other horse along.

Trent heard them coming. He wriggled back, clear of the crest; then stood up and ran toward her.

"Stop!" he ordered. He grabbed her rein close to the bit. "We've got to go round—on to Sousse—if the horses can do it. Only chance."

"What do you mean?" Sally cried, her heart cold within her.

"Mean? Look here!" Deftly he linked the two bridles, snapped his picket-rope to one of the bits, and let the coil run out over his arm as he led her up to the crest. "Keep down. Don't show yourself against the skyline. Lower—that's it. Now look." He pointed to the sandy valley beyond.

Far across it, perhaps a mile away, flames mounted high from a burning building. Against their lurid background, palm trees drooped; flitting shadows that might have been circling horsemen moved on the face of the sands. Distant yells and an occasional shot came to their ears.

"That's the post at El Teb," Trent said bitterly. "The Arabs have surprised it. Poor old Duchemin! They're done for," muttered Trent, his glasses at his eyes. "The post's afire all the way through."

At that instant the burning building seemed to fling itself skyward in a great column of flame and smoke. Burning fragments sprayed out flowerlike about the base of that awful pillar.

Then the roar of a mighty explosion shook the earth.

Sally cowered, her hands over her eyes.

"The magazine," said Trent in a low voice. "That's the finish. We ride for Sousse, Miss Marsland, and pray the horses will hold out till we meet a patrol. Headquarters'll be worrying about us by now, when they find they can't get us by radio."

"Leave me," Sally said sharply. "Leave me here, and ride on yourself. You can make it with two horses. They won't last, otherwise. It's your duty, you know."

Trent bent over her. Instinctively he seemed to know that nothing but harshness would drive her on now; a gentle word, and she'd collapse.

"Get up!" he snapped. "You're going along if I have to tie you on the horse. I'm not leaving you here for the White Sheik. You're his, he said, but by heaven you're not! You're—"

"I beg your pardon, Lieutenant Trent," said a calm voice. "She is mine."

Trent snapped erect.

NOT ten feet away stood the well-remembered figure of the man in the brown burnous. A pistol gleamed in his hand. Behind him were half a dozen tribesmen, rifles ready.

Trent's hands closed on the automatic, but before he could pull the trigger, the man in the brown burnous was upon him, bearing him backward. The deadly muzzle sprayed bullets skyward for an instant; then in a whirling rush and flutter of cloaks the Arabs dived into the fray, flinging Trent to earth beneath an avalanche of sweating bodies.

Out of the mêlée came his shout: "Sally! Mount and ride for it! Get to Sousse!"

Was he thinking of her—or of his duty to get word to headquarters? The thought stabbed Sally even as she obeyed, lunging to her feet and snatching at the bridle of the nearest horse. Her foot was in the stirrup when a strong arm jerked her back.

"A moment, if you please, mademoiselle," said the man in the brown burnous. "You cannot ride away alone; the desert is swarming with warring tribesmen, some of whom, I am afraid, are little better than cutthroats. I must detain you for your own good."

Four Arabs were now sitting on Trent, who still struggled. Another stood by, clutching the automatic.

"Have you got his pistol, Abdulla?" the man in brown demanded.

"I have, *sidi*."

"Then let him up. Shoot him if he tries to get away." He spoke in French, that both Trent and the girl might understand.

Trent staggered to his feet, panting.

"I am sorry I could not remain with your *goumier* in El Tazelt this afternoon, Lieutenant," the man in brown said mockingly. "I had business elsewhere."

Trent didn't answer. He faced the other, unarmed, helpless, surrounded by enemies, yet quite cool. Sally had the impression that he would miss not the shadow of a chance to get away. His thoughts were still on the road to Sousse.

"Permit me to introduce myself," Brown Burnous went on. "I am Mulai Mahmud, better known, perhaps, as the White Sheik—a tribute to my Caucasian blood, rather than my dress, as you see. Mulai Mahmud—very much at your service, mademoiselle—and not at all at yours, Lieutenant."

"Mulai Mahmud!" repeated Trent scornfully. "Then you have embraced Islam, as the saying is. A renegade!"

"Yes," the White Sheik said, in silken accents. "I have embraced Islam, true. And something else besides, something which you will learn about presently. The last lesson you will ever learn in this life, my lieutenant."

Trent shrugged and said nothing.

"Mount the men, Abdulla," the White Sheik ordered. "Four of you ride close about this Franzawi officer. Shoot him down if he makes the least move to escape. It would be better to bring him in alive; Anbal would be pleased. But the lieutenant is a very devil; take no chances with him."

He added a remark or two in Arabic, which Sally did not understand, though she saw a startled look flit across Trent's face.

They all mounted, Trent's guards closed round him, and they rode over the crest and down toward the red glow of the burning post of El Teb. The White Sheik rode close to Sally. His burning eyes never left her.

As they drew closer to the post, men came galloping to meet them, with loud

cries of welcome and of triumph. Weapons were brandished. High-spirited Arab barbs reared and pranced, young warriors boasted of their deeds.

"They are crying, mademoiselle," said the White Sheik, "that they will drive the French into the sea—yes, that they will draw a ring of fire about Sousse, and the streets of the city shall run red with blood!"

The hood of his burnous blew back, exposing a head that might have belonged to a Roman Emperor—round, close-cropped, imperiously held. The features were regular, the mouth thin and cruel; the aquiline nose spoke of ambition; the jaw, of invincible will. But the eyes—somber and glowing, like dark pools in whose depths burns an unquenchable flame. They held Sally spellbound for an instant, dominated her, made her for that dreadful moment feel a surge of mad desire to ride, ride with these reckless and savage raiders. Then came horror, a sickening horror, as though something unclean had touched her soul. She straightened in her saddle, and her words were crisp.

"Doubtless," she said calmly. "But first your rascals must dispose of one or two little details such as the Legion Cavalry regiment."

The White Sheik leaned toward her, his face savage with sudden anger.

"You shall see," he muttered. "Not those four squadrons of mercenaries, no, nor forty squadrons, will stop the riders of the desert when the word goes out from the Caverns of the Gods!"

He spoke with triumph, as if he had a secret, terrible knowledge.

"What do you mean?" Sally demanded, trembling. The words sickened her. Fear rode again at her elbow. He did not answer; he was looking at a group of men who stood a little distance away, guarded by mounted Arabs. The glow of the burning buildings shone across black negroid faces.

"Prisoners!" he growled. "But they will be Senegalese, black men, not worthy."

He rode toward them nevertheless, pulling Sally's horse with his.

THE prisoners were a wretched group, their once smart uniforms a mass of charred and bloody rags. Not a man of them but was wounded, but they held themselves proudly erect; no soldiers could have borne themselves better in adversity than these black warriors from the far-off Senegal. A little aside, a special guard around them, were two white men.

The White Sheik asked a question in Arabic; a dozen voices answered him. He growled in disappointment.

"I had hoped they were officers," he said to Sally. "But the officers are all dead. The white prisoners are the quartermaster-sergeant and the corporal who operated the radio. Eh, *bien*, they are better than nothing—and I have Trent.

"Well, we must dispose of these black dogs. We shall teach them what it costs to sell their bodies into French slavery and kill their betters. Dismount!" He repeated the order in Arabic. The horses were led back, leaving Trent and his guards standing near the White Sheik, who now spoke again to his henchman Abdulla.

Promptly three men ran forward with a machine-gun and planted it on the sand, facing the line of Senegalese prisoners. Abdulla himself took his place on the gunner's seat and manipulated the bolt.

He nodded to the White Sheik; over his outstretched knee the belt of glistening cartridges coiled downward, like the scales of a serpent ready to strike. Struggling, the two white prisoners were dragged aside, leaving the eight Senegalese alone.

They were standing at "attention" now; they saw the fate that menaced them, and their eyeballs gleamed white in their black faces. One especially fine-looking Negro, on whose sleeve the remnant of a sergeant's galon still glistened, called out, "*Vive la France!*"

Trent thrust his guards aside, strode forward to the White Sheik.

"You can't do this, Malai Mahmud!" he snapped. "You're a white man! You can't shoot down these poor fellows in cold blood this way—they've only done their duty."

"Nor can I be burdened with prisoners," the White Sheik retorted. "My men have been killed here, plenty of them, by these same black rascals. They will have their revenge. Allah knows I would lift no finger to stop them. Let it be a lesson to all mercenaries who serve France for pay!"

He made a sign to Abdulla, who coolly traversed the gun to the right and settled himself in his seat, eyes squinting along the sights.

"*Dieu!*" cried Trent hoarsely. "I can't stand it—I can't look at it! They'll kill them all—all! Not one will be left to bear the word to Sousse of what has happened! El Teb destroyed—El Tazelt sore beset! They'll kill them all!"

"*Vive la France!*" cried the big sergeant again.

Sally wanted to look away, but she could not. All the horrors of that night had held her transfixed; and this—this, with the courageous Negro hurling defiance in the face of death, had a savage and magnificent beauty.

The machine-gun crashed into action; the prisoner on the left of the line reeled backward, his chest torn through by half a dozen bullets. The gun swung on, destroyed the other soldiers, and was silent.

The Senegalese prisoners lay where they had fallen. For their loyalty to France, they had paid the last full measure of devotion.

"Damn you, Mulai Mahmud! Damn you!" snarled Trent. "You might at least bury them, so the jackals won't get them!"

"My men have other things to do," retorted the White Sheik. "I'll leave them there for their comrades to find—a lesson, as I said, to mercenaries. To horse, Abdulla! We ride for the south."

CHAPTER THREE

FLAMES OF LAST SACRIFICE

TRENT rode southward from burning El Teb with a certain feeling of satisfaction in his heart. He was a prisoner, and so was Sally Marsland. He'd permitted himself to be surprised and taken. The iron struck deep

into his soldier's pride. But he had put one trick over on the White Sheik.

Old Sergeant Kindulu, of the 4th Regiment of Tirailleurs Senegalese, was nobody's fool; he could catch a hint as well as the next man, and he'd campaigned in France and Gallipoli and Macedonia, as well as Morocco and Syria. He knew his way about, did Sergeant Kindulu—and he knew Trent. Not the man to have hysterics for nothing, was John Trent. None knew it better than Kindulu, with whom Trent had occupied a shell-hole under terrific fire, day and night, for seventy-two unforgettable hours in front of Verdun. So the veteran realized that Trent's outburst was intended to convey a message—"not one will be left to bear the word to Sousse"—"El Tazelt sore beset"—

So? The machine-gun bullets were coming closer. But so was a moment of darkness. Trent had seen Kindulu squint upward at the moon; had seen the old sergeant squirm and drop just before the hail of bullets reached him, in the instant of confusing half-light as the clouds obscured the face of the moon. So clever, so well-timed was the action, that it completely deceived everyone but Trent.

Kindulu would have preferred to die there with his men; he would ordinarily have considered it a disgrace to have survived them, in such circumstances. But Trent's words had made it a matter of duty; they were practically an order from his superior officer. So Kindulu had obeyed. He'd get through. You could kill those black warriors, but you couldn't wear them out. And there'd be patrols coming out from Sousse by now, anxious to find out why neither of the desert posts answered radio calls. Kindulu would not have to walk all the way.

Trent permitted himself an inward chuckle. Now, instead of having to wait till mounted patrols could reconnoiter the oasis and get back to report, the commanding officer at Sousse (where there were, alas, no planes) could act at once on Kindulu's story, radio Sfax for a squadron of bombers—and beleaguered El Tazelt would be relieved.

Yes, the White Sheik had certainly missed a bit there. He'd even reacted to Trent's suggestion that the bodies be buried just as Trent had foreseen.

Trent chuckled again. Then he became aware of the White Sheik dropping back to ride beside him; the White Sheik, with Sally Marsland at his other side, riding very close.

"It is a long ride, my lieutenant," the White Sheik said in his suave voice. "I trust you are not tiring?"

"The Legion never gets tired, Mulai Mahmud," Trent answered. "As you will presently discover," he added.

"If your Legion can follow us into the Caverns of the Gods, they are welcome," the White Sheik snapped, and the Arabs yelled derision of Trent.

"Arab tribesmen," retorted Trent, raising his voice, "have taken refuge in caves before this—to their cost. *Vive Pélissier!*"

The yells changed to yells of rage. A score of blades were lifted in the moonlight. The White Sheik roared an order, and the blades went down. Sullenly the column resumed its march. But a note of dissension had been struck, and it was a lesson that Trent of the Bureaux Arabes, veteran in the ways of Africa, was not going to forget.

While the White Sheik was busy, Sally swung her horse closer to Trent's.

"What is it? What did you say to them?" she asked. Trent realized that she had not understood, save for the "*Vive Pélissier!*" He had, of course, spoken in Arabic.

He smiled grimly.

"They evidently have some caverns they skulk in," he said. "Well, the name of Pélissier is remembered by every Arab, however ignorant. You see, long ago, during one of the Algerian insurrections, a whole tribe of rebellious Arabs took refuge in the caves of Dehna, after carving up all the French settlers they could lay hands on. They were pursued by Chasseurs d'Afrique under Colonel Pélissier—who afterward became a Marshal of France for the storming of the Malakoff in the Crimean War. No use trying to force entrance; it would have been just a

waste of lives. Pélissier sent in a prisoner, with word to the sheik to come out, or take the consequences. The sheik was defiant. So Pélissier blocked up two of the entrances, collected green brushwood in vast quantities, waited till the wind was right and built a roaring fire at the remaining entrance. He smothered the lot of them.

"There was an awful howl all over Europe when the news got out; the Government wanted to cashier Pélissier. But old Pere Bugeaud was Commander-in-Chief in Algeria, and stood by his officer. He said Pélissier had done exactly right, and insisted that he be promoted, instead of disgraced. He had his way; Pélissier was made a general of brigade. Ah, there was a skipper to die for, that Pere Bugeaud!"

Sally was shuddering.

"I hate this country. I hate everybody in it," she muttered.

Trent said no more. Instinctively he knew that she could not trust herself to him now—not while there still glowed in his eyes the light of a soldier's admiration for those stern old warriors, Bugeaud, idol of the Army of Africa, and Pélissier, conqueror of Sevastopol—and of the Caves of Dehna. . . .

DAWN lifted itself out of the sandhills to the eastward. Still the cavalcade plodded on, ever bearing south, into the depths of the Sahara. Ahead, red sandstone bluffs lifted themselves from the face of the sands; the rays of the quick-rising sun glowed on them with a light that seemed ominous of blood and war and death.

Trent, watching Sally, read her thoughts.

She had longed for Africa, and this was the real thing. The real thing—and she hated it. Hated it more with every passing moment. Every hour brought horror in a new form.

"Poor kid!" Trent muttered, with real pity in his heart. "I've got to get her out of this."

Yet first came the inexorable commands of duty. He was beginning to get the

glimmerings of a plan—nothing definite as yet, just an idea. First he must see these "Caverns of the Gods," find out what awaited him there. Then, perhaps, might come opportunity. After all, he knew Arabs.

With the dawn, fresh life seemed to come to the tribesmen. Weary men and weary horses lifted their heads; here and there snatches of talk broke out. Presently, at the White Sheik's order, two of the men whose mounts were freshest spurred ahead at the gallop, and were soon lost to sight.

Straight toward those hills the Arabs rode on. Now the red cliffs rose sheer out of the desert, blocking the way for miles on either hand. No gorge, no cleft seemed to offer a passage through that grim barrier—yet the White Sheik and his people held their course.

As they approached the cliffs, Trent's eyes searched the high walls for some opening, some hint of the entrance to a cavern. But he saw nothing. Nothing—yes, there was something. What was this dust-cloud that rolled toward them?

Riders—three or four of them. Trent caught a glimpse of a striped haik, and remembered instantly Sally's description of the men who had entered her room; remembered, too, the rascally-looking pair he'd seen at the moment of the White Sheik's arrest in the market place of El Tazelt.

The advance scouts of the column were shouting now, and lifting high their rifles in boisterous greeting. The White Sheik spurred forward to meet the newcomers. There was loud talk amid the whirl of dust, but they were speaking in a tongue totally unknown to Trent.

Then two riders—Abdulla and another of the White Sheik's particular henchmen—closed in on either side of Sally and swung her horse toward the rear of the column. At the same moment, others pushed in closer to Trent, thrusting alongside him the horses bearing the captured French soldiers, with whom up to that moment Trent had had no opportunity to exchange a word.

The old *sergeant-fourrier* grinned at his

officer and lifted his bound hands by way of apology for not saluting. He was bearing his lot with the stoicism of the veteran. The radio corporal, a young blond-haired fellow, was raging, cursing in broken Arabic at one of the guards who had struck him with a carbine-butt. Blood was flowing down his face.

"Take it easy, son," the quartermaster-sergeant warned him. "The lieutenant here will get us out of it if he can. If he can't, all your wriggling'll do you no good. Eh, *mon lieutenant*?"

There was another characteristic of the veteran; that touching confidence in a tried and proven officer which is so hard to win, but, once won, is proof against any trial.

Trent shook his head. "I don't know about getting out of it, sergeant," he said frankly. "It looks bad now, but there may be a chance later."

"Count on me, *mon lieutenant*," the non-commandant muttered, just as the White Sheik came cantering up, followed by three men in striped haiks; three hawk-faced, swarthy little men of peculiarly repulsive aspect. They peered at Trent and the other two prisoners with nods and grunts of satisfaction.

"Three of them, as you see, Anbal," said the White Sheik in Arabic to a companion who rode a little in advance of the others. "Three Roumi prisoners—and the tall one is an officer!"

"There will be rejoicings in the home of the gods, O Mulai Mahmud. Thou hast done well!" rejoined the other. He spoke an Arabic so broken and so archaic that Trent had difficulty in understanding him. If these men were not Arabs—and certainly they resembled no Arabs Trent had ever seen—what were they?

INWARDLY Trent, who had never in all his tempestuous career known the meaning of fear, shrank from this beady-eyed trio. There was about them the suggestion of something horrible, some foulness from the dark places of the earth which had no right to flaunt itself unbidden in the clean sunshine.

They talked among themselves, eyeing

him furtively, yet with a dreadful gloating which made his blood run cold.

"Yes, Mulai Mahmud, thou hast done well," the leader of the trio repeated. "And now," his voice grew thick—"now where is the white maiden? At last, at last! It is full time—show me the white maiden, Mulai Mahmud, that I may see with my own eyes the glorious truth!"

The face of the White Sheik hardened into a cold impenetrable mask.

"There will be other white women, Anbal," he answered sternly. "This one is not for you. This one is mine. Let that be clearly understood between us."

"The voice of the god will cry out for her in the great cavern, Mulai Mahmud. What will you say to the people then?" demanded Anbal, his small eyes glittering.

"I will say," retorted the White Sheik, "that I have led them thus far on the road to victory, and will lead them farther—"

"By the favor of the gods," interrupted Anbal.

—"and that I ask as reward nothing but this woman, promising to secure another to take her place—"

"Every attempt but this one having miserably failed," Anbal snapped.

"And," concluded the White Sheik, "I *will* have her. Or will *you* lead the warriors of the desert against the French, Anbal?"

"I am a servant of the gods, Mulai Mahmud, I move only at their bidding," Anbal answered calmly. "Beware their anger, Mulai Mahmud, for they can blow thee down from thy high place with a single breath!"

The threatening ring of these words was unmistakable. For an instant the White Sheik's hand closed on the butt of his automatic. Then, with a visible effort, he regained his self-control.

"Ride on," he growled. "We will speak of this further in the caverns, Anbal."

"The gods, also, will speak," Anbal muttered as the column resumed its march.

Trent had things to think about. What was this talk of "the gods?" The Mohammedan religion insists above every-

thing else upon the unity of God; its profession of faith rings out daily from a thousand towers: "There is no God but God, and Mohammed is the prophet of God." Were these wretches in the striped haiks, then, not Moslems? Trent noted how the Arabs of the raiding party—Beni Gherza tribesmen for the most part, though he saw representatives of half a dozen other desert clans—shrank from the three who rode so close together, and eyed them with awe, and kept as far away from them as possible.

"Who are those men?" he asked bluntly of the Arab who rode nearest him.

The Arab scowled. "They are holy ones," he muttered. "Not to be defiled by even being discussed with an infidel dog."

Trent whistled softly. Holy ones, were they? Servants of "the gods." So?

He had seen that morning how swiftly these mercurial tribesmen might turn on their leader; now there was dissension between that leader and these three rascals, of whom, evidently, the tribesmen went in fear.

Trent had not served in the wise councils of the Bureau des Affaires Indigenes without learning that motto of Imperial Rome which Imperial France so well applies to the government of her turbulent subject populations: "Divide and rule."

Perhaps, even yet, his chance would come.

A SHADOW lay across the face of the sands. Trent looked up. The high battlements of the red sandstone cliffs lowered above him; the leading Arabs were already disappearing round an outjutting crag which, projecting at an angle from the face of the cliff, hid from all distant view a narrow cleft in the rocky wall.

The column lengthened out into single file; the horses picked their way among the rock-fragments which strewn the bottom of the gorge. The desert was lost to sight; the walls of the gorge hemmed them in on either hand.

The place formed an excellent hiding place. The uniform color of the rock, the irregular façade of the great bluff, hid the

entrance well. One would have to ride very close to the base of the cliff and search carefully to find it at all, Trent thought.

Now he observed that some of the Arabs were dismounting. The column checked its advance; the White Sheik shouted orders.

Slowly Trent was urged forward by his guards. He could see nothing of Sally nor of the two soldiers; Arabs were before him, Arabs behind him. These too dismounted. At a gesture from the nearest, Trent followed suit.

Two Arab guards led, or rather shoved him, into the cave. Inside was pitch darkness. Out of the darkness rang a voice in Arabic challenge:

"Halt, in the name of Allah! Who enters the Cavern of the Gods?"

Sharp came the White Sheik's answer:

"Mulai Mahmud, returning in victory, with Roumi prisoners!"

"Ai! That is good hearing! Gate, there, gate! Open to the victorious Malai Mahmud!"

Rusty metal shrieked in protest somewhere ahead. A torch appeared, burning redly in the murk. Hoofs clattered on the rocky floor as the crowd of men and horses surged forward, amid cries of welcome from the men of the gate-guard.

All this time Trent's two guards had clung closely to his arms, taking no chances on his snatching a weapon under cover of darkness. He came to the gate. Amid the yelling mob they thrust him onward, pressing close about him, shouting their triumph over the hated Franzawi. Someone—probably the White Sheik—was flicking the ray of a flashlight about.

Again a challenge; again the White Sheik answered. This Cavern of the Gods was guarded well, Trent thought. Then, as the echoes of the White Sheik's voice died away in the echoing gloom, a glare of light illumined the place to its last reddish crevice.

Electric lights! A row of them, overhead, and others on the walls. Trent gasped in astonishment.

"All modern conveniences, as you see,

Lieutenant," murmured the White Sheik at his elbow. "I fear you will find our arrangements for your temporary security less modern—quite primitive, in fact—but none the less effective. *Voilà!*"

A word to the guards, and they pulled Trent out of the crowd surging down the lighted passage, into a sort of recess in the side wall. Here was a black hole marking the entrance to another cavern. A great boulder lay beside it.

"Your chamber, my lieutenant!" smiled the White Sheik, gesturing toward the hole, which was scarcely four feet high. "I trust you will find it comfortable."

Trent bowed.

"Your hospitality, monsieur, is overwhelming," he replied. He was stalling for time, his eyes on the teeming passage. He was trying to get a glimpse of Sally.

"In with you, if you please," ordered the White Sheik impatiently.

Trent shrugged, stooped, and entered the inner cave. He had no choice, for the moment. His chance, if it ever came, would be later, after he'd had time to think.

The Arab guards, at a word from the White Sheik, stooped and put their shoulders to the boulder, and heaved, straining. The boulder began to move.

At that instant, Abdulla appeared in the passage. Behind him, stumbling along wearily, came Sally Marsland. She saw Trent.

Crying his name, she tore herself from the grip of Abdulla's colleague and scurried past the moving boulder, and into the cave. The boulder, falling now of its own weight, thudded into place, blocking the entrance, save for a narrow irregular space at the top, through which light and air could reach the interior.

Crouching there beneath the low rock roof, she clung to Trent and wept.

The White Sheik snarled in imprecation.

"Roll back the rock!" he ordered the Arabs. "The woman cannot remain—"

He stopped short.

Into the recess the three men in the striped haiks had just glided.

"We came back for thee, O Mulai

Mahmud!" Anbal said in his harsh voice. "There is much to be done, much more to be talked of. Come!"

"Keep down!" Trent muttered softly to Sally.

The White Sheik hesitated, torn, Trent saw, between reluctance to let Sally stay with Trent and the idea that it might be just as well not to let Anbal know where she was.

"Come!" repeated Anbal. "I must speak to thee of many things, but mostly of her whom we have so long awaited: the white maiden. I see that the Roumi officer is already immured, and that is well. The others will serve for the present; but the gods will call him—yes, and will not be appeased until thy stubborn heart has turned from this girl. She is very fair. She is the chosen of the gods."

An expression of demoniac hatred flitted across the White Sheik's powerful face, at the sight of which Abdulla, standing behind Anbal, laid hand upon a dagger-hilt as though to strike down the man who had so angered his master. Anbal's eyes, rolling upward, missed the look.

"She is the chosen of Mulai Mahmud," said the White Sheik stonily. "But come, then, if you must, Anbal. We will talk of these matters. You, Latif, stay here on guard."

The men in the striped haiks vanished into the passage, their soft leather shoes making no sound as they moved. The White Sheik followed, stalking out of the recess with the haughty air of one who is master of his surroundings. Abdulla and the others followed.

The sentry, left alone, yawned and sat down, leaning against the wall, his carbine within easy reach of his hand.

ALL these men, it was plain, were of the White Sheik's own bodyguard, captained by Abdulla and devoted to their leader's person. As for the other tribesmen, Trent could not be certain. Nor could he see yet just where Anbal and his friends fitted into the picture.

Sally's sobs had died away.

"Sorry to be such a fool," she said.

"I'm glad you're here," said Trent,

truthfully enough. "And you're brave enough to know the truth, mademoiselle."

"Call me Sally," she interrupted.

"Right, Sally. Well, we're in a mess, a damned tight spot, because I don't know what we're up against. I don't know what to do or where to begin. Let's have a look at our jail first, anyway."

The light shone over the top of the boulder. The space between the bulging rock and the stone walls of the entrance was not large—at the top of the boulder's curve, no more than a couple of inches; at the sides, perhaps a foot.

No way out there. Trent gave a tentative heave at the boulder itself. It did not give at all. He started round the interior wall, feeling his way. It was all solid sandstone.

"We're in a small cave about twenty feet deep and twelve wide, Sally," he reported. "No holes save the one in front. I can't tell how high the ceiling is—I can't reach it or see it. Nothing on the floor except dust and dry rot of some sort. These caverns are old—very old. I wonder who built those gates?"

"The Romans, maybe," suggested Sally.

"Maybe. But the Romans were a pretty tough lot, by all accounts, and not much given to cave-dwelling."

"Then," conjectured Sally thoughtfully, "maybe these caves were used by some people who were hiding from the Romans."

Trent nodded. "Much more likely," he said. "But that doesn't help us now. Hello! The sentry's taking a nap. Can't go out *over* the boulder; what about *under* it?"

He knelt, poking about under the bulge of the sandstone boulder.

"Look, Sally," he said in a low voice. He had found something—not much, but something. The boulder, in lodging in the entrance to the small cave, had broken off a large fragment of the soft sandstone, which had wedged itself between the boulder and the side of the entrance-hole, so that the boulder rested against it.

"It just holds by one end and no more," Trent pointed out. "I can work it out, and when I do, the boulder will move a

little, settling against the edge of what you might call the doorway."

Trent was examining the floor of the cave. It was not solid rock, like the walls; not, at least, in the actual entrance. The detritus of centuries, broken fragments of stone long since powdered to dust, made a softer flooring here. With a flat bit of stone, Trent scraped at it. He made a little groove, and grinned.

"Stand up, Sally, and watch that sentry. If he moves, or opens his eyes, kick me."

HE began digging away, making a hole beneath the point where the rounded bottom of the boulder touched the floor. It was slow work, and the soft bits of sandstone he was using for tools kept breaking in his hands. Soon his nails were cracked, his fingers torn and bleeding, but he stuck to his task.

At last he had quite a little cavity excavated beneath the boulder; a cavity on whose edge the boulder balanced, held from toppling into it by the piece of sandstone wedged between it and the wall of the entrance. The hole was about six inches deep—he could go no deeper, for below was solid rock.

"It's all we can do," he told Sally. "And no use waiting. Here's luck!"

He laid violent hands on the chunk of sandstone. It trembled; it moved a little. One final wrench, and it came free. The boulder toppled ponderously into the little hole Trent had dug, thudding against the side of the doorway with a thump that seemed to shake the whole mountain.

Trent's eyes were intent on the sentry. The man never stirred. He had been in the saddle all night, and he slept well.

The space between the top of the boulder and the right-hand side of the entrance had deepened and widened appreciably. Trent thrust out his head; yes, he thought he could get through.

Sally was watching him, as he stripped off tunic and belt.

"Suppose the sentry wakes up when you're stuck halfway through?" she said.

"That," said Trent, "will be just too bad. But it has to be risked."

"No, it doesn't." Before Trent could stop her, Sally had dived for the opening. Her slender figure wriggled through in a flash. Outside in the recess she lit on her feet, catlike, and pounced on the sentry's carbine.

She turned a flushed face to Trent.

"Now come on," she said, "and if this man moves, I'll—I'll kill him!"

"Good girl!" Trent applauded. He was already working his shoulders through the narrow space. It was, as he'd thought, a tight squeeze; a good deal of skin was scraped from his arms and shoulders as he worked his way outward. Now his hips stuck—and at that moment the sentry lifted his head and opened his eyes, only to stare directly into the muzzle of his own carbine, not a foot from his nose.

"One cry, one move, brings a bullet!" snapped Trent in Arabic, and his words were punctuated by a sharp click as Sally drew back the cocking-piece of the Mauser carbine.

"Allah, protect thy servant!" murmured the sentry, sitting very still indeed.

Trent braced his hands against the boulder, got purchase with one foot on an irregularity in the inner wall, and muttering "All together now!" shoved mightily.

His hips ripped through. He landed on his knees, lacerated, bleeding, but out of that prison-cave.

He reclaimed his tunic, belt and kepi from the side of the boulder where he had deposited them, and then, with strips torn from the man's own haik, he deftly bound and gagged the sentry, while Sally stood by, carbine in hand.

He had just tightened the last knot when the lights in the passage went out, leaving the whole place in Stygian blackness. Through the darkness there sounded, far in the depths of the mountain, the distant throbbing of a great gong. Sally clung to Trent's arm.

"I'm afraid, John!" she whispered. "I don't like that gong! Take me away!"

"You're brave, Sally," Trent answered, "and you've got to go on being brave. We can't get out through those guarded gates—no use thinking of it. It'd be suicide to try."

"Then—"

"Then we've got to go the other way. Inward."

"Toward *that*?" whispered Sally.

The gong had ceased. In its place came the faint but blood-curdling sound of a weird barbaric chant, hundreds of voices blended in unison, rising and falling in a rhythm that was somehow suggestive of blood and death and cruelty. That was it, ancient, incredibly ancient cruelty, blood-lust, horror.

"Whatever it is, we've got to go that way," Trent said. "It's the only chance."

"How—how do you know there's a way out in that direction?" Sally wanted to know.

"The air, Sally. There's a current of air, flowing inward. You can feel it. Come on."

He started inward along the passage, feeling his way along the wall with one hand, the carbine swung in the other. He hoped that if the lights came on again suddenly, they wouldn't find themselves in the presence of a lot of tribesmen.

Suddenly he came up against a rocky wall. The end of the passage? A cul-de-sac? No; a sharp turn to the left. Again he groped his way onward, while the unceasing chant grew louder.

Another turn. Now, there glowed a faint reddish light against which dark shadows seemed to move. In his nostrils was a faint reek of burning sulphur. The chant wailed upward to a high note, filling the passage with dreadful sound. Then it ceased abruptly.

A low murmur, horribly expectant, took its place. Through this, abruptly, came the scream of a human being in mortal agony, or terror.

Trent broke into a run, Sally scurrying along beside him.

THE light grew stronger. Now he could see the pale oval of the girl's face at his elbow, and ahead the pulsating crimson glow on rocky walls.

The passage widened; caution checked Trent's reckless pace—which was as well, for without the least warning the passage ended. He stood on the brink of a preci-

pice. Below him was a vast cavern, lighted by that ruddy glow, which shone upward from a great crevasse at one end of the cavern.

The floor of the cavern, perhaps a hundred feet below the ledge on which Trent and Sally stood, was jammed with tribesmen. Every face was turned toward that end of the cavern where the red light shone upward from hellish depths; and there, dominating the whole scene, stood an enormous idol, fully fifty feet tall.

It was hewn out of solid sandstone, representing an erect, thick-limbed human figure, bearded, and wearing a pointed helmet. Its pedestal, shrouded in shadow, was on the farther side of the glowing crevasse. Its two joined hands, palms upturned, were stretched out over the crevasse, as though waiting to receive some offering.

Behind its pedestal Trent caught a queer flicker, a reflection of light which he realized, after a moment, was a subterranean river, flowing silently past behind the idol. Its dark waters bathed the very foot of the rock on which the idol stood.

Up out of the crevasse came the fumes of burning sulphur, now shrouding the idol in clouds of vapor, now drawing away and leaving the ugly image revealed in all its horror. Its face was a mask of cruelty and merciless greed.

"What—what is it?" choked Sally, crouching beside him.

"It looks," said Trent, trying to keep his voice steady, "like the old Carthaginian Moloch. If you remember your history, that was the god to whom the Carthaginians, in time of peril to the state, used to sacrifice their children. They laid them into the outstretched hands of the idol, and the hands moved by some trick mechanism, dropping the children into the flames below. But of course it couldn't be anything like that, here."

"You remember what I suggested—that some people had come here, fleeing from the Romans? Suppose, after the fall of Carthage—"

Trent whistled softly. "It could be so. They kept up the old worship, eh? Built

their image of Moloch here—handed down the secret from generation to generation—hid here, stealing what women they could. Good Lord, Sally! It's incredible, but there the thing is before our eyes. And look—*look!*"

Opposite those thick outstretched hands of stone was a platform, built of solid masonry, with a railed balcony projecting over the crevasse which almost touched the tips of the idol's fingers. Up the steps that led to this platform slowly climbed a group of men, splendidly attired in vestments of purple and scarlet. Ahead of them, two enormous Negroes dragged a writhing figure clad in a white cloak. The glow of those deep-hidden fires—volcanic fires, Trent knew they must be—shone on fair hair. The man in white was the radio corporal from the post of El Teb!

The men in purple and scarlet closed round him. The light glittered on the gold of swaying censers; the odor of incense mingled with the fumes of sulphur. A chant rose from the platform; a chant keyed to a higher, more feral note than before.

On the edge of the platform stood the priests—for such they must be. They flung up their arms before the image of their god; and their cries of supplication, of awful worship, rang loud above the beat of the chant. Then, in a flash, they whirled, seized the bound and struggling corporal from the hands of the blacks and flung him into the upturned palms of the great idol.

The chant rose again to a high-pitched ululation. Slowly, the hands of the idol dropped downward, moved by some hidden, fiendishly ingenious mechanism. Down they slanted, until the body of the corporal slipped, slipped again, and rolled off the fingertips of the image, into the crevasse, into the fires that waited far below. A yellowish flame shot up from the fissure, licked the stone hands of the idol, and died down again.

The priests stood with arms upraised, shouting praise of their god. The idol's hands lifted back to their horizontal position.

Trent had lifted the carbine, had aligned the sights on one of the priests, but he lowered the weapon again.

"No use," he muttered, as Sally shuddered. "I'd just be destroying both of us—throwing away our last chance, and doing no good to anyone. This ledge—let's follow it. It must go somewhere, for the passage has no other turning."

They started, hugging the wall.

THE ledge went round the top of the great cavern, beneath the vaulted roof where the sulphur fumes and the smoke hung thick. Try as he would, Trent could not keep from coughing. He moved on steadily, holding himself firmly to the idea that this was their one, their only, chance to get away. There had to be some way out. The smoke, the fumes, escaped somewhere—back of the image, he thought. Perhaps through the channel of that dark swift-flowing river.

Below, the bloodthirsty cries were dying down. The priests were beginning that awful chant again. The crowded tribesmen took it up. Then, as it sank to a low whining note, the voice of Anbal rang out.

"Brothers! The god is pleased to accept our sacrifice!"

"Ai! Allah is great!" shouted the crowd.

Allah! Had these fools somehow been induced to confound that hideous idol with the God of Mohammed?

"Brothers!" cried Anbal again. "The god speaks to you through the mouth of Anbal, his high priest. Two accursed Franzawi we have fed to his holy fires—"

Two! God rest the soul of the brave old sergeant! He at least, Trent knew, had not gone into the flames screaming. That cavernous chamber had echoed to one last gallant shout of "*Vive la France!*"

"—aye, and we have another still to offer him, an officer! It is well."

Despite himself, Trent shuddered, there on the rocky ledge, looking down at the glow of the sacrificial fires.

"It is well," Anbal repeated, "but it is not enough. Not until the god has re-

ceived the final sacrifice will he assure us of victory against the Roumi. And you all know what that final sacrifice must be."

There was a moment of profound silence, then Arab voices shouted: "The maiden! The Roumi maiden! Ai-eeee! The maiden! Give the girl to the flames! The Roumi maiden!"

"Yes!" Anbal's shout beat down the baying voices. "Yes! That is the sacrifice the god has always asked on the eve of war—a white maiden. Why must the god wait? He demands your answer. He promises you victory. Aye, victory, and the loot of the cities of the Franzawi! What say ye all, brothers? Shall Moloch, the great war god, wait longer?"

The tribesmen howled. "The maiden! The Roumi maiden to the fire!"

"Silence, dogs!" It was a new voice; and it sounded from the ledge only a few yards from the point where Trent and Sally crouched. The voice of the White Sheik, the man who called himself Mulai Mahmud.

HE stood there, plainly visible in the glow from the fissure, a dominating figure in his brown burnous, hood thrown back, head high, one arm raised in a gesture, not of supplication, but of command.

Silence came instantly. Every face below was turned toward him.

"Who has led you in war? Who has given you victory?" he roared.

"Mulai Mahmud!" answered the crowd, fervently.

"By the favor of the god!" rang the snarling voice of Anbal.

"By the favor of Allah," retorted Mulai Mahmud, "whose attributes of vengeance alone take form in the god Moloch, as I have taught ye all."

So that was it, thought Trent. Cleverly playing on the ignorance of these savage Arabs, Mulai Mahmud—having chanced upon the secret of the cavern—had grafted the savage worship of Moloch onto their none too deeply rooted Mohammedanism. Anbal and the other priests, of course, were playing along with the White

Sheik for their own ends—but were their ends *his*? Or were they engrossed beyond all else in obtaining sacrifices for their awful god?

No wonder tribesmen had been trying to carry off white women!

What was Mulai Mahmud saying?

"Now I tell you this. The woman who was brought here today is mine. I took her in fair fight, with my own hands."

"The god claims her!" shouted Anbal. "People of the desert! Will you let any man cheat you of your victory? The time has come which you have long awaited. Strike off your shackles! Sweep the Franzawi into the sea! Loot their cities! Loot!"

"Loot!" howled the crowd, surging this way and that, while the red light glittered on a thousand drawn blades. "Loot! Lead us, O Moloch! Lead us, O God of War!"

"Silence! She is mine, I tell you!" roared the White Sheik.

The flame in the fissure flickered higher, illumining the whole cave.

"She is the god's!" yelled Anbal. "Aye—and there she stands! Take her, O brothers, and bring her to the sacred fire!"

He stood on the platform, one skinny arm extended, pointing—pointing right at the ledge where Sally and Trent were!

TOO late Trent perceived that a dozen, a score of little stairways, cunningly cut in solid rock, gave access from the ledge to the cavern. Now the tribesmen were swarming up, all unheeding the stentorian shouts of the White Sheik.

"Take her!" screamed the priests. "To the flames! Ai! The hands of the god are empty!"

Trent dragged Sally along the ledge, running toward the spot where the White Sheik still stood shouting vain orders. The ledge turned sharply; there were no stairways here, the chase was behind, the White Sheik stood just ahead.

"Fool that I am," he cried to Trent, "the sword that I forged has turned in my hand! Quick! This way! We can gain at least a little time!"

He plunged into a narrow fissure in the rock; Trent thrust the girl after him. Light burst fanwise across the fissure. Trent saw the White Sheik holding open a heavy wooden door.

"In with you!"

Sally and Trent rushed into a rock-walled, electric-lighted room; the door slammed shut, the White Sheik flung two great iron bars in place and shoved home a bolt. The next instant a score of dagger-hilts were hammering on the heavy oak—too late.

The White Sheik turned to Sally, who had sunk down on a great chest and buried her face in her hands.

"Mademoiselle," said he, "I will protect you if I can. Believe me, this is not my doing."

"Not your doing!" she flashed. "It's all your doing! Murderer!"

"I am trying to save you, at least," the White Sheik answered calmly. "I was once," he explained, "Count Guinacori, lieutenant-colonel of the Mantova Dragoon regiment of the Royal Italian Army, chevalier of the Order of the Annunciation. I have the honor, mademoiselle, to ask your hand in marriage."

A strange proposal, with the blood-thirsty mob thundering at the door, intent upon her life! Sally stared at him, transfixed by horrified wonder.

"You do not believe me, mademoiselle?" the White Sheik went on. "I cannot blame you. I am here, in this"—he lifted the coarse brown burnous—"a leader, as you will say, of cutthroats. Alas, it is true. There was in Italy at the time of the battle of Caporetto a party who believed that the best interests of the kingdom would be served by the making of a separate peace, by yielding to what seemed the inevitable, while terms could still be had. I was of that party. Had events gone otherwise, we would have been patriots. As it turned out, we were traitors. Some of our leaders were shot. Others were permitted to commit suicide. But I, because I had served in Tripoli and knew Africa's ways, was given a chance to redeem myself. I was sent here, to this troubled frontier, by a great and far-see-

ing man who believed that, in the days to come, Italy might wish to reclaim her rightful heritage in Tunis, and who wished to prepare, against that day of need, an organization favorable to her cause among the wild tribesmen of the frontier region.

"I was sent alone; if the day came when my work could be acknowledged, I would win back my place. If not, if I were taken by the French, my life was forfeit, and Rome could not move a finger to save me. Well, so far I have succeeded. I have built up a power which will destroy the African empire of the French. I tell you that in your teeth, Lieutenant Trent of the so-famous Bureaux Arabes, for you are a dead man as you stand there!"

Sally turned her great eyes to Trent.

"What shall I do, John?" she said.

The carbine was still in his hands. There was a cartridge in the chamber; his finger was on the cocked trigger. One twitch of that finger, and Sally Marsland would be forever beyond the reach of the White Sheik—or of the stone hands of Moloch. It was what she expected of him, and he knew it. But duty stayed his finger. Duty—grim, inexorable.

If he killed Sally, there would be another captured girl, another sacrifice, and then the final outburst of insurrection.

If, on the other hand, the White Sheik won her promise, defended her against the priests, it meant the beginning of the end. It meant that the insurrection would fall to pieces of its own weight, for only by inspiring the ignorant desert tribesmen with a belief in the awful mysteries and powers of Moloch had the White Sheik been able to induce them to take up arms against the powers of France, which had so often chastized them. A serious rift between the priests of Moloch and the White Sheik—a rift such as would certainly be caused if the White Sheik defended Sally from the sacrifice and perhaps shed blood in the process—would mean the end of his hold over the tribesmen.

"You'd better promise, Sally," he said in a low hard voice. "It's the only way, now."

He saw pain flicker in her eyes, after a single second of utter unbelief that she could have heard aright. Then her head went up, as pride came to her rescue.

"Do as you like with me, Mulai Mahmud," said she. "The power is yours. I am quite alone."

The White Sheik spun on his heel.

"Be still outside there!" he roared. "Abdulla! To me, Abdulla!"

There was no answer save a terrible crash, as some heavy object hurled suddenly against the door. One of the bars tore free from the staple that held it; the door sagged inward.

"Abdulla!" thundered the White Sheik.

"I am a prisoner, master!" called a voice. "They hold me fast, here, a knife at my throat."

Crash! The other bar gave way; the door flew back, and a dozen tribesmen, headed by Anbal and two assistant priests, surged into the room.

"Stop! Let not brothers shed the blood of brothers!" Anbal shouted as several men poised for a rush at the White Sheik. "Give up the woman, O Mulai Mahmud, for only so shall the god smile upon your emprise!"

Then, at last, the quick brain of Mulai saw the trap into which he had been led. Then at last he realized the meaning of Trent's advice to Sally, saw in their faces that these men would not be denied, that no substitute sacrifice would serve.

He hesitated no longer than had Trent.

"Take her, then," he growled. "If you must."

Trent leaped high, caught the wires leading from the dynamo room across the rocky ceiling, and jerked them down.

DARKNESS was instant and absolute. Trent dived for the place where Sally had been; a body blocked him, a knife ripped at his side.

He heard the White Sheik bellowing for torches. Then, far along the passage, Sally's despairing shriek:

"John, John! They've got me!"

The passage was packed with armed men, surging round the figures of Anbal and the White Sheik, howling acclaim to

their reunited leaders, howling even louder:

"To the sacrifice! To the sacrifice!"

To charge them alone and unarmed was to throw his life away. His life—and it was not his. It belonged to the grim god he called duty. It might still serve France. *If* he did not destroy himself on a mad and hopeless impulse.

This passage—it went somewhere. He would try to see where.

That passage seemed interminable. Twice he came to turnings, and each time turned toward the right, since that way lay the cavern where Moloch's altar smoked. At last he heard a faint purring sound.

Moving very slowly, he went on. The passage sloped sharply downward, the air grew suddenly cooler and fresher, though the darkness was as deep as before. The purring sound grew louder, became the ripple of water.

The river—the subterranean river! A moment later water splashed over his foot. He stood on its very brink.

Far away he saw a gray splotch of daylight. It was the way out. To freedom. He had but to wade up the shallow stream—

No, he would not serve France by so hopeless a venture. What then?

Downstream must lie the great cavern. Perhaps if he went that way, he could do something: to kill Anbal or the White Sheik on the altar, to strike at the heart of rebellion by destroying the belief of the tribesmen in the potency of their new god. Only such a thing would serve his purpose.

Determinedly putting the thought of Sally from his soldier's mind—though he could not put her from his man's heart—he waded down stream. And presently, along the surface of the water, he heard the awful cadences of the chant of sacrifice. Again the red light of the volcanic fissure glowed before him.

He crawled out of the water on the farther bank and worked his way along over the loose rocks. The light grew brighter; and now the shadow of the great idol lay across the river. He could

see its hands, greedily waiting; see the platform, empty yet—for which he was thankful.

A desperate plan sprang into Trent's mind. Carefully, he descended into the river, waded across and found narrow steps by which he might ascend from the water's edge up the rear of the idol's pedestal.

Trent examined the idol with desperate eyes. The arms were still high above his head. How to get up to them? Why, here was a ladder—iron rungs, rusty but firm. Hidden, of course, from the vulgar view.

Trent was about to lift himself up when something creaked at his very feet. So deep was the shadow, so thick the sudden swirl of sulphur fumes, that he could just make out the square of a trapdoor in the top of the pedestal slowly, slowly rising behind the idol's heels.

A man's head—a head in a striped haik—appeared. Then the body, the legs. The man stood on the pedestal, within a yard of Trent. He closed the trap door carefully and stood there, balancing an iron bar in his hand. He chuckled to himself.

It was his last chuckle in this world, for Trent's knotted fist drove true and clean to the point of the rascal's bearded chin. He crumpled, out. Trent snatched the iron bar from his hand and struck. He heard the skull beneath the striped haik crumple under that savage blow. He eased the dead priest to the stone, and with the bar in his hand, climbed silently up the rear of the idol, using the ladder.

Yes—it was as he had thought. There was a wide vertical slot between the idol's shoulders, and in that slot was a socket into which the iron bar fitted. This was the explanation of the idol's moving arms. When the sacrifice was ready, the assistant priest, hidden behind the broad back of the image, had only to pull down on his bar and the hands dropped the sacrifice into the flaming fissure. Very simple.

Beneath the idol's arm Trent peeped out.

A TOP the platform were Anbal and several other priests, clad in their brilliant vestments. The two Negro at-

tendants were there, holding a slender form in white between them—Sally, clad now in the white robe of sacrifice.

Trent swung himself round the idol's shoulder. His feet found firm footing on the leveled arms. He felt the hot breath of the volcanic fires on his face as he sprang across that dreadful bridge.

Anbal was screaming imprecations. Trent bounded from the hands to the platform, knocked Anbal sprawling, snatched Sally, and swung her into the idol's hands. The White Sheik jerked out a knife; Trent drove a fist into the man's stomach and leaped backward, crashing to his knees in the stone palms of Moloch, but not before his left hand had snatched that knife. And now, with two swift cuts, he freed Sally from her bonds.

"Get going!" Trent shoved Sally along the arms toward the idol's shoulders.

"They will flee by the river!" rose Abdulla's voice. "This way, brothers! The passage! We will cut them off! They cannot escape! Death to the Roumi!"

"Death to the Roumi!" echoed the maddened tribesmen, and there was a rush for the stairways leading to the ledge and the passages.

Across the river, Sally shuddered on the stony bank while Trent, hidden by smoke and fumes, labored madly with his iron bar at the loose rock that lay on the steep declivity.

Now it was yielding, now it was moving—a few fragments, a larger one—the whole mass trembled beneath his feet.

He tore off his shirt, ripped it in half, plunged the rags into water and grabbing up Sally in his arms, fled upstream, while behind him the rock slide thundered down into the bed of the stream—thundered and slid and started new slides for fully five minutes after he had left it.

There were no shouts from the cavern; no sounds of pursuit. Only a deathly silence reigned behind.

On and on—upstream against the power of the current. On and on, endlessly.

"I can't breathe!" gasped Sally.

"Only a little farther!" Trent thought

(*The End.*)

he lied, but at that moment his inflamed eyes caught sight of that distant spot of gray light. Better air gave relief to his lungs, fresh strength to his limbs.

Again he managed to pick the girl up, and at last—how long afterward he never knew—he staggered out into the light of day, drew in one mighty breath of clear desert air, and saw the sun shining down between the rocky walls of the gorge through which the river found its way into the depths. The sun which he had thought never to see again!

He splashed water into Sally's face. She opened her eyes.

"Come along," he bade her. "We've got to get out of this gorge; the gas'll be coming out that hole in clouds any minute."

"Gas!" croaked Sally, between parched lips.

"Sulphureted hydrogen—natural result of damming a river so it overflows into a volcanic fissure where sulphur is burning," grunted Trent. "There won't be much pursuit by the tribesmen. The only way we got out ourselves was by breathing the fresher air carried along by the river. What price Pélissier, now, eh?"

Together they struggled up the stream bed and stood at last in the open desert, on the high ground, whence the river fell away.

"Are—are they all dead—down there?" asked Sally.

"No. Some may be; most of them will just be sick after they come out of it. Sally, Sally!"

She lifted her face.

Her tired lips did not speak; but her eyes were eloquent. Trent bent and kissed her.

After that, it seemed to matter very little that behind a distant dust-cloud flashed the sabers of a squadron of Legion cavalry, riding in search of the Caverns of the Gods, with Sergeant Kindulu at their head.

Faithful Kindulu!

Hand in hand, Trent and his Sally started across the burning sands to meet the troopers of France.



"A little more attention to your back-hand, and—voilà!—the title will be yours, ma petite!"
(Page 127.)

WHILE THE GALLERY CHEERS

By

WILLIAM BRUNER

CHAPTER ONE

STEEL MAN



HE was holding a tennis racket. Defiantly. As if, with that fragile thing, she could halt the progress of a tractor, a twenty-seven-thousand-pound gun, an assortment of heavy trucks, and a dozen men.

But she was doing just that, and quite successfully. She was dressed in cool white, with a white band across her forehead, and she looked crisp on that hot summer afternoon, crisp and assured. The motors chugged idly and loaded the still air with fumes, but the mobile artillery didn't move. The men, sweltering in olive-drab uniforms, didn't move either. They sat regarding the girl admiringly, but uncertainly.

"I'm sure," she said politely, "that someone has made a mistake." She waved her tennis racket toward the ominous-looking gun. "Really, we have no place for that—that cannon at Rocky Farm."

The red-faced sergeant, sitting high on the seat of the leading truck, caught hopefully at familiar words.

"Rocky Farm," he repeated. "That's right, Miss." His booming voice became anxious. "Understand, we wouldn't bother you like this for anything, only we've got orders—"

"I'm sorry," the girl interrupted, with a shade of exasperation, "but there *must* be some error."

The sergeant was visibly disturbed. "The War Department," he explained reproachfully, "doesn't make errors." He turned to the civilian who sat next to him. "Am I right, Mr. Powell?"

Mr. Powell's angular figure jerked perceptibly, and his steel-gray eyes lost some of their abstraction. Dan Powell had not been thinking of the War Department's infallibility, nor of the delay. He had been thinking only of that girl who stood exactly between the tall stone pillars of the Rocky Farm gate, blocking progress with her tennis racket. When Sergeant Mallory's question filtered through, he had just concluded that before him stood the loveliest girl he had ever seen.

"Am I right?" Mallory asked again.

"She certainly is!" Dan Powell agreed warmly.

The sergeant sighed. He had been in

the army too long to be surprised, much, at anything; and now he concluded that young Powell wasn't going to be of great help. He faced the girl again.

"Listen, lady," he began patiently. "You're taking unfair advantage. You know we're not going to run over you. On the other hand, I'm under orders to deliver this gun to Rocky Farm, Long Island. If you can't understand why, you've got nothing on me. Now, come on, be reasonable!"

She hesitated, evidently touched by the sergeant's plea. "But this is private property! I'm sure my father—"

"Is his name Edward Walden?" Mallory asked.

She nodded.

"Does he manufacture steel?"

"Why, yes, but—"

"There!" Mallory snapped his blunt fingers as if the whole thing were settled. "You see?"

"Oh, Lord!" Dan Powell muttered. He jumped down from the truck and strode forward, pulling a battered felt hat away from his mussed, brown hair. "Gosh, Miss Walden, I didn't know—" He broke off, flushing. "I mean—well, this is a surprise."

"It certainly is," she agreed—but she smiled.

Dan Powell could only stand there and watch. That smile was like something out of an Irish song. It brought magic to the world. A dancing light came into her warm, brown eyes. Dan could think of nothing else. Even with a dozen soldiers looking on, he was ready to mark that one brief moment as the most memorable of his life. It wholly eclipsed that other great moment when, through calculation and experiment, he had concluded that his new armor plate was perfect.

But it now occurred to Dan Powell that armor plate, while of tremendous importance to himself, was cold, and hard, and quite unresponsive. This girl, on the other hand—

Dan suddenly checked himself, before his eyes gave him away. "We didn't expect to find anyone here," he explained lamely. "Mr. Walden suggested that we

use Rocky Farm for making certain tests, but if we're intruding—"

She laughed, and the laugh was pure music, like some infinitely disturbing song.

"Oh, not at all," she said. "Dad simply failed to mention that you were coming. Artillery doesn't drop in on us every day, you see, and when that huge gun turned into our road, I simply couldn't understand. But it's all right, of course."

She stepped aside. Sergeant Mallory beamed down on her. But with the air of one who was taking no chances, he hurriedly gave the order to advance. The tractor clanked ahead, dragging the big gun after it. Dan stood near the girl, while the rumbling trucks followed.

He couldn't talk to her because of the noise, but it was enough to stand there and look at her. She was tall, he noted approvingly, and she held herself erect, with an easy balance. He had never before seen a girl who could be so graceful while merely standing still. He thought of "statuesque" as a descriptive word, but that didn't quite do. She was too alive.

White was becoming to her. It set off the golden tan of her skin, detracted nothing from the deep brown of her wavy hair, nor from the vivid, natural red of her lips. Perfect lips beneath a straight, perfect nose. Dan felt an unaccustomed ache in his heart—a permanent ache, he feared, which only this girl could cure.

The last truck rattled by. The girl gazed doubtfully after it.

"I was on my way to the village," she said, "but I think I'd better go back to the house." She hesitated a fraction of a second, then added, "Mother's there."

"Oh," Dan said. Somehow her tone was not wholly reassuring. "Will she object?"

"She might. Mother has very definite ideas about things. We're supposed to be here for peace and quiet. I'm afraid she won't consider that gun favorable to either."

"It's only a hundred and fifty-five millimeters," Dan explained. "That means its shell is just a fraction over six inches through."

"A mere toy." Her eyes laughed, but she started up the maple-shaded road. "Do you actually intend to shoot it?"

"I'm afraid that was the plan."

The girl increased her pace. "We'd better hurry," she said.

Dan strode along with her. By glancing sidewise only occasionally, he could study her profile without undue risk of stumbling. It was a serenely lovely profile, finely molded. The sweep of her forehead—

Dan Powell stumbled. He recovered his balance, then flushed.

"You might," the girl suggested gravely, "watch where you're going."

"I can't," Dan said, and marveled at his courage.

The girl gave no indication that she had heard. The tennis racket swung in time with her steps, snipping through the long grass at the side of the road. Up ahead, the clatter of the trucks and tractor had ceased. He guessed that Sergeant Mallory and the soldiers had arrived at the house. He hoped for the best. Right now, more than anything else in the world he wanted to stay at Rocky Farm—and he wasn't thinking at all about testing his armor plate.

The road curved up a gentle slope. They walked rapidly, silently, hurrying around the bend, as if the matter of a few seconds was of prime importance. Perhaps it was; Mrs. Walden had sounded rather grim.

And then Dan Powell saw the little man. Screened by the trees, he was peering furtively toward the house—a great, weather-stained barn of a place which loomed just a few hundred yards farther on. The man was writing swiftly, almost feverishly, in a small, black-covered notebook.

Dan halted, catching the girl's arm. His voice was low, tense:

"Does that fellow belong here?"

Startled, the girl shook her head. At that moment the man turned. He had a pale, curiously expressionless face, but his wiry little body was fixed in an attitude of dismay.

"Hey!" Dan called. "Just a minute!"

The little man seemed to need just some such order. He snapped the notebook shut and fled rabbitlike into the woods. Dan sprinted after him, but the little man made excellent use of his head start. He vanished before Dan had followed a hundred yards. When Dan stopped, he could hear the man crashing through the brush in the general direction of the highway.

Deciding that further pursuit would be useless, Dan returned to the road. Miss Walden looked at him curiously, but asked no questions. Dan, however, felt that some sort of explanation was necessary.

"You must excuse me if I seem jittery," he said. "You see, I recently developed a new principle in armor plate. Your father became interested. He had the castings made at his steel mill, and suggested that we come here for the first tests. The idea, of course, was to carry them out as secretly as possible."

"Of course," she agreed, but she was laughing. "Really, when that gun goes off, every person from Patchogue to Montauk will be running over to see what's happened."

He made an impatient gesture. "They won't matter so much. What we're afraid of are spies."

"Spies!"

He nodded. "Not that there's any danger," he said hastily. "I understand that spies are highly civilized—polished. But they do snoop."

"So I've heard." The girl's eyes laughed. "Do you think that little man was a spy?"

"I don't know. If he wasn't, why did he run?"

"Perhaps he was frightened. He was a timid-looking fellow." She started toward the house again. "We'd better hurry. Your sergeant will be needing us."

THE house was a fantastic looking place. Built in an era when bulk, cupolas and gingerbread-trim were the fashion, it sat impassively on the hilltop, incredibly shabby and run-down. At first glance it reminded Dan of an old woman

who had lived far beyond her day, but who still clung with desperate sentiment to the dress and manners of her youth. But, like such a woman, the old farm house possessed a dignity of its own. No remodeling, no face-lifting, was needed, although in either case a touch of paint might not have done any harm.

But those instruments of modern warfare did seem out of place before that aging house. It was as if Dan's imagined old lady had suddenly blossomed out with a machine-gun and turned gangster.

As Dan and the girl approached, a woman appeared on the wide veranda. She was tall, auburn-haired, and attractive. Dan knew, without being told, that she was Mrs. Walden. His heart sank. Her expression and whole bearing indicated annoyance and surprise. She waved a graceful hand toward the gun.

"What," she asked clearly, "is the meaning of this?"

Sergeant Mallory, obviously wishing he were some place else, wasn't going to get into any more arguments.

"Orders, ma'am," he said.

"Orders?" Mrs. Walden's voice went up. "Whose orders?"

"War Department's, ma'am."

Mrs. Walden sighed. The girl hurried to join her on the veranda. Dan stopped uncertainly at the bottom step.

"I could almost swear," Mrs. Walden said, "that I am dreaming. Leslie, do you see that gun? Those men?"

"It's all right, Mother. Dad knows about it."

"Oh," Mrs. Walden said, a little more sure of herself. "He does?"

Leslie Walden nodded, and turned toward Dan. "This is Mr. Powell," she explained. "He's invented a new armor plate, and they've come here to test it out."

Mrs. Walden glanced apprehensively at the gun. "To test it out?" she cried. "But that's impossible! Think of your tennis! You'll get neither rest nor practice with so much stir going on."

Leslie shot Dan a quick, enigmatic glance. "I don't think it will bother me."

Mrs. Walden was unconvinced. "Of

course it will!" she insisted. "We can't have it. Why—"

She broke off as a large sedan came sweeping up the drive. Two men climbed out. One wore the uniform of an army officer. A captain's bars were at his shoulders. The other was Edward Walden. He grinned briefly at Dan, then hurried up the steps and took his wife's hand.

"I'm sorry, Helen," he said. "I completely forgot—"

"You conveniently forgot," Mrs. Walden corrected. "Go on."

"I failed to mention," Mr. Walden said, with dignity, "that we were planning to do a bit of shooting out here at Rocky Farm. But I know you won't mind. All the work will be done down by the old barn—"

"That gun will rattle the walls in Jericho," Mrs. Walden interrupted. "Really, Ed, it's out of the question. It's only a short time until the championship matches at Forest Hills. Leslie has a chance—I'm sure she has—of winning the national title. I've planned for that so long! You wouldn't spoil—"

"Certainly not." Edward Walden beamed at Leslie. "A little thing like a one-fifty-five gun won't bother you, will it?"

Leslie laughed, her brown eyes dancing as she glanced at Dan Powell.

"Not if you do your shooting here," she said. "Otherwise I'd be terribly worried about what I might be missing."

"Atta girl!" Mr. Walden proudly patted his daughter's shoulder. Then he saw the others. "Dan! Captain Cardway! I want you to meet—"

They shook hands, talked. Dan noticed that Mrs. Walden seemed to be genuinely distressed. He was sorry. They said the usual things. But Captain Cardway, looking very military, had something unusual to add.

"I must ask you all," he said earnestly, "not to mention our real reason for being here. Not to anyone."

"Of course not," Mr. Walden said. "A test like this is secret. No one will give out any information."

CHAPTER TWO

NEAR CHAMPION

BY dinnertime, Mrs. Walden was doing her best to act the part of gracious hostess and succeeding admirably. Plainly, she still felt that she had been tricked; but after all, as she pointed out, she was helpless against such powerful allies as her husband, her daughter and the War Department—now ably represented by the metallic Captain John Cardway.

Dan liked Leslie's mother. She had the knack of friendliness. He soon forgot that originally she had not been at all glad to see him. He couldn't blame her. It must have been disturbing to see a dozen men pull up at her front door with a good-sized gun and the admitted intention of using it.

Dinner passed pleasantly enough. The talk was all of tennis and the forthcoming national championship matches at Forest Hills. Dan learned, with some dismay, that both Leslie Walden and her mother were nationally known figures. He learned, too, that Mrs. Walden was possessed by one driving ambition. Herself a one-time champion, she wanted above all else to see Leslie win the title. She talked it, admitted dreaming it, and even put up with the inconveniences of Rocky Farm for it.

"Last year," she explained, "Leslie lost the championship match by only the narrowest margin. She was trained too fine."

"That's what I always said," Mr. Walden put in. "Really, Helen, you treated the poor girl as if she were a race horse. Now if you'll only give her a chance to be herself—"

"That's exactly why we're here—to avoid sports writers, too much excitement—noise."

Captain Cardway looked concerned. He was a metallic sort of man, with a brassy voice, eyes that were curiously rust-colored, and hair that seemed made of stiff copper wire. He had come to Rocky Farm, as a technical expert for the government, to observe the effects of gunfire on the new Powell plate.

"I'm afraid," he said ruefully, "that we're interfering too much with your plans."

"Not at all," Leslie protested. "I can't spend every minute on tennis."

"But you should." Her mother's tone was urgent. "It's the only way, my dear."

Ed Walden's round, shiny face twisted into a frown. "I tell you, Helen," he warned, "you'll have the girl licked before she ever sets foot on the West Side courts."

"Nonsense!" Mrs. Walden turned to Dan. "Do you play tennis?"

Dan smiled ruefully, shaking his head.

"And you, Captain?"

"I made the Army team when I was a cadet," the officer said. "But that means very little. The Point lost most of its games that year."

Mrs. Walden glowed. "I'm afraid you're modest, Captain. We'll see—if you can spare time for a few sets."

Cardway smiled at Leslie. "Of course I can," he said.

Dan felt like kicking himself. Why, he wondered, hadn't he claimed to be good? He might have got away with it. It was as simple as that. If you played tennis, Mrs. Walden liked you. If you didn't—

He almost sighed. He could picture himself miserably slaving over the firing tests, while Leslie and the captain enjoyed a fast workout. No telling where *that* might lead. Cardway, he understood, was single. . . .

But Dan got a break after dinner.

"I'm going down to the barn," he said, "to see whether all the equipment got here in good shape."

"Want company?" Leslie asked.

"Gosh!" He caught Mrs. Walden's quick glance. "I mean—I'd be delighted."

They started. The road to the barn, where Sergeant Mallory and his men had camped, was rutty, rough. Although a full moon lighted it perfectly, Dan felt justified in taking Leslie's arm.

"Nice night," he said.

"Lovely."

Silence. Not an embarrassing silence. Dan could have walked for hours with Leslie Walden at his side and felt no

need for words. And yet—they were alone. It mightn't happen again. Not for another day, at least.

"Your mother's a peach," he said.

Leslie laughed. "She stood for the—the invasion better than I expected. You see—well, she's set her heart on having me win that title. It's a sort of mania with her. Not that I mind," she added hastily. "I'd rather like to have it."

"You will. But if all this confusion is going to get on your nerves—"

"Dad's pretty wise. He probably thinks it'll do me a world of good. It's easy to overtrain. I—I think it will do me good, too."

"Hope so." He paused. "Mr. Walden has certainly been helpful. More than that. When I went to him with my formula, he took complete charge. He made the castings, arranged for the gun and these men, and got semi-official recognition from Washington, by bringing Captain Cardway here. If the plate's a success—"

He told her briefly what it would mean if his armor justified his hopes. Its great advantage would be extreme toughness combined with thinness. Three-inch Powell plates should have the same resistance to shell attack as twelve-inch plates of the older type.

"And that means a tremendous saving in cost and weight." His lean face lighted as he talked. "You understand, it's for protecting men, not for destroying them. A battleship armored with this plate would be faster, lighter, stronger. It would give our navy—"

He broke off, grinning sheepishly. "I'm getting ahead of myself. I'll tell you more when I see how it stands up."

"It'll stand up." Leslie sounded as if she meant it. "I know Dad's ideas on fine steel. Making it is not merely a business with him, it's an art—as it must have been in old Toledo and Damascus."

She smiled, and the soft oval of her face was enchanting in the moonlight. They were on a wooded, rocky ridge which screened the old barn from the farm house. Ahead, Dan could see a twinkle of light where the soldiers had

built a small fire. His steps lagged; he liked that sense of being alone without being lonely.

He suddenly thought of the little man who had fled into the woods.

"At any rate," Leslie went on, "Dad's fine steel has kept us poor—nicely poor. We can own this big old farm, which no one else would have. At first we were going to fix it up, which is the reason for that elegant stone gate. Then—because no one seems to want really fine steel—we decided we'd better leave it as it is."

"It's perfect."

They looked back. Moonlight softened the harsh angles of the place, gave it serene majesty. The parlor windows glowed.

"I like it, too," Leslie said. Her voice was low. "Tonight it's more lovely than I've ever seen it before."

Dan did not trust himself to speak. Peace was in the scene, but not in his heart. His pulses throbbed. Unconsciously his fingers pressed more deeply into her arm.

Sergeant Mallory's booming laugh came up from the soldiers' camp, and the spell was broken. Leslie pulled away.

"Please!" she laughed. "I need that arm for tennis!"

"Sorry! I didn't know—"

A long-drawn, snarling sound ripped through the quiet. Instantly it was followed by a loud, jangling crash. Then startled silence. They exchanged quick glances.

"That sounded—"

"Like a car smash-up," Leslie finished. "It's down by the gate!" She caught Dan's hand and started to pull him away from the barn road. "I know a short-cut," she cried. "Hurry!"

They ran across a weed-grown field which had known no plow for generations. They came to a dark wall of trees. Leslie found a path, mottled by thin shafts of leaf-filtered moonlight.

Breathless, they reached an old stone fence which bordered the road. Dan leaped up, helping Leslie across. They ran on toward the gate.

"It is an accident," Leslie cried. "Look!"

An automobile was smashed crookedly against one of the stone pillars. Two people were standing near by. They weren't doing anything at all about it; just standing and looking, as if they might be dazed. As he drew nearer, Dan saw that one of them was a woman.

"Anyone hurt?" Dan called.


They turned. Then, unexpectedly, the woman sank down on the ground and began to weep. The man limped toward her. Dan noted, with surprise, that he was already using a cane.

"Are you hurt?" he repeated.

"I do not know, Monsieur," the man answered, speaking with effort. "I think that we are only frightened."

CHAPTER FOUR

CELEBRITY

 CAR came roaring down from the house. It stopped at the gate, its headlights flaring on the wreck. Captain Cardway and the Waldens were in it. They crowded out, all asking at once if anyone were seriously injured.

"Only shock, I think," Dan said. "We just got here."

Leslie and her mother lifted up the sobbing woman. The headlight beam fell across her face. It was tear-stained, but memorably beautiful in an exotic way.

"You must come up to the house, my dear," Mrs. Walden said.

"Ah, madame, it is too dreadful! Our little car—"

"They can do wonders repairing them," Mrs. Walden soothed. "Heaven knows, they get enough practice! Can you walk?"

"I—I believe so, madame."

"How'd it happen?" Captain Cardway asked.

The man with the cane answered. He had a swarthy, narrow face, with a trim mustache and alert, deep-set eyes. He spoke with a marked accent—French, Dan thought.

"We have—what do you call it?—a flat tire. We skid. We hit the gate. We wreck ourselves."

"Hurt your leg?"

"No, monsieur. That is an old hurt."

The women were at the Walden sedan. Ed Walden was examining the wreck and shaking his head.

"Such steel!" he muttered. "Now if they'd put some real metal in these things—"

"Drive us to the house, will you, Ed?" Mrs. Walden called. "Then perhaps the captain and Mr. Powell will go to the village for a wrecking car."

"We put you to much trouble," the man with the limp protested.

"Trouble!" Mrs. Walden said. "I'm only too glad to find that you didn't hurt yourselves on our gate. I knew what had happened the instant I heard the crash. There's no other sound quite like a smash-up."

Ed Walden drove them away. The captain went along. Dan, remaining alone with the wrecked car, discovered that the back seat was piled with luggage. He felt vaguely annoyed with the limping Frenchman and the good-looking woman. They might have had their accident somewhere else. As it was, they had interrupted a perfectly good walk with Leslie Walden. Perhaps, given a little more time, he would have kissed her. That would have been pretty fast work for Dan Powell, who understood metallurgy thoroughly and women not at all. But it was agreeable, at any rate, to think along such lines. . . .

Captain Cardway returned with the sedan.

"What do you think?" he asked. "Those people—they're brother and sister—are going to spend the night."

Dan chuckled. "Mrs. Walden will soon have a houseful."

The captain seemed in a trance. "Lord!" he breathed. "She's a beautiful woman!" He pulled the luggage out of the car piece by piece. There was a lot of it. "They are French," he went on. "They were going to Southampton and got lost. Mrs. Walden wants their things brought up."

Dan felt a little less irritated with the French girl. If, by crashing into the scene, she had taken the captain's interest away from Leslie Walden, Dan was prepared to like her. The trouble with the captain,

from Dan's point of view, was that wise look in his rusty eyes. Women, he somehow felt, might be intrigued by it. Not that Leslie had shown any preference for the officer, but at the same time—

He found himself hoping that the French girl and her brother would stay a few days.

When he arrived at the house again, that was exactly what Mrs. Walden was urging them to do. She had made a discovery. She couldn't get over the coincidence of it.

"It's the most remarkable thing!" she exclaimed. "To think, with all Long Island to have that accident on, that it should happen here!" She beamed at Dan and the captain. "Gentlemen, Mlle. Claire Marquette and M. Nicolas Marquette!"

There was a good deal of bowing, polite murmuring. Dan hoped that he was looking properly impressed—not that anyone was paying him any particular attention. Even Ed Walden had a sort of pleased awe in his eyes as he watched the newcomers, who, under the influence of so much warm friendliness, were making a quick recovery from their experience.

IT was some little time before Dan got the whole thing straightened out. Since everyone else seemed to be perfectly familiar with the Marquettes, he dared ask no questions. He listened and learned.

Nicolas Marquette, he discovered, was one of the most brilliant French tennis players of all time. In his spectacular rise he had eclipsed even the great Jean Borotra and Henri Cochet. Then, ironically, after his success in tournament play, he fell during a practice game and broke his ankle.

The injury had kept him off the courts. Deciding that he might as well do something with his idle time, he had come with his sister to see America. He did not at all wish, he gravely said, to be seen by America. The prospect of being lionized as a visiting celebrity had filled him with alarm. So, arriving under the protection of assumed names, they had purchased a small car and started out—

"Just as tourists, madame, seeing this great country of yours."

"But," Claire Marquette said ruefully, "we do not get very far!"

"I hope you'll go no farther," Mrs. Walden said warmly. "It is too hot now for motoring. Rocky Farm is an old wreck of a place, but it's restful. Do say you'll stay! It'll be simple. We've no servants, but—"

The Marquettes exchanged quick, questioning glances. Each had the air of wanting to accept the invitation.

"At least until your car is repaired," Mrs. Walden urged.

"But you are too kind, madame!" Claire protested. Her low-pitched foreign voice sounded strange in that old-fashioned parlor. "We would be so much trouble."

"You wouldn't!" Leslie cried. "But I'd be troubling you, I'm afraid, asking pointers on my own tennis. I may as well be frank with you. If you stay, I simply won't be able to help coming to you for advice."

Nicolas smiled. "I am tempted too much, Mademoiselle—we will remain!"

Dan glanced doubtfully at the man. Marquette's acceptance, it seemed to him, contained almost too much warmth. Perhaps, he consoled himself, that was merely the Frenchman's manner. He hoped so. It would be just too bad if, in losing Captain Cardway as a rival for Leslie's attention, he found himself facing a more potent one in the person of Nicolas Marquette.

Everyone seemed tremendously pleased. Dan tried to act pleased, too. He grinned—and noticed Claire Marquette's dark, enigmatic eyes fixed steadily on his own. There was nothing casual in that glance; it was hypnotic and disturbing. He fumbled for a cigarette.

"You make us all very happy," Mrs. Walden was saying. "I'm glad you didn't conceal your identities from us, too."

Nicolas shrugged. His movements were sudden, precise, as if he were operated by a system of coiled springs. Dan could imagine him performing with spectacular speed on a tennis court.

"How could we?" the Frenchman asked.

"You and the mademoiselle are far better known than we. It would have seemed unjust to thank you for your kindness under false names."

"That is true," Claire agreed. "We—"

A splintering crash suddenly broke in on that polite atmosphere. It came from the veranda. Ed Walden leaped for the front door, with Dan and the captain close at his heels.

Outside, they found only moonlight and peace. Then Ed Walden swore softly and pointed. Dan saw that a large section of the veranda rail was down and lying crazily on the ground.

"This place isn't *that* old," the steel manufacturer muttered. "It's not quite ready to fall part. Somebody *pulled* that rail down."

Dan and Cardway started around the house, going in opposite directions. After a few minutes Dan heard the officer give a triumphant shout. He ran faster.

Rounding a corner, he beheld Cardway in hot pursuit of a man who was sprinting toward the woods. He paused, squinting, but the bright moonlight left no doubt. Cardway was chasing the same little man whom Dan had surprised that afternoon!

Dan started to run again. Ed Walden puffed along behind him. When he reached the woods, he found the captain threshing about in the brush. The steel manufacturer caught up.

"We can't let that fellow get away!" Cardway growled. "If people start spying around like that—"

Walden gasped. "You think he's a spy?"

"Certainly!" the officer snapped. "Why else would he be here?"

Ed Walden didn't know. And so began a fruitless search which was to last several hours, and gain the three men nothing but brush-scratched faces and torn clothes.

MRS. WALDEN glanced at a loud-ticking grandfather clock. "Whatever's keeping them," she said, "is certainly keeping them a long time. And you," she added, addressing the Mar-

quettes, "must surely be tired after your—your experience." She rose. "I'll show you to your rooms."

With Leslie leading the way, the three women went up the creaking stairs. Nicolas followed, leaning heavily on his cane. Mrs. Walden opened two doors in the upper hall.

"This corner room will be yours, Mr. Marquette," she said. "The next is Claire's. They're both rather enormous and old-fashioned, but you'll find them comfortable."

Claire glanced into her room. "But it is charming!" she exclaimed. "These old things—there is something about them. First they are fashionable, then everyone says they are ugly, but when enough years pass, they seem beautiful again."

"I'm glad you like it," Mrs. Walden said. "We want you to stay."

"You make it impossible for us to leave," Nicolas declared. He bowed. "Madame—Mademoiselle."

He stood in the doorway until they had gone downstairs. Then swiftly he went to Claire's room and closed the door behind him. He threw his arms up and leaned, in mock exhaustion, against the wall.

"Well, baby," he said softly, triumphantly, "looks as if we put it across."

Claire said nothing. Tears glistened on her cheeks. He stared.

"Well, for the luvva—" He strode forward and caught her shoulders. "Say, what's eating you?"

Claire sniffled. "This—this room!"

He flicked the teardrops from her cheeks. "We've had better, I'll admit," he said. "Boy, this has the works! Wash stand. Clothes press. And look at the size of that bed! Sister, a fellow could play tennis on that!"

Claire pulled away and flung herself on the bargelike bed. "That's not the point at all," she said bleakly. "Max, I had a room exactly like this when I was a little girl!"

"Better can that 'Max' stuff," the man said. "Nicolas Marquette to you, my dear. And while you're at it, you'd better forget Jessie Collins and the old Iowa farm."

The woman sighed. "Don't worry about me," she said wearily. "But let me tell you this—no more fake automobile accidents for this gal. You make 'em too good!"

"We put it over, didn't we?"

She nodded, but there was no triumph in her eyes. "We put it over. It was almost too easy, really. These people—they're not at all what I expected them to be. They're genuine. I won't be happy on this job. It'll be like taking candy from a baby."

"As long as you take the candy—" The man who posed as Nicolas Marquette, internationally known tennis star, spread his lean, well-groomed hands. He wasn't letting a little sentiment interfere with business. He had come to Rocky Farm for the sole purpose of securing the formula for the new Powell armor plate, and, one way or another, he meant to have it when he left.

That formula, he knew, would bring a handsome price from any one of several world powers. Unlike the woman, he did not believe that it would be easy to obtain. Dan Powell, obviously, was nobody's fool, and neither was Edward Walden. But if those two proved too difficult to manage, there were still Leslie Walden and the captain, both of whom, in his expert opinion, might be more susceptible. Leslie was already interested in his "tennis"; and the officer had scarcely lifted his eyes from Claire's face all the while he was in the room. So Max Brown, alias Nicolas Marquette, was inclined to feel hopeful.

"We're getting the breaks," he said. "All we've got to do is watch our step. The real Marquette isn't likely to cause us any trouble. He's out of the picture—in this country at least—until he gets back into tournament play."

"And you look enough like him to be a brother," Claire said. "That's break two for you. I'm not so lucky. Tomorrow I start playing tennis with Leslie—with you doing the heavy looking on."

"And the coaching, my dear," Nicolas said. "I've memorized all the rule books. It's a good thing. If we don't make a champion out of Leslie Walden while

we're getting that formula, it won't be our fault!"

Claire smiled ruefully. "They ought to get something out of it," she said. "But there's one thing I don't like. Who do you suppose was out there on the porch?"

"I'll guess with you."

"Competitors?"

Nicolas frowned. "Maybe. We've had 'em before. I thought we had exclusive dope on this new armor—but you never can tell." He went to the door. "We'll see. Meantime, you can work on young Powell, and I'll see about falling in love with the lovely Leslie. It shouldn't be hard," he finished.

"Not for you," Claire snapped. "Good night!"

CHAPTER FOUR

LOVE GAME

THE necessity of acting civilized, Dan Powell concluded after the Marquettes had been at Rocky Farm a week, was one of the greatest hardships in the world. He sat on a shaded bench, smoking his pipe and watching a spirited game of tennis between Claire and Leslie, and glumly wished that everyone present were somewhere else.

Nicolas, for instance. It would have been much better if Nicolas had gone back to Paris. Instead of that, he sat next to Dan, talking volubly to Mrs. Walden. His precise, accented words fell on Dan's ears like so many hammer blows. Dan found himself wishing that the Frenchman would fall again and sprain his vocal cords.

And there was Claire, who, in Dan's opinion, needed choking. He could have done the job with pleasure. But he had to be civilized. It was all very depressing.

Things had not been going so well—not for Dan Powell. One complication after another had delayed the armor-plate tests. That, considering the importance of time, was annoying. If these first tests proved the quality of the plate, Dan hoped to interest the navy, which was preparing to build several new cruisers.

Dan wanted to see his steel used in those ships, for reasons of economy, strength, and safety. But the construction program could not, of course, be held up too long.

If Dan didn't have some definite results to show within a couple of weeks—well, it would be just too bad.

Still, that was the least of his worries. He had faith in his plate; sooner or later it would win recognition. The greatest of his worries was Leslie Walden. Watching her now, he was at a loss to know just what to make of her. At first she had seemed warm, human; but within the last few days—

The Frenchman's voice broke in on his thoughts:

"Such speed, Madame! Such grace and skill! Your daughter is one player superb. On the court she is like a machine—cool, confident, thinking of only the thing she must do, which is to play brilliantly and win."

Mrs. Walden nodded, her hazel eyes glowing with pride. "She does play beautifully, Nicolas. I've noticed marked improvement since you came. You've given her faith in herself. She should win."

"Ah! I have watched the great Suzanne Lenglen play. Wonderful, yes. But your daughter—she might show even the great Suzanne some tricks!"

"Perhaps," Mrs. Walden agreed doubtfully. "I'll be more than satisfied if she can show Lydia Benson some tricks. Lydia defeated her last year, you know, and you may be sure that Lydia is determined to hold the title if she can."

"Don't you think," Dan asked, half angrily, "that there's such a thing as being over-tennis? It seems to me—"

Mrs. Walden gave him a pitying smile. "You're very like Ed," she said good-humoredly. "I don't suppose there's a man in the world who knows more about steel and less about tennis—"

"Unless it's I," Dan interrupted glumly.

The game ended. Both girls came toward the bench. They were warm. Leslie's face was flushed. Her dark hair had pulled from under the white band on her forehead. Dan thought she had never

looked more lovely—but he was always thinking that. He wanted to tell her so, but the remark, however sincere, didn't seem quite suited to the moment. And, as usual, the Marquettes immediately succeeded in getting between Leslie and himself. Talk about teamwork! Dan was almost convinced that they did it purposely. But why?

Dan could understand—even if he didn't appreciate—the Frenchman's interest in Leslie Walden. But, lacking vanity, he could not account for Claire's too-obvious attention to him. He knew that his lean face was not handsome; that his angular frame lacked grace. He was just a plain American, with nothing sophisticated in his make-up. Why, then, should Claire Marquette—traveled, talented, wise—bother about him? He didn't know—and he wished she wouldn't do it. He would have been better pleased if she had picked Captain Cardway, who was so painfully eager to be picked.

Now, coming off the court, Claire caught Dan's arm and gave him one of those long, steady looks. He grinned; that seemed to be his only defense. Nicolas, waving his cane for emphasis, told Leslie how to improve her game.

"A little more attention to your backhand, and *voilà!*"—Nicolas snapped his fingers—"the title will be yours, *ma petite!*"

Leslie shook her head. "I don't know," she said, almost wearily. "Sometimes—"

She broke off, glancing quickly at her mother. Mrs. Walden, swinging a racket in readiness to take Leslie on for another set, did not notice.

"Nicolas is right," she said. "Come—we'll work the kinks out of that backhand. Only a few days left, remember."

DAN watched resentfully as Leslie went back on the court. Maybe the others couldn't see it, but he could. The girl was tired. If they kept wearing her down, practicing tennis with her during the day, talking it with her at night—

"You are not happy today," Claire said, squeezing his arm. "What is the matter? Do things go wrong for you?"

Dan nodded.

"Your big gun does not work?"

"That's it."

The Marquettes, of course, knew of the soldiers who were camping near the old barn. They knew that Dan and Captain Cardway frequently went down there to work. But they were not inquisitive, and never went near the field where the tests were to be made. They seemed to be perfectly well satisfied with Ed Walden's casual explanation—that the government was experimenting with some of his steel before awarding him certain contracts.

Dan turned to Nicolas. "I'm going to the village," he said. "Want to drive down with me and see how the garage is making out with your car?"

"I should be pleased," Nicolas said, "but I must stay here, my friend." His dark, thin face—rather a Satanic face, at times—wore a faintly mocking smile. "I have given my promise to the mademoiselle. But perhaps my sister—"

He broke off with a small, expressive gesture. Well, that was the way they worked. A system. Dan turned to Claire.

"Will you come?"

"I should like that very much."

They went up to the house arm in arm. That, so far as Dan knew, was the only way this girl could walk. They found Captain Cardway and Ed Walden sitting on the veranda. The captain scowled slightly when he saw them coming. Walden's moonlike face was without expression.

"Ah, Captain!" Claire laughed. "You look as if you would eat nails."

"Sorry!" Cardway tried unsuccessfully to smile. He beckoned Dan aside. "I was just down to see Sergeant Mallory," he said. "He reports that everything is nearly ready for the tests. When do you want to start?"

"Tomorrow suit you?"

Cardway nodded. His rusty eyes were fixed on Claire. "I'll tell him."

They turned back. Claire was leaning against the recently repaired rail, talking vivaciously with Ed Walden, who was smiling in spite of himself. Ed, in strict confidence, had admitted to Dan that he

did not care a great deal for the Marquettes. They made him feel sort of "creepy," if Dan understood what he meant. Furthermore, he thought that Nicolas was showing entirely too much interest in his daughter. Not that Nicolas wasn't all right, maybe—but Ed Walden had definite ideas about Leslie's future. He wanted her to marry, of course; and—this he kept wholly to himself—he wouldn't have objected to Dan Powell as a son-in-law. Good steel men, he figured, ought to stick together.

"Ready?" Dan asked.

Claire nodded brightly. She had a knack of making everything seem important, interesting. Dan helped her down the steps and into the Walden sedan. As he climbed in after her and started the motor, he was conscious of Cardway's dark glance. He rolled toward the woods with a feeling of relief.

And then a disconcerting thought occurred to him. What, he wondered glumly, if Captain Cardway's growing jealousy got the better of him? If the officer took the notion, he could very easily forward an unsatisfactory report on the armor plate—and that would be that.

Preoccupied, Dan kept his eyes fixed on the road. Claire moved close to him and put her hand on his arm.

"Sometimes I think," she said sadly, "that you do not like me very much."

"Sure I do," Dan told her. Of course, he went on thinking, the captain wasn't the sort of man who'd be likely to do a trick like that. But you never could tell. Jealousy made people do peculiar things. He, for instance, had often wished that the famous Nicolas Marquette had broken his neck instead of his ankle. "Sure I do," he repeated absently.

She moved closer still. "But you are so cold—like steel!"

"Steel!" Dan echoed.

"Perhaps," she went on hurriedly, "that is why I like you." She shrugged. "Who could say?"

"Shucks!" Dan said. It didn't sound very effective. Maybe, he thought hopefully, Claire would become discouraged. Undoubtedly she was used to brilliant

compliments, quick conquests. Not that she didn't deserve them. She was beautiful and charming.

"You are a very foolish boy."

Dan stared at her a brief instant, astonishment on his lean face.

"I think you love this Leslie, yes? But she, *mon cher*, loves only her tennis. You suspect that? And it is true. To be a champion—that is what she wants. And then what? You can ask yourself that, M. Powell."

Dan smiled. And his answer, brief and to the point, was matter-of-fact and direct.

"She'll be ready to quit, of course."

Claire laughed. It was a pitying laugh. "You think so? Ah, but you do not know! Once a champion, a champion always. It goes to the head like wine. Like poison it stays in the blood. I have watched my brother. He thinks of nothing else but to be champion of this, champion of that."

"Are you sure?" Dan asked.

"But yes!"

He grinned. He wasn't worried about Leslie's becoming a trophy collector. The future would take care of that. But Nicolas was very much in the present.

Claire suddenly drew away from him. Her eyes were cloudy with resentment.

"You make fun of me!" she accused.

"No, I don't," Dan protested earnestly.

"But you see—"

"Some day you will be most sorry!"

She was thoroughly angry now. Dan sighed. Maybe it was just as well. They completed their trip to the village and back in absolute silence.

THEY found a fresh stir of excitement when they reached the farm. While the captain and Ed Walden had sat talking on the veranda, someone had entered the house and ransacked Walden's desk. Nicolas, limping up from the courts, had seen a strange man dash out of the back door and make for the woods. He had given the alarm, but the man was not to be found.

Neither, for that matter, were Ed Walden's papers, although he claimed that nothing of value had been kept in the

desk. While the others were discussing this latest mystery, he came close to Dan and whispered:

"Where do you keep your—ah—formula?"

"I take no chances," Dan whispered back. "I carry it with me."

Ed looked relieved. His wife, however, was still deeply concerned.

"I don't like all this," she said irritably. "We came here for rest, and what do we have? A madhouse!"

It was fairly obvious to Dan why the intruder—doubtless the swift-running little man—had made away with Ed's papers. He probably hoped to find the armor-plate formula among them—foolish of the intruder. Dan carried that formula in a snug-fitting money belt, close about his waist. Even that was not a safe place if the unknown man were really determined. A blow over the head—

"And all this confusion must stop!" Mrs. Walden went on, rather stunning in her wrath. "I simply won't have any more of it!"

"But Helen!" Ed protested mildly. "We have no control over prowlers."

"I don't care," Mrs. Walden said. "It's all very distracting. It must stop!"

Dan was inclined to agree, but for a somewhat different reason. Nicolas was making cow's eyes at Leslie. *That* was distracting. Claire was glowering at him—and her glowering was just as bad, Dan decided, as her sticky smile. And Captain Cardway, looking forlorn, was watching Claire.

It was distracting, all right. Dan took Leslie's arm and led her resolutely away from there. Not that she was willing to go with him. She halted at the foot of the veranda steps.

"What are you trying to do?" she demanded.

"We're going for a walk."

Leslie looked up, her eyes inscrutable.

"Why not take Claire?"

"Don't be foolish."

"I won't go."

Dan drew her toward the barn road. "But you must," he insisted. "It's very important!"

CHAPTER FIVE

THE PROWLER

THEY walked in silence until they reached the wooded ridge. There, where the spell of moonlight had once been upon them, they halted. Dan glanced toward the barn. The big gun, unlimbered and ready for use, looked out of place in that peaceful field. The soldiers were busy around it, oiling and polishing. Sergeant Mallory, plainly, didn't believe in letting them have too much leisure.

Some distance beyond, set solidly against a rocky hill, were half a dozen pieces of armor plate. They resembled huge squares of black cardboard. Each, carefully marked, had been processed in a different way and contained varying amounts of alloy metals. The tests were to determine which particular plate stood up best under gunfire.

An old log lay near the side of the road. Dan pointed at it. Leslie, with a resigned sigh, sat down.

"Why did you bring me out here?"

Dan studied her face. It was a little pale, he thought, and somewhat drawn with weariness. He recalled how fresh and cool she had been that day he first saw her. And now, within a week, they had worn her down with their incessant harping on tennis. What she needed, Dan thought, was something else to think about. In providing that, the armor-plate tests had failed—largely because of the Marquettes. They caused discussion of the tests to be avoided, naturally; but at the same time they provided further reason for talking tennis.

Dan thought he had a double-barreled remedy.

"I've a favor to ask," he said gravely, "and something to tell you."

"I see." Her tone was abstracted. "I suppose you're going to advise me to stop practicing so much."

"No." He grinned. "I wanted to borrow one of your tennis rackets."

Her brows went up in disbelief. "Don't tell me that *you're* going to take up the game!"

"I might, at that. But this is something else. This spy business is getting serious. Someone is after the armor-plate formula. It'd be pretty bad if it were lost. I'm carrying it with me, but—"

He broke off. Her eyes widened in sudden alarm.

"You mean there might be violence?"

"It's possible. Listen, Leslie. Will you take care of the formula for me?"

She stared at him. "But—"

"It will be simple. I'll hollow out one of your racket handles and put it in there. It's the last place in the world that anyone would suspect."

"Maybe," she agreed doubtfully. "But what if I should lose it?"

"No danger. Will you take care of it for me?"

"I—I guess so." She frowned. "But it will be an awful worry!"

"Not too great. Just don't tell anyone about it." He paused. "That's the favor. The other thing—"

For a moment panic seized him; he didn't know how to go on. But somehow or other he felt that he had to go on. Ever since that first walk together they had been constantly drifting apart. It had to stop.

"I don't suppose it's ever occurred to you," he said abruptly, "that I—I love you?"

A rush of color came to her cheeks. She looked at him steadily, searchingly, but when she spoke her voice was cold.

"Why should it?" she asked.

Dan knew what she meant. She was thinking of Claire. And how, he wondered bleakly, was he to explain that Claire meant no more to him than—well, nothing?

"It's true," he said. "From the moment I first saw you standing in the gate. Ever since—"

She jumped up, her lips trembling, her eyes distracted.

"Please don't!" she cried. "I—I—"

Her voice broke. She turned quickly and hurried away, half running toward the house.

Dan Powell made no move to follow. It had occurred to him that it mightn't be

a good idea. He just sat there on the log, scowling at nothing in particular. He was not wholly discouraged. Leslie at least knew how he felt—and she hadn't been angry. That was a lot.

HALF an hour later, Dan went back to the house. It was quiet again. He climbed up to his room, which was next to the one occupied by Claire Marquette. He stopped when he opened the door. Then, slowly, a grin spread over his face.

A tennis racket was lying on the bed. Green silk shoulder binding made the racket distinctive.

He took it downstairs and outside. There was an old-fashioned root cellar a few dozen yards back from the house. Ed Walden had wired the place and made a workshop out of it. Half underground as it was, and lacking windows, it reminded Dan of a dugout. He closed the heavy door, turned on the light, and set to work.

It was a simple job to bore a hole in the racket handle. Then, removing the money belt, he took the typewritten sheets from it, pushed them into the hole, plugged it up and replaced the leather cap. When he was through the racket showed no sign of being the hiding place of tremendously important papers.

Feeling pleased with his solution of the problem—for the persistence of the prowler had begun to worry him—he returned to the house.

Leslie and Nicolas were in the parlor.

"Here's your racket," Dan said, tossing it on the horse-hair sofa. "I think you'll find it's all right, now."

Leslie forced a smile. "Thank you," she said. "It's a favorite. I'd hate to have anything happen to it."

Nicolas started to tell a long story of the tragic end of his favorite racket. After a series of rather involved circumstances, it seemed that a policeman had stepped on it.

"When I heard it crack," he said sorrowfully, "it nearly cracked my heart. But would you believe it, my friends? I still save the pieces!"

"What of?" Dan asked. "The racket?"

"But surely! My heart," Nicolas explained, gazing at Leslie, "it is lost."

"Hope you find it," Dan said. He sat down and lit his pipe. Leslie idly turned the pages of a magazine, avoiding his eyes. Nicolas cleared his throat several times.

"I think," he finally said, frowning at Dan, "that I will go."

"Don't let us stop you," Dan said.

Nicolas didn't move.

After a while Claire and Captain Cardway came in. They were laughing and looking pleased with themselves.

"We have been for a walk," Claire explained. Her dark eyes sparkled; she looked more than ever warm and alluring. "The captain has showed me your big cannon—but, oh, I shall be so terribly frightened if you shoot it!"

"We'll give you plenty of warning," Dan said sardonically, "if you want to leave."

Leslie shot him a quick, shocked glance. The captain stiffened. The Marquettes simply stared.

It might have become a situation; but Mrs. Walden came in, just then, with a suggestion that they all motor over to West Hampton Beach for a swim. Something perverse had got into Dan Powell. He refused to go, and in no uncertain manner.

They went without him, but they were back for supper. Dan, as a penalty for his outburst, found himself left isolated. He didn't mind. Nicolas tried to talk with Leslie about tennis, but she seemed to prefer reading. Claire, the captain, and the Waldens settled down for a session of bridge. Dan decided to walk over and have a talk with Sergeant Mallory, who was always glad to see him.

The sergeant was impatient to have the tests completed.

"Not," he explained, "that we don't like it here. But I think you've got the stuff, Mr. Powell."

"Hope so," Dan said.

He glanced around. Although it was warm, the soldiers had their nightly fire. One of them was playing a banjo. The

others sat around, talking, smoking, listening. Dan envied them. They were a cheerful lot, going where they were called, doing what they were told, without complaint and without any great reward. All of them had worked hard on this job, Dan knew; and most of the delay had been caused by difficulty in setting up the heavy armor plates.

"All ready for tomorrow?" Dan asked.

"And rarin' to go."

"Got plenty of powder and projectiles?"

Sergeant Mallory grinned. "You can be sure of that, boy!" He nodded toward the big barn. "That place looks like an arsenal for fair. We unloaded the trucks. Nothing like playing safe when you can."

They talked on. The sergeant slyly mentioned the visit of Captain Cardway and Claire.

"That baby's a hot sketch," one of the soldiers said. "Talk about—"

He was interrupted by a single sharp, metallic clank, as of steel hitting steel. The sergeant jumped up and ran toward the gun, shouting for someone to bring a flashlight. Dan followed, out of the fire-light glow, beyond the tents.

A man came with a light. Mallory snatched it and turned it on the gun. Then he swore, loudly, expertly, and with fancy embellishments.

"There'll be no shooting tomorrow!" he growled. "Some son of Satan has busted the breech!"

Dan could see that. He didn't know a great deal about artillery, but plainly the gun had been dealt a severe blow. Even small damage, he suspected, would be enough to keep the gun from being used.

Mallory lowered the light beam. A heavy sledge was lying on the ground. Dan stared. He had seen that sledge only a few hours before, up in the root-cellar workshop!

The soldiers crowded close. Mallory roared.

"Get going!" he ordered. "Find that man and bring him back!"

They separated, running off into the darkness. Dan went, too, racing up the road toward the house. It was dark in

that vacant field. The moon, growing old, was not yet up.

He neared the wooded ridge. Then he stumbled on something soft, lumpy, and limp. He sprawled over it and knew that it was a man. He fumbled for a match, struck it, grunted incredulously. The flare of light showed him an all-too-familiar face.

The man was Nicolas Marquette. . . .

CHAPTER SIX

THE CONSPIRATORS

NICOLAS MARQUETTE'S struggle back to consciousness was slow and painful. Light dazzled his eyes when he opened them. His head ached. He glanced around cautiously. He was in bed. Claire sat at his side, looking less concerned than annoyed. They were alone.

"Well," she asked flatly, "what happened?"

Nicolas groaned, but without hope. Claire, he saw, was not in a sympathetic mood.

"I got socked," he said.

"Who did it?"

"I wish I knew." He frowned. "Do they suspect anything?"

"No—but it's not your fault, Mr. Brown. They think that the great Nicolas Marquette can do no wrong."

He sighed. "I thought," he muttered, "that this was going to be an easy job. We've been here a week—and nothing to show for it."

"I can show you a pair of blistered heels," Claire snapped, "from too much tennis."

"Which doesn't count, any more than my cracked head. Looks as if we'll have to try something else."

Claire got up and paced the room. "Oh, I wish we didn't!"

"This old junk they call furniture still make you homesick?"

"It does. So do these people. They're honest. Sincere. I'd be tempted to blow the works, Max—only it breaks my heart even worse to think of losing so much."

"Atta girl! Listen to this and see what

you can make of it." He sat up, propping himself on an elbow. "Nobody around?"

"They're all in the parlor. Mrs. Walden is reading the riot act. She claims that Leslie's title chances are being ruined—probably true, one way or another. The steps'll squeak if anyone comes up."

Nicolas told his story. Worried over their lack of success, he had decided that they needed more time. Once the armor was tested and approved—even so much as by Captain Cardway—he knew that every spy in the country would doubtless attempt to get hold of the formula. If he and Claire didn't secure it while they were at Rocky Farm, they could just as well give up trying.

Pretending that he was going out to exercise his ankle, he had found the sledge in the workshop and crept down to the soldiers' camp. He struck the firing mechanism one telling blow and ran.

"I got away all right," he finished grimly, "as far as the hill. Then someone popped out of the trees. I thought it was Cardway or Walden and started to limp."

"They never left the bridge table."

"Don't I know it? Anyhow, this bird rushed me, grabbed my cane and bent it over my head. And that's that."

"Must be the same man who broke the veranda rail."

"Yeah. And that's not so good. We'll have to keep an eye peeled for him, too."

Claire took a cigarette from a packet on the dresser and lit it.

"What was the idea," she asked abruptly, "of taking those papers out of Walden's desk?"

Nicolas grimaced. "I had a good chance. Thought I might find something, so I grabbed 'em and gave the alarm." He chuckled. "Having a competitor has some good points. We can blame all our own stunts on him."

"Providing we don't go too far. What if they brought detectives out?"

"With all those soldiers around? Don't be foolish. Mrs. Walden wouldn't stand for it, anyhow."

"Maybe not." Claire sat on the edge of the bed and leaned close. "But you don't need to search any more desks, or

even suitcases, for that formula. Dan is carrying it with him."

"How do you know?" Nicolas asked quickly.

"I pressed against him in the car this afternoon. He was wearing a money belt. No one needs money out here. So he must be carrying the formula in it."

Nicolas considered. "And you can't get it?"

"Not a chance. I'm poison as far as he's concerned. He's in love with the Walden girl—and that's that."

Her voice was edged with unconscious bitterness. Nicolas grinned wryly. It was obvious that Dan's preference for the other girl had piqued her. Not that it made much difference. Claire wasn't one to let her emotions interfere with the chances of making money. Neither love nor hate could keep her from being mercenary. Nicolas possessed a similar viewpoint—that was the reason they got along so well.

Spies, Nicolas reflected, were popularly supposed to be in the profession because they craved excitement, danger. Maybe. He had his doubts. He and Claire, at any rate, had no such fancy ideas. A large cash return was their goal—and the less excitement that came along, the better Nicolas liked it.

"I don't suppose," he asked, "that you could slip into his room and get the belt?"

She shook her head. "Too dangerous. When it comes to tackling Dan Powell, we want to be sure there are going to be no slip-ups."

"How about working through the captain?"

Claire smashed the cigarette into an ash tray.

"He's willing to play all right," she said irritably, "but he's one of these birds you read about." She quoted ironically from a well-known poem: "'I could not love you, dear, so much, loved I not honor more.'" She spread her hands with a resigned gesture. "He hasn't pulled that line yet, but I won't be surprised when he does."

Nicolas grunted. Any way he looked at

it, the whole thing was discouraging. Even Leslie. He'd hoped to have a pleasant interlude with her, but it hadn't worked out that way. He'd been given plenty of opportunity to air his knowledge of tennis—acquired for the occasion—but that was all.

No; they'd have to get rough. That would take some planning, but the disabled gun would allow them a few days more. Repairs could hardly be made until new parts were obtained.

In the meantime, Leslie and her mother would be going to Forest Hills—certainly a relief. Nicolas knew that he'd be urged to go along, but he could refuse easily enough. He could plead his fear of being recognized and his dismay at thought of the resulting publicity.

"There's some good advice in one of my tennis-instruction books," he said. "It's simple: 'Always change a losing game.'" A crafty light showed in his dark eyes. "That, my dear, is exactly what we're going to do."

Claire nodded, but without enthusiasm. Nicolas smiled tolerantly. It was her tough luck if she liked these people. He knew from past experience that he could depend on her—for anything.

As for himself, he looked forward to a change of tactics. He was getting sick of tennis, fed up with the simplicity of life at Rocky Farm, annoyed over his constant failure to secure the armor-plate formula. And most certainly he'd enjoy taking Dan Powell and Captain Cardway down a notch or two. He'd like to see them squirm. They were too damned superior. They made him feel cheap.

"You'd better be on your way," he suggested. "Tell our hosts that your brother Nicolas is doing nicely—and that he doesn't hold his unpleasant experience against them."

Claire went out, closing the door behind her. Nicolas reached for a handbag that was near the bed. It made his head throb to stoop over, but he fumbled in the bag until his hand touched something cold and hard. He pulled it out—a flat, blue automatic, no more deadly looking than the man who held it.

"This," he said softly, "ought to get results."

AT that moment, walking slowly, Dan and Leslie reached the tennis courts. Dan led her to a bench. They sat down. Dan chuckled.

"Well," he asked, "what do you think of the latest mystery?"

"I don't know," she said somberly. "Sometimes it frightens me. It used to be so quiet and restful here—"

"And then we came with a gun and trouble."

"No—that's not what I meant." She touched his arm quickly and left her hand resting there. "I get a feeling of something evil hanging over this place, of something dreadful about to happen." Her voice was low-pitched and somber. "I can't explain it any better than that, but it bothers me just the same."

He said, "Shucks!" It didn't sound as convincing as he could have wished. This business was beginning to get on his nerves, too. The sergeant reported no firing could be done until new parts were obtained for the breech. That would take three days, at the least.

For the life of him, Dan could not guess why the gun had been damaged. It didn't make sense. Neither did the attack on Nicolas. It did not once occur to him to suspect that Nicolas was neither French nor a tennis player. Mrs. Walden, quite unconsciously—and all because of her passion for tennis—had put the stamp of authenticity on the masquerade.

"Anyhow," Dan said, "you'll be going to Forest Hills soon. Maybe all this will be cleared up by the time you get back—with," he added confidently, "the national title."

"Of course," Leslie agreed dully. "With the national title."

"You sound entirely too glum, lady," Dan said. "Snap out of it!"

"I—I wish I could," she faltered.

Dan turned. Catching her shoulder, he pulled her around, almost roughly, until she faced him. In the dim glow of light from the house he could see a glint of tears on her cheeks.

"Poor, tired kid!" he whispered.

Suddenly she was in his arms. He crushed her close. His lips touched her cheek. Abruptly she pulled away.

"Please don't, Dan!" she begged. "I like you. A lot. But—"

But—

That one word was like a wicked little barb, piercing through his heart. Dully he watched while she stood up and moved a few feet away from him.

"I don't quite get you," he said. His voice had a hurt sound.

"I know," she said slowly. "You—you wouldn't understand. It's not fair—to you, I mean. But I've got my tennis, do you see?"

She spoke swiftly, earnestly, more eager to convince herself than him. But Dan, listening dully, could not recognize that fact.

"I've got to go on with it," she continued earnestly. "If I win this title, there are still others. The French. The British. It may take a long time. Possibly I'll never win them. But I've got to try. It wouldn't be fair to mother if I didn't. She's sacrificed, Dan, to make a top-flight player out of me. She's—"

"I'll say she's sacrificed." He jumped up and faced her angrily. "She's sacrificed *you*! And what for? A cup or two, some empty honors, a little fame—"

Leslie interrupted sharply:

"Dan!"

"It's true!" he cried. "Claire told me how it would be—how this championship lust poisoned the blood, how it was never satisfied!" He didn't suspect the full measure of scorn in his voice. "She warned me—and I guess she was right!"


"Of course," Leslie agreed coldly. "Claire would know. She is a very wise woman."

For the second time that day she turned and walked swiftly away from him. For the second time, Dan made no attempt to follow. But she was angry this time. Very angry.

Dan stared bleakly after her, feeling very much as if the bottom had dropped out of the world. Or out of his heart, anyhow.

CHAPTER SEVEN

AT FOREST HILLS

 HE gallery applauded when Leslie Walden appeared on the court. She gave a brief, fleeting smile. It was good to be remembered and so warmly received, but—

The old love of the game was gone. The thrill of impending battle was replaced by something else. Not fear, exactly. Certainly not indifference. But zest—the driving urge that had carried her into the finals the year before, and caused her to practice so faithfully all during the summer—that zest was wholly lacking. And the lack made her feel useless on the court. Coming here without enthusiasm was worse, actually, than coming without a racket.

By association she thought of the racket back at Rocky Farm, the one that held the armor-plate formula in its handle. And that made her think of Dan. But she did not want to think of him. Not ever again, if she could help it. Which was something utterly impossible. . . .

The game started. Ten thousand people looking on. Other games starting, too, on courts to the right and to the left of her. It seemed, suddenly, that the whole earth had become a wide reach of tennis courts; that all the world was there to watch.

Faces rimmed her around—a wall of faces. All watching to see what she was going to do. Interested faces. All here because their owners loved tennis for its own sake. Would those people suspect that she—one of the important figures of the tournament on the basis of last year's play—would they suspect that she didn't love the game any more? Would they guess that the thought of going through those seemingly endless sets left her with a feeling of empty dismay?

She played automatically. When the ball came flashing over the net, she sought to make a good return. Doing that was as instinctive as walking. The girl across the net, a little awed by Leslie's reputation, was playing a cautious game. A more experienced opponent would certainly have detected that Leslie was off

form, and come through with a blistering attack.

It seemed a long time before that first set was over. Leslie took it, winning six games to her opponent's three. During the change of courts she glanced again at the gallery. The applause was more polite than enthusiastic. She saw disappointment on most of the faces. She felt guilty. They knew, of course, that her heart was not in the match.

She lost the second set—seven-five. Her opponent seemed astonished, and moderately hopeful. That defeat jarred Leslie out of her preoccupation. She tried harder, did better, taking the final set and the match with an unimpressive six-four.

It did not seem to Leslie that she could get to the hotel quickly enough. Her mother, deeply concerned, said nothing until they were in their room. Then, for a few dreadful minutes, Leslie thought that her mother was going to cry. But she didn't. She forced a wan smile instead.

"You're a little off form today," she said.

Leslie threw herself into a deep chair. She stretched out, but found little relief. It wasn't her body that was tired; it was her brain. She tried to match her mother's smile.

"I'll be all right tomorrow."

Helen Walden tried to act as if she thought so, too. "It's unfortunate that Nicolas wouldn't come," she said. "He might have given you some pointers. I wanted him to wear dark glasses, but no! He had to stay away."

"And that is one thing," Leslie said wearily, "to be thankful for."

Mrs. Walden's brows went up. "My dear!"

"I don't like him," Leslie went on doggedly. "He's too—smooth. And all he knows, all he ever talks about, is tennis, tennis, tennis!"

Mrs. Walden crossed the room and sat on the arm of Leslie's chair, and stroked her daughter's forehead anxiously.

"Won't you lie down?" she said.

"It wouldn't do any good. I'd just lie there and think. About tennis." Her voice

broke. "Is that all I'm ever going to be—just a tennis player, a trophy grabber?"

"Leslie!"

"Sometimes I think it's true. I used to play the game because I liked it. But now it's become so dreadfully important. It's not fun any more. It's work—demanding, nerve-racking work!"

She didn't realize, just then, that she was unconsciously repeating Dan Powell's accusations. Her mother was silent, but her eyes showed hurt dismay. Leslie was too distracted, just then, to notice or to care.

"I won today," she went on dully. "Another match tomorrow. Perhaps I'll win again. And then there'll be another match, and another. It—it's ghastly!"

Mrs. Walden got up and slowly walked to a window. She stood there a long while, looking out.

"I'm sorry," she said at last. "Awfully sorry. I thought—I mean, I just took it for granted that you liked tennis and tournament play as much as I do."

Leslie sat with her eyes closed, saying nothing. Thoughts flashed through her mind; unrelated, maddening thoughts. Dan. She'd scarcely spoken to him since that night on the tennis court. She remembered the expression in his steel-gray eyes. Puzzled. Concerned. . . . Nicolas. She wished he'd stayed in France. With that sister of his, whose eyes said more than her voice. . . .

"You know, dear"—that was her mother, speaking as through a great distance—"you know there's nothing else so important to us as your happiness. If I've forced tennis on you—"

But it wasn't fair to let her mother think that. It wasn't true. All those ambitions had been her own. She wasn't going to quit, now, either. Not so long as she could hold a racket and battle for that title. She got up quickly and went to her mother's side.

"Let's forget all this," she said. "Tomorrow—" She looked out the window. She could see the stadium of the West Side Tennis Club from where she stood. People were streaming away from it, hurrying for trains, buses, cars. A spirit of

holiday was upon them. She could hear their voices—a low, somehow thrilling murmur. It suddenly occurred to her that they were her friends through a common interest in tennis. They had come to see her play, and she—well, whatever the disturbing, indefinite reason, she hadn't done her best.

"Tomorrow," she repeated steadily, "I'll be back in form."

Her mother watched her for a long moment. Then she laughed softly.

"I know you will!" she cried, her eyes aglow once more. "I know it!"

LESLIE did do better the next day—incomparably better. In spite of a determined opponent, she took the match with the first two sets. But only Leslie knew what that victory had cost. Elimination was taking care of the weaker, less-experienced players. Tomorrow she'd face a still stronger rival. Then, if she were lucky, she'd be in the semi-finals.

So would Lydia Benson, beyond any doubt. Lydia, who had defeated her last year, was playing spectacular tennis. Her opponents—fully the equal of Leslie's—never had a chance. Driving service, an uncanny ability to be everywhere on the court at once, plus brilliant strategy, made the champion's game outstanding. Experts, Leslie knew, had already conceded her this year's title. She didn't wonder. Leslie Walden, who had been regarded as the champion's strongest competitor, wasn't strong any more.

No. Leslie knew it. Everyone in the stadium knew it. Sports writers knew it, and spread the news. Leslie stopped reading the papers. They didn't help.

Her father came down from Rocky Farm. His face was grave, but he was sympathetic and understanding. He wanted her to win, simply because he believed she had set her heart on it. He tried to make her believe that she was being clever.

"It's a wise thing not to use all your energy on these runners-up," he said, smiling across the dinner table. "When you meet this Benson girl in the finals, you'll still be fresh and competent."

Mrs. Walden looked at him pityingly. Herself on edge, she could not resist a thrust.

"Fresh!" she said. "After all that uproar at Rocky Farm? Really, Ed!"

Ed Walden was distressed. "I thought it would be a good idea," he explained defensively. "If you ask me, those French people—"

He broke off. Obviously, he also had an opinion about the Marquettes. He studied his daughter's face, but her expression revealed nothing of her thoughts.

"The gun has been repaired," he went on after a brief pause. "We tested one of the plates today."

Leslie looked up quickly. "What luck?"

"Perfect! Those armor-piercing projectiles just naturally gave up the ghost. They broke, I'm telling you—broke into dozens of pieces! The plate wasn't much more than dented."

"I'm glad," Leslie said. "For you and Dan." She hesitated. "Any spy trouble?"

Ed shook his head. "Everybody's been keeping a sharp lookout. Nicolas and Claire have been sticking close to the house, too. I guess our spy has become discouraged."

"Let's hope so," Mrs. Walden said.

"Dan," Mr. Walden continued, "is actually more interested in your tennis, right now, than in the armor. He's coming down for the finals—to see you win."

"That—that's nice of him." Leslie suddenly choked.

CHAPTER EIGHT

GALLANT BATTLE

IN the middle of the semi-finals, the gallery suddenly woke up to the fact that Leslie Walden was making a courageous fight. At first disappointed in her, then indifferent, the spectators began to change their opinions.

They could see that she was not at her best. Even so, she was still down there on the court, still making a bid for the championship. It took something more than skill to keep plugging along like that; it took a fighting heart. Leslie Walden, they were ready to admit, had that.

Leslie's opponent was a stocky, energetic, poker-faced player from California. Her name was Ruth Hart. A newcomer to the Eastern courts, she was attacking with a fierce determination to win. She was an excellent player, possessed of stamina, skill, speed. She lost the first set, but not until she had forced Leslie to seven-five; and, continuing her hammering tactics, she won easily in the first three games of the second set.

It was then that Ruth Hart became too sure of herself. In her anxiety to finish the match then and there, she began to overplace her shots, giving Leslie a slight but desperately needed advantage. For Leslie, still not at all sure of herself, was playing a slow, mechanical game. It was hard to concentrate on the match. Her thoughts kept battering at other things.

Another game? Why, that was three in the second set, and Ruth had won them all!

"I'm afraid," Mrs. Walden said sadly, "that she's come to the end of her rope."

"Wouldn't be surprised," Ed agreed cheerfully. "She'll start to climb back, now, almost any minute."

Mrs. Walden sighed. She didn't believe in the impossible.

But Leslie didn't want to lose that match. She wanted another chance to meet Lydia Benson on the courts. Just one more chance. She had tried too long and too desperately to give up now.

Ruth Hart continued to play recklessly, almost savagely. But Leslie, figuratively, was getting a second wind. She had worried so much in the last few days that further worry now seemed beyond her power. She began to take hold of herself. While the gallery watched, amazed, she won the next five games.

"What did I tell you?" Ed Walden exclaimed deliriously. "What did I tell you?"

"Hush!" his wife begged. "If she wins this next game—"

Leslie, down on the court, was thinking the same thing: "If I win this next game, it will put me in the finals!"

She did not quite remember what happened after that. The hot sun beat down,

but the green turf was soothing to the eyes. The crowd was silent, too deeply interested to do anything but look on and marvel. In those last few minutes there was no sound on the warm air but the smack of the ball, the twang of the rackets.

And then it was over, with great waves of applause rolling down from the gallery. Leslie knew that she had won, but she had no sense of triumph. She merely felt numb, done in.

How, she wondered, could she ever hope to stand up against the slashing play of Lydia Benson in tomorrow's finals?

THE telephone rang. Leslie, lying on the bed, opened her eyes. The last glow was fading from the twilight sky. She reached for the telephone in the half darkness.

"Hello," she said.

"This is Dan."

"Oh."

"I just read about this afternoon's match," he said. "Had to drive over to West Hampton for a paper. Couldn't wait any longer. Gosh, Leslie, you were swell!"

"I almost lost."

"That's not the point." She could tell from his voice that he was genuinely pleased. "You won. And what's more—" He broke off, in embarrassment, she thought. "What's more, you're going to grab that title. For me!"

"For you?" she echoed. "But Dan—"

"You've simply got to. I'd feel terrible if you didn't. I—I've been sorry about the other night, ever since. But it won't happen again. Next time we scrap"—she could almost see his grin—"it'll be about something else."

She laughed. She knew, then, that she was not angry with him any longer; that their quarrel had been foolish, unnecessary.

"I'll be in tomorrow," he said, "for the finals."

"Dad told me. How's the steel?"

"Better than expected. Wait—here's the captain and Claire and Nicolas."

Their congratulations made her feel good. Before, because she had been tired,

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there'd been a bitter taste to her victory over Ruth Hart. She lay back on the bed after Dan rang off and smiled at the ceiling.

But the telephone rang again after a few minutes. It was an old friend, Louise Franklin, wanting to wish her well.

"But I thought you were still in Paris!" Leslie said.

"Just got back. When I read the papers, I grabbed a taxi to the Penn Station and caught the first train over. I'm in the lobby now."

"You're not!"

"Big as life. I'd like to come up—if it isn't against doctor's orders or something."

"Hurry," Leslie said.

Louise Franklin was a large, bony girl—"just an old horse," she called herself. Leslie knew of no other person who was so good-natured, so big-hearted, so agreeable to have around. She made a haphazard living by professing to be an interior decorator. "About which," she often told her friends, "I know nothing. Consequently my effects are unique if not unified—hence my startling success."

She came bursting into the room. Leslie, after fifteen minutes, felt like a new person. The tournament and all its worries were forgotten.

"Where are the folks?" Louise asked.

"Mother's gone out to see how many old tennis stars she can find," Leslie said.

"Dad's at a movie."

"Fallen in love yet?"

"No."

Louise regarded her critically. "What's his name?"

Leslie flushed under Louise's shrewd, friendly eyes. "I think," she said slowly, "that it's Dan Powell."

"Sounds robust," Louise said, with a chuckle. "But you've got nothing on me. I've gone and fallen for a Frenchman."

"Louise!"

"Gospel. You'll be green with envy. His name"—Louise paused for dramatic effect—"is Nicolas Marquette!"

Leslie sat there trying to grasp the full significance of that disclosure. Nicolas Marquette! But—

"You're joking!" she whispered.

Louise was suddenly at her side, shaking her. "Leslie!" she cried in alarm. "Leslie! What's the matter?"

"You must be joking," Leslie repeated. "Nicolas Marquette is out at Rocky Farm!"

It was Louise's turn to stare. "Since when?" she managed to ask.

"He's been there—with his sister—nearly two weeks."

Slowly Louise shook her head. "Not Nicolas," she said positively. "I saw him less than a week ago—in Paris."

"Did—did he have a broken ankle?"

"Of course!"

Leslie jumped up from the bed. If Louise were telling the truth—and she knew with sickening certainty that Louise would not lie—then the limping man at Rocky Farm was an impostor. She remembered the armor plate, and its tremendous importance. She caught up the telephone and jiggled the receiver hook frantically. The desk answered.

"This is Leslie Walden," she said. "My father is at a theater here in town. Locate him for me, please, and ask him to come here at once. It's urgent!"

"Has anything happened, Miss Walden?" the clerk asked anxiously.

"No—no!" Leslie cried. "But hurry—please!"

She hung up. Louise looked at her blankly.

"What's it all about?"

Leslie hesitated, then told her, knowing that Louise could be trusted.

"Those people *must* be spies!" she finished. "Why else—"

The telephone jangled again. It was the clerk, reporting that her father had been located and was on his way to the hotel.

"Thank you," Leslie said, suddenly relieved. Her father would know what to do. "Will you call the operator and ask for this number?"

She gave the number of the Rocky Farm phone. The clerk repeated it, and hung up. Leslie sat on the edge of the bed, staring at Louise.

"So many queer things have happened out there," Leslie said. "At times it has

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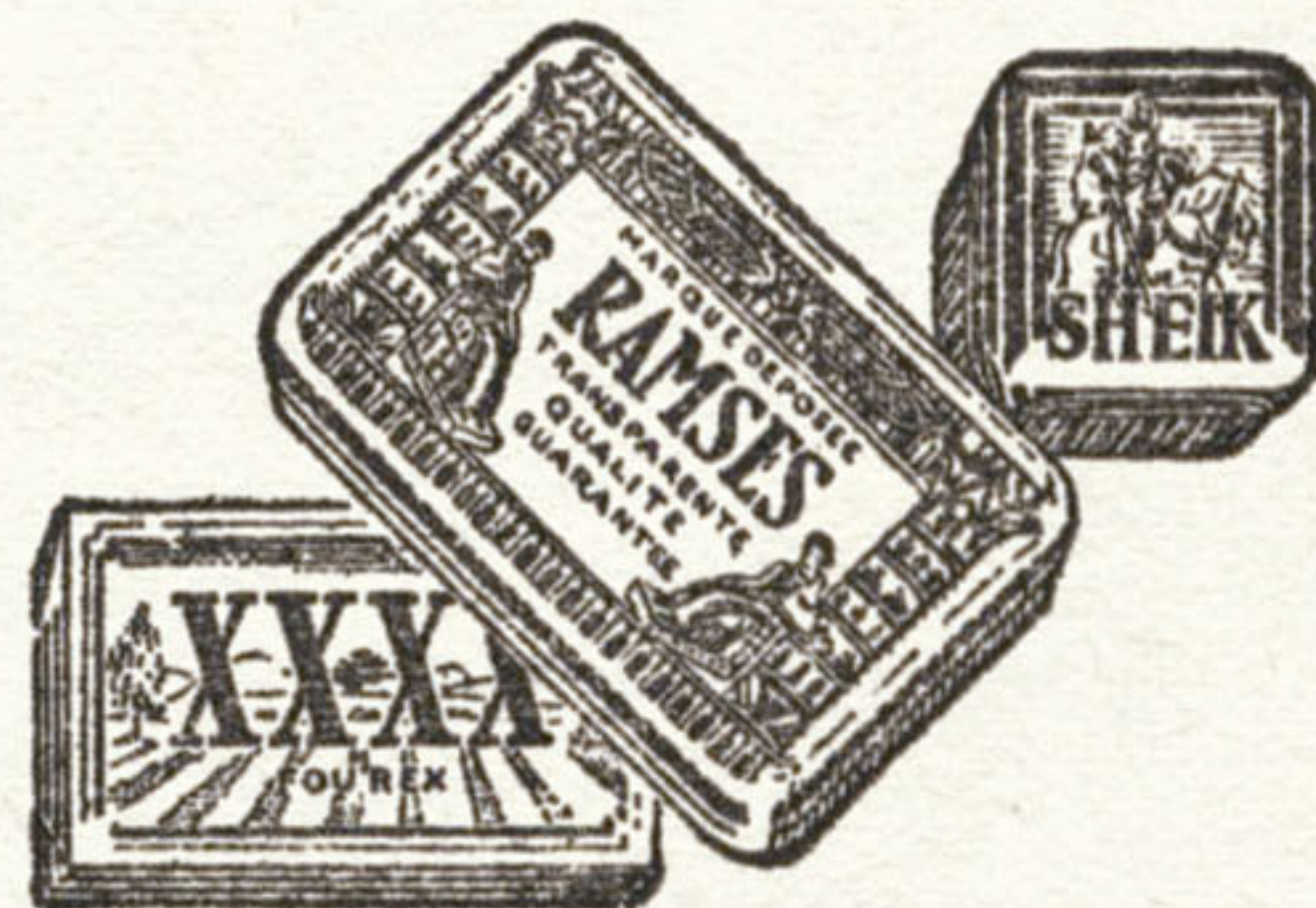
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almost seemed that something evil, sinister, is poisoning the place!"

"An imitation Nicolas Marquette would be sinister enough," Louise observed. "What did he look like?"

"Like Nicolas Marquette," Leslie said. "I've seen pictures of him."

"How about the sister?"

"Dark, slinky—like one of those old movie vamps."

"The real Claire," Louise said, "is a platinum."

Ed Walden came hurrying in, distressed. "Leslie!" he said. "What's happened?"

She told him. He shook his head gravely.

"I was just talking to Dan a little while ago," she went on. "He was calling from Rocky Farm. Everything was all right then, but—"

The telephone rang. Leslie answered. Her face whitened as she listened to that utterly unnerving message.

"Are you *sure*?" she asked sharply.

The clerk said that he was sure. Hanging up, she slowly turned to the others.

"The phone at Rocky Farm," she said, "is out of order!"

"But you were just talking—"

"I know, Dad. That's why I'm afraid. *Something must have happened!*" She snatched her coat and hat from a chair. "Where's your car?"

"In the garage. But—"

She caught his arm and pulled him toward the door. "Come on!" she urged. "There's no time to waste. We've got to drive out there!"

"But listen! I can go. You've got to think about your tennis, Leslie! You'll be the champion tomorrow."

"Champion!" she cried. "What difference does being champion make? I'm going, Dad. I couldn't possibly just sit here and wait!"

He nodded reluctantly, following her to the door. Louise started after them.

"I want to go, too," she said. "I want to see this fake Nicolas."

"You can't," Leslie told her. "You've got to wait here for mother. Tell her what's happened. We'll call back."

Louise nodded and sat down. Leslie hurried her father down through the lobby and past a wondering clerk; out on the street and to the hotel garage. Soon they were on Queens Boulevard, heading as fast as traffic would permit for Jericho Turnpike. Leslie had the wheel, knowing that she would dare greater speed than her father.

"This is madness!" he cried. "You're driving too—"

Traffic scattered before the speeding sedan. Leslie pushed down on the throttle.

"Hold tight!" she whispered. "We're going through!"

CHAPTER NINE

THOSE THAT ARE GREEDY

DAN POWELL sat alone in the parlor at Rocky Farm. Preoccupied, he did not hear the small noises in the night. His eyes on a green-trimmed tennis racket which leaned in a far corner, he was thinking of Leslie Walden. He was glad he'd called her up; and the fact that she had seemed pleased took a great load of worry from his mind.

Tomorrow he'd be seeing her again, giving his wholehearted support, if it were needed, while she pounded Lydia Benson off the court. For Dan knew now that Leslie's victory was of tremendous importance to himself. It was excusable, perhaps, to be jealous of a man like Nicolas Marquette, but to be jealous of a game—well, that was carrying things too far.

Nicolas and Claire still declined invitations to go to Forest Hills. That was some consolation. He wished they'd get next to themselves and pull out. But it was something of a relief not to have them around now. Claire and the captain—plainly infatuated—had gone for a drive. Nicolas was out exercising his game ankle. . . .

"I beg your pardon."

Dan whirled around. A stranger was standing in the door. Not exactly a stranger, either. Dan had seen him too often before. It was the little man. Dan jumped up. For a moment the little man seemed to be on the point of fleeing, but he held his place.

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"Who're you?" Dan demanded.

The little man swallowed. "I'm John Hammer," he said, in a thin voice. "I'm a secret service operator."

Dan stared at him. "You're *what*?"

"The government," John Hammer explained defensively, "sent me to keep an eye on this place while the tests were being made."

Dan's lean face crinkled into a slow grin. "Well, for Pete's sake! Why the hell didn't you make yourself known? Why did you keep scaring us half out of our—" He broke off, scowling. "Say—did *you* smash that breech?"

John Hammer shook his head. "The bird you know as Nicolas Marquette did that," he said. "I smashed Nicolas. When he came horning in with that woman, I got suspicious, see? I did some checking up. The real Marquette is in Paris. This fellow's a—"

John Hammer said no more. Something flashed behind his head, struck with a heavy thump. The secret service man staggered forward two short steps and collapsed. Before Dan could move, Nicolas Marquette, automatic in hand, occupied the little man's place in the doorway.

"A spy," Nicolas finished in a voice that seemed to rasp without its false accent. He fixed his cold, malicious eyes on Dan. "Powell," he went on, "we've wasted too much time around here. I want that armor-plate formula—and I want it quick!"

Dan watched him contemptuously. A tingle of rage was beginning to course through his body. He swore softly.

"I thought there was something rotten about you," he said. "So that's your game?"

"It isn't tennis," Nicolas said. Keeping his eyes fixed on Dan, he stooped over the unconscious man and frisked him expertly. He was rewarded by the discovery of an automatic very much like his own.

"I don't intend to waste much time on you, Powell."

"That's encouraging." Dan sat down on the horsehair sofa. The ticking of the grandfather's clock was loud in the room. His eyes rested briefly on the racket in

the corner; the racket with the hollowed handle. "I wouldn't want to detain you."

Nicolas frowned. "The formula!"

"I'll see you in hell first!"

The sharp, distant crack of an automatic interrupted him. It came from the direction of the barn. Nicolas listened intently, but when the sound was not repeated he grinned mockingly.

"That's my girl friend," he explained. "You can keep calling her Claire. A smart woman, Powell. She can handle a few soldiers and an officer."

Dan said nothing. Nicolas continued to stand there, waiting expectantly. John Hammer groaned and sat up. He blinked unhappily at the spy. Dan found himself feeling sorry for the little man. He'd bungled, certainly; but everyone in the secret service couldn't be perfect. Too, it was hard to blame Hammer for being slow to verify what no one else had even suspected.

"How'd you get next to us?" the spy asked, with professional interest.

Hammer rubbed his head tenderly. "Go to hell," he muttered.

Within a short while Dan heard angry voices outside. The captain's and Mallory's were among them. Nicolas laughed.

"She made it!" he exclaimed.

There was a heavy bang. The voices were suddenly silenced. Someone came hurrying through the house.

It was Claire. Her face was flushed as she burst into the parlor, and her dark eyes fairly glittered with excitement. She glanced at Dan indifferently; stared briefly at Hammer.

"Who's this one?" she asked.

Nicolas explained. Claire shrugged.

"Any trouble with the soldiers?" Nicolas asked.

"Not much. Had to shoot the sergeant—he tried to make a break. That convinced the others—even the captain. He," she added caustically, "is very much upset."

Dan could understand that. The pictures were vivid. Claire, urging Cardway to drive down to the camp; Claire pulling a gun. . . .

"Powell claims," Nicolas growled, "that he won't give up the formula."

"Naturally," Claire said. "Be a good boy, Dan. Tell us what you did with it after you took it out of your money belt."

"Money belt?" Dan echoed.

"You were wearing one, you know. I found it in your room this afternoon. Unfortunately, it was empty."

Dan grinned. "So it was."

She glanced at the clock. It was a few minutes after ten.

"We'll give you an hour to make up your mind," she decided. "Then we may have to persuade you."

"Do your worst," Dan grunted. "Won't do you much good."

"No?" Claire's eyes narrowed; all beauty was gone from her face, eclipsed by greed and hate. "Perhaps if we get Leslie out here—"

She broke off suggestively. Dan, staring at the tennis racket in the corner, was slowly beginning to realize that these people would stop at nothing. . . .

CHAPTER TEN

MAD FLAME

LESLIE stopped the car just inside the stone gate. Slowly, cautiously, she and her father walked up to the house. It was blazing with light, but no one seemed to be about. A bad sign. Leslie's heart pounded with apprehension as they climbed up the veranda steps.

"So good of you," a soft, mocking voice said, "to come."

They spun around. Claire was standing behind them. She held an automatic in her right hand.

"My dear woman," Ed Walden rumbled, "what are we supposed to make of this?"

"No foolish questions, please," Claire said. "Offhand, I'd say you'd found us out."

"Yes," Leslie said. "Where's Dan?"

"Down at the old barn with 'Nicolas.' He'd be very happy to see you, I imagine."

Her tone was poisonous. Leslie felt greater dread than she had ever known before. The very certainty of Claire's manner told her that things were wholly in the spies' hands.

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They went down the rutty road to the barn, Claire following with the gun in one hand and a flashlight in the other. The big gun stood alone; the soldiers' tents were empty. Pencils of pale yellow light reached out from chinks in the barn wall. Claire called. Nicolas answered—without the accent.

Leslie's uneasiness increased. Claire motioned her and her father toward a small side door. They went in. Leslie's eyes widened with horror.

"Dan!"

His arms, drawn behind him, were tied to an upright. His face was battered. One eye was swollen and discolored. A trickle of red ran down from a cut on his cheek. He made an obviously painful effort to grin, but Leslie could see the sharp dismay behind it.

"You came," he said, "at an awkward time."

"What's going on here?" Ed Walden blustered. "Don't you two realize that—"

"Sure," Nicolas interrupted. "We can't get away with it, huh?" He rubbed his knuckles. "Your friend has an armor-plated jaw, if you ask me. Can't get anything out of him, but"—he leered at Leslie—"you might help, sister."

"The papers aren't down here, then?" Claire asked.

"Hell—I knew he was giving me the run-around, but—"

"Where's Cardway—the soldiers?" Ed broke in.

"In your dungeon," Nicolas said—"otherwise the root cellar. Nice place. They've got a semi-secret service man for company—the lad who broke the rail trying to get a look at us. Claire got tough and locked 'em all up. The captain, she claims, didn't like it much."

LESLIE looked around anxiously. If there was only some weapon, some means of escape— But the kerosene lamp on the floor revealed nothing that might bring a stir of hope.

The barn seemed cavernous in its insufficient light. Off to one side, rows of projectiles gleamed softly, each one pre-

cisely like the next. Beyond were stacked bags of powder—enough, it seemed to Leslie, to start a small war.

"What are you going to do?" Ed asked.

"Tie you, first thing," Nicolas said. "Fix him up, Claire."

Claire found rope. All eyes, except Leslie's, were on the woman as she made Ed Walden's hands secure behind him. But Leslie was watching Dan's arms. They were moving a little, but she could see that he was exerting tremendous force against those ropes. If he could only break loose!

Nicolas lit a cigarette and inhaled deeply. "You won in the semi-final round this afternoon, didn't you?"

Leslie nodded.

"I am most proud of my pupil," he went on, lapsing into his perfect imitation of a Frenchman's accent. "But it would be very disappointing, little one, if you were now to lose the championship—for which you have worked, oh, so very hard! If you were to lose, let us say, because of a broken arm—

"You've heard of ju-jitsu, of course?" he said softly. "A little pressure here, a counter pressure there—and *snap*—the bone breaks!" He paused. "Perhaps, Powell, you'll come across now with that formula?"

"If you so much as touch that girl—"

"If that is not enough," Marquette went on harshly, "we might light a few matches under her pretty nose."

Claire was watching Leslie closely. And Leslie saw the ghastly truth in the woman's expressive eyes. This was no bluff.

She thought fleetingly of that green-trimmed racket with its hollow handle. She forced a tight, mirthless smile. They wouldn't get it, that was all.

"Don't you think," she asked quietly, clenching her hands behind her back, so they wouldn't suspect her agitation—"don't you think all this is rather crude?"

Nicolas said, "Catch hold of her, Claire."

Claire started forward. Nicolas came toward her too, passing close in front of Dan. Leslie stiffened, knowing it would



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be worse than useless to attempt a break.

Dan was writhing like a madman. Veins stood in ridges on his temples; his neck cords bulged. Then suddenly, incredibly, his arms were free. Leslie saw blood on his hands as he leaped, silently and fiercely, at Nicolas Marquette.

Nicolas whirled too late. Dan caught his gun arm. For a moment, straining body to body, they stood almost motionless. Claire spun around, her face twisted by rage. Her automatic flashed upward.

For one hideous instant Leslie could only stand there. The lantern seemed to focus all its light on those struggling men, forming an appalling picture. Beyond, their monstrous shadows heaved and swayed in hideous parody of the fight.

The lantern! It was the only loose thing near at hand. Leslie darted forward, snatched it up by the wire handle. Claire started to turn. The lantern swung in a sputtering arc, crashed, shivered against Claire's wrist. The gun dropped. Claire screamed.

The lantern fell from Leslie's suddenly nerveless fingers. Kerosene was spurting out of it, spreading darkly on the dry old floor, flowing around the dropped gun. Flame leaped down from the burning wick. Instantly the whole pool of spilled oil was ablaze.

CLAIRE dropped to her knees, snatching frantically at the gun. The spreading flames drove her back. Leslie raced past her. She caught hold of Marquette's gun-arm and twisted ruthlessly.

Her interference allowed Dan to free one of his hands. A fist flashed by her face. Knuckles cracked against bone. Nicolas reeled back, waving his arms feebly in a vain effort to keep his balance. Dan rushed in, smashing other, harder blows at the spy's head and body. Nicolas collapsed and lay still on the floor. Dan grabbed his gun.

The automatic in the oil pool suddenly went off with an ominous crack. Fiery beads of kerosene leaped up, scattered, spreading the flames farther. Some fell on Claire. She drew back, sobbing, and beating fren-

ziedly at her face. The old barn was brilliant with flickering light. Dan hurried to Ed Walden's side and fumbled with the ropes that held him to one of the up-rights.

Claire screamed once more, stark terror in her voice.

"The powder!" she cried. "The fire is at the powder!"

Leslie looked. It was true! And the projectiles were shining brightly, wickedly.

She felt weak, dizzy. The heat was doing that. Then Dan's voice was bellowing at her through the roar of the flames.

"Get out of here!"

She saw Claire running for the little side door. Someone caught her hand and dragged her along. It was her father. Claire paused uncertainly at the door and then raced back. Leslie's smarting eyes followed her. She caught Nicolas's arm and tried to drag him. Dan shoved her aside.

"Get out!" he cried savagely. "I'll take care of him!"

Then Leslie was outside. The cool of the night felt good to her feverish face. She tried to stop. Dan was in there! Dan!

"Come on!" Ed Walden begged. "We can't lose a second!"

Claire hurried out of the barn. She stopped and held the door wide. Dan followed, with Nicolas swung across his shoulder. Leslie gasped a thankful prayer. She started to run with her father, up the rutty road, up toward the wooded ridge.

Dan was coming, too, staggering a little under the spy's weight. Claire was just behind him.

The whole barn was aglow. Flames were soaring skyward from it. And then, with awful suddenness, the old barn was gone. Dazzling light flared briefly in its place. The walls and roof burst outward, scattered into thousands of flaming pieces.

But the terror of the night did not stop with that first deafening explosion. Shells began to go off. The tents danced wildly, as if to get away from that hideous place too; and then they were bowled over, one by one.

Something snarled overhead. Leslie

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knew. A fragment of shell. There were others, others by the score. They all kept on running as fast as they could, stumbling, staggering on, never knowing when one of those screaming pieces of steel might—

Then she was away from the woods and racing down hill. The others were all with her. The barn was out of sight, but she could still hear the hellish thunder, still feel the earth-jarring concussion.

"This is far enough!" Dan panted. "The ridge will protect us—some."

They dropped down on the ground. Nicolas was still unconscious. Claire, evidently with no thought of making an escape, crouched at his side. She was sobbing hysterically.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

TOP FLIGHT

DAN POWELL sat in the West Side Tennis Club stadium and waited expectantly, with ten thousand others, for the champion and the challenger to appear. He was fully aware that the people near by glanced frequently and somewhat skeptically at his discolored eye, but Dan wasn't worrying about a little thing like that. He meant to see the finals; and if one eye didn't work so well, he'd simply watch twice as hard with the other.

The Waldens were with him, both looking a little the worse for wear. Ed Walden kept nodding sleepily. He'd been up most of the night. Mrs. Walden was somewhat frayed. She hadn't slept at all.

"Here they are!" someone shouted.

And then they were coming down the red-brick steps, side by side. Two lovely girls, both dressed in white, both striving to appear calm, but only partially succeeding. Leslie wore a white band across her forehead. Lydia wore a white visor. Each carried her rackets under her right arm.

They walked across the turf, onto the No. 1 court. A hush fell over the stadium. Officials hurried here and there—aimlessly, Dan thought—and finally linesmen and umpire took their places. A coin flashed.

"Lydia won the toss," someone said. "She's going to serve!"

Dan, who didn't know a good deal about tennis, felt slightly dizzy after that. The ball, streaking from one side of the court to the other, was like a living thing. He saw brilliant, whipping drives; sizzling service; furious, deep-court returns.

But the scintillating play was not the thing that made the gallery marvel. It was Leslie Walden's sheer determination. From the first it was she who took the offensive, forcing the champion into repeated, costly errors; allowing no let-up from that relentless, killing pace.

Dan knew why. Leslie was in no condition to stand up under the terrific strain of a long-drawn-out match. She was putting every ounce of her strength, every bit of her strategy, into an effort to force the match to a quick, triumphant end.

She took the first set, six games to the champion's three.

But Lydia Benson was by no means defeated. She was fighting for her championship. Making a savage attack, she won the first two games of the second set.

"Lydia's found her stride," a woman near Dan said. "This is the beginning of the end."

But the champion, tense and worried, was making the same mistake that had defeated Ruth Hart in the semi-finals. She was playing a shade too hard. Leslie, on the other hand, continued to play with cold, audacious fury—and the cup-holder won no more games until the sixth of the set.

"It's anybody's championship now," said a man near Dan.

"It's beginning to look more like Leslie's," another man said. "Lord, what tennis!"

The second man was right. The gallery, in polite uproar from the start, suddenly burst into deafening cheers. Dan cheered, too, until hoarseness stopped him; although he found it difficult to realize that three more games had passed, and that Leslie had taken them all.

Down on the court, new champion and old were shaking hands.

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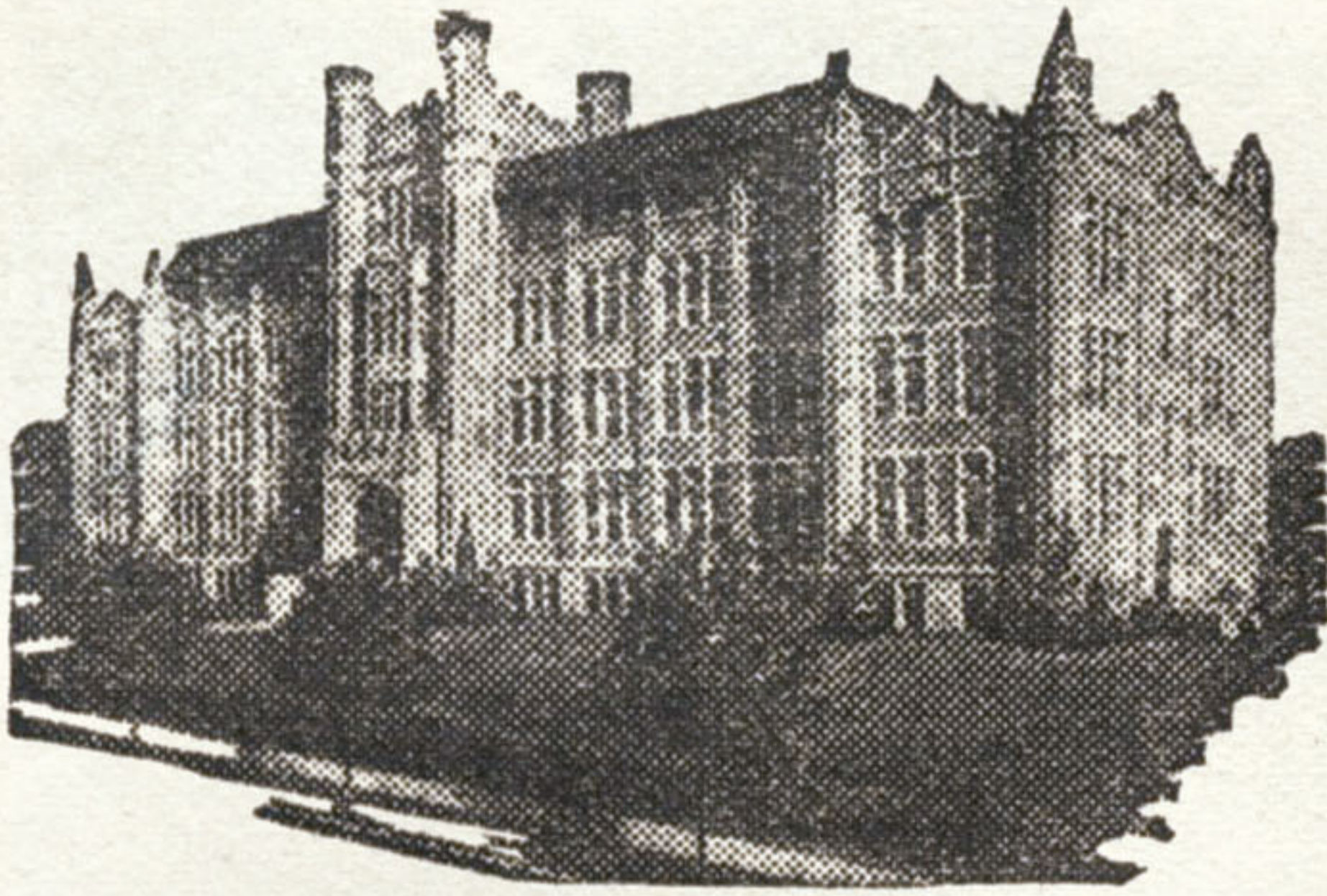
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THEY sat side by side on the old log. A slim crescent of new moon hung in the western sky. Before them, pitted and blackened, was the place where the barn had been. But they didn't look at that. They looked at the moon.

"How does it feel to be No. 1 tennis player?"

"I—I rather like it." She chuckled. "How does it feel to be No. 1 armor-plate inventor?"

"Only so-so," Dan said. "There's something else I'd much rather be."

She was puzzled. "What's that, for heaven's sake?"

"Your husband," Dan said.

Leslie laughed softly.

"You start," she said, "by kissing the girl."

(The End)

IN THE NEXT ISSUE

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need to PROVE
I can make You
a NEW MAN!**

by *Charles Atlas*

Holder of the title:
**"The World's Most Perfectly
Developed Man"**
Won in open competition in the only
National and International contests
held during the past 15 years

ONE week! That's all the time I
need. In 7 days I'll PROVE that
I can make you over into a *new
man of vitality and power.*

I'll do for you exactly what I did for
myself. I was once a 97-pound weakling.
I was sickly, only half alive. I had a
flabby, namby-pamby body.

How I changed myself from this "below aver-
age" physique into the man who won—against
all comers—the title of "World's Most Per-
fectly Developed Man" is an absorbing story. It
is told in my book, "Everlasting Health and
Strength," which I will send you *absolutely free* if you
fill in and mail the coupon below.

It's Easy MY WAY

Big claims mean nothing! That is why I offer you more
than promises. That is why I offer you a 7 days' trial of
my famous method, *Dynamic-Tension*. That lets you see for
yourself that I back up every promise I make. That
PROVES beyond a flicker of a doubt that I can and will
turn you, too, into a vital, powerful NEW MAN.

Thousands of fellows all over the world have used my
method—and now you can, too. Like them, you can put on
firm layers of muscle where you need them most, tone up
your whole system, banish constipation, poor digestion, bad
breath, pimples and other conditions that rob you of the
good things and good times of life, and get the "drive"
that'll take you to the top of the ladder.

I've Got NO USE for Apparatus

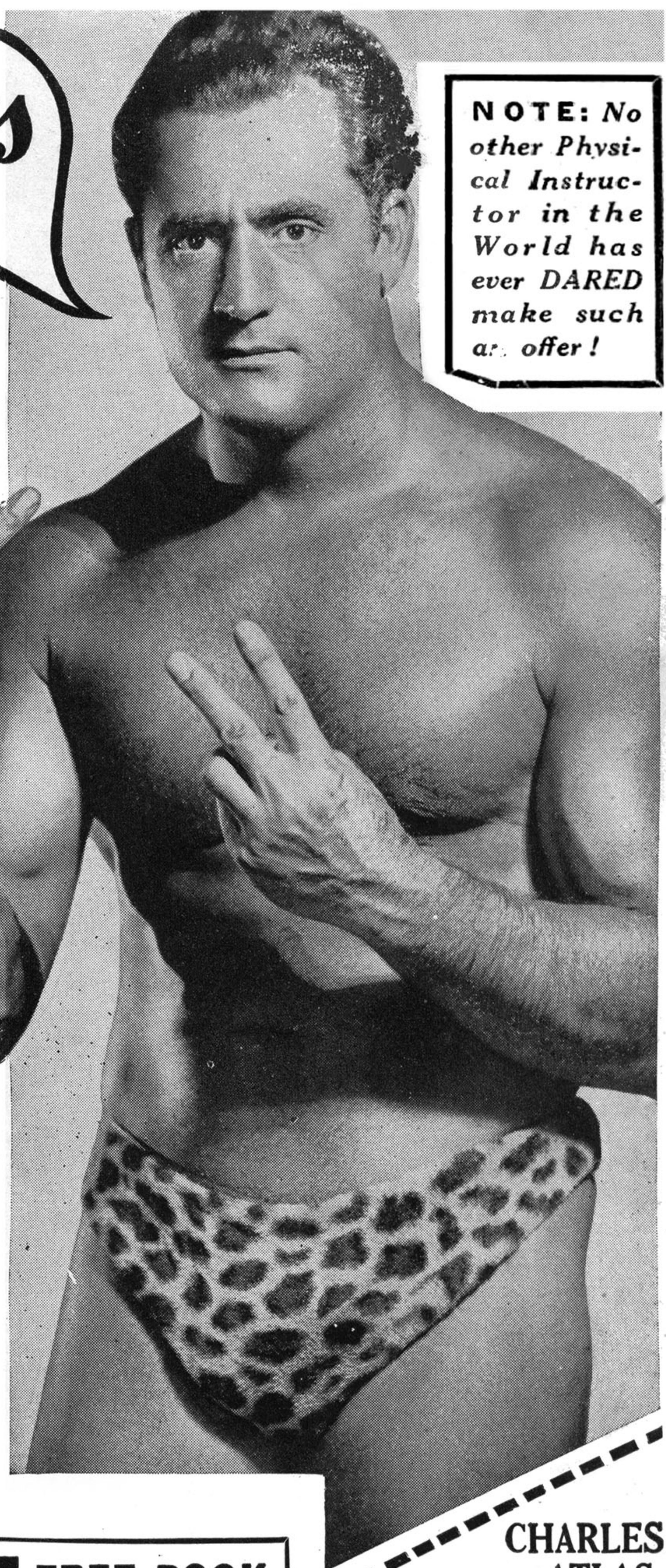
I haven't any use for tricky weights or pulleys and machines that
may strain your heart and other vital organs. There's nothing un-
natural or artificial about this method of mine. And I don't dose you or doctor you. *Dynamic-
Tension* is all I need. It's the natural, tested
method for developing real men inside and out. It
distributes added pounds of powerful muscles over
your body, gets rid of ailments and surplus
fat, and gives you the vitality, strength and pep
that win you the admiration of every woman and
the respect of any man.

**Send for YOUR Copy
of MY FREE BOOK**

Don't be held back by a below-par body!
Now you can easily and quickly make this
new man of yourself! Do what my thou-
sands of other pupils did—send for a free
copy of my illustrated book, "Everlasting Health and Strength."
Learn how I built myself up from a weak, no-muscle, always-
tired, "runt" to winner of the title, "The World's Most Perfectly
Developed Man." Gamble a stamp to mail my coupon—to
learn how YOU can win the biggest prize in life—a handsome,
healthy, husky body. Address CHARLES ATLAS, Dept. 22-G,
133 E. 23rd St., New York City.



**NOTE: No
other Physi-
cal Instruc-
tor in the
World has
ever DARED
make such
an offer!**



**CHARLES
ATLAS,**

**Dept. 22-G
133 East 23rd Street,
New York City**



FREE BOOK

Gamble a stamp today,
Mail coupon for free copy of
my new book, "Everlasting
Health and Strength." It
shows you from actual pho-
tos how I have developed
my Pupils to my own per-
fectly balanced propor-
tions. Where shall I send
your copy? Write your name
and address plainly on the
coupon. Mail it today to me
personally.

I want proof that *Dynamic-Tension*
will make a New Man of me—give
me a healthy, husky body and big
muscle development. Send free book,
"Everlasting Health and Strength."

NAME.....
(Please print or write plainly)
ADDRESS.....
CITY..... STATE.....
© 1934 C. A. Ltd.

I'll FILL your POCKETBOOK



and Give You a Brand New Ford Tudor Sedan

for producing

HERE'S a Wonderful Chance to Step Into a Good-Paying Tea and Coffee Route Right in Your Own Locality. No Experience Needed—I'll Give You What Little Training Necessary—No Red Tape—Earnings Start at Once.

Look at These Unusual Earnings

If you have been working for a boss and your pay has been limited; if you are weary of pinching and striving to exist, here's an opportunity to change all this. With my route plan you can stop time-clock punching forever. Here's what some others have already done: Chester Clay, N. Mex., made \$10.00 in two hours. Howard B. Ziegler, Pa., made \$21.60 in a day and \$103.32 in a week. Lambert Wilson, Mich., made \$79.00 in one week. Ray Chapman, Mo., cleared \$73.50 in a week. These exceptional earnings show the remarkable possibilities of my route plan.

Special Openings for Women

I have a wonderful opportunity for women on local Tea and Coffee Routes. Earnings run up to \$5.00 a day just in spare time. The work is light and pleasant and the profits exceptionally big. Housewives, school teachers, office workers, factory workers—all find my new and novel plans for spare-time work highly profitable. If you have other work to do just start in spare time. Mrs. C. R. Luoma, W. Va., averaged \$40.00 a week for a year on one of these routes. Mrs. Preston Portwood, Ga., quit a \$10.00 a week department store job and cleared \$7.50 the first afternoon. These unusual earnings show what big money women can make. I now have an even better plan to offer you. Send me your name today.

I give brand new Ford Tudor Sedans to my producers. Not a prize or a raffle—but an extra bonus or reward in addition to your regular cash earnings.

PERMANENT FOOD ROUTES PAY UP TO \$42.50 A WEEK

I'll start you in a big-paying business of your own—you don't risk anything. Sounds astonishing! It is a revelation to men and women in immediate need of cash. This is a public announcement of a time-tried and thoroughly proven plan for quick relief from your money worries. I need more people to operate local Tea and Coffee Routes at once. These routes pay up to \$42.50 a week right from the start. Even spare-time Route Owners make up to \$5.00 a day. I back you up and take the risk.

IMMEDIATE EARNINGS

It's your job to distribute the goods and collect the cash. You keep a big share of it for yourself. You don't have to wait—profits start pouring in immediately. I place "Ready Made" plans for success in your hands just as soon as you join me. I have spent years and a fortune in cash for these things I give you free of extra cost. With my plans you pocket all the profit. You don't divide up with anyone.

HOUSEHOLD SUPPLIES PAY BEST

Look around—you will see men making big weekly incomes from

laundry routes, dairy routes or bakery routes. My route plans are still better. I manufacture nearly 300 fine food products and necessities used daily in almost every home—things people must buy to live. I furnish you wonderful new route plans, and fine premiums for your customers. Your earnings are big right from the start. Think of having relief from money worries with the thrill of seeing your business grow bigger every week.

FORD CARS GIVEN

I back up my Route Owners to bring them unheard-of earnings. I even give Ford Tudor Sedans—free of extra cost—as a bonus to my producers. This is in addition to the regular big daily cash profits. Send name today for big booklet crammed full of facts. You will be amazed at my liberal offer.

SEND NO MONEY— YOU RISK NOTHING

I want to hear from you at once so I can lay all the facts before you, then you can be the judge. You may be just the person I am looking for. You don't risk a cent. If you need cash don't miss this opportunity. It might not appear again. Right now while it is before you, put name on coupon or penny postcard—mail—rush today.

Good For Free Offer

ALBERT MILLS, President
5078 Monmouth Ave., Cincinnati, O.



Rush me free facts on your Route Plan, telling how I can start earning up to \$42.50 a week at once. I understand there is no obligation on my part. You are to send me your plans and complete facts, and I am to be the judge.

Name

Address

(Please Print or Write Plainly)

