



DELUXE

★ Five Novels

20¢

DECEMBER

Monthly

CHEATERS FACE THE ROUND-UP

A Thrilling Western

By

John Colohan

5 NOVELS for DECEMBER

MURDER'S STOOGES

A Gripping Mystery

By Edward S. Williams

SATAN'S HORDE

Stirring Adventure in Papua

By S. Gordon Gurwit

THE JEWELLED THRONE

A Colorful Persian Quest

By Victor Rousseau

AND THE ICE SIZZLES!

Hockey Players Fight It Out

By C. Paul Jackson



Rotating Forest Fire Lamp

See the Smoke Rise and the Forest Burn!

Map is a new, unusual picture in a Tally Lamp who ACTUALLY shows you the smoke rise and the forest burn. It is a new, unusual picture in a Tally Lamp who ACTUALLY shows you the smoke rise and the forest burn. It is a new, unusual picture in a Tally Lamp who ACTUALLY shows you the smoke rise and the forest burn.

FOREST FIRE LAMP, Price Reduced
NIGARUA FALLS LAMP, Price Reduced

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WONDERFUL X-RAY 10c
See clearly through flesh, etc.

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INSIDE . . . She is Handsomely Revealed!

From the outside of the glass, these beautiful little beauties are shown in modest poses. But when the glass is turned, the charms are revealed in a most revealing manner. The girls look lovely in the most revealing manner. The girls look lovely in the most revealing manner.

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Johnson Smith & Co., Dept. 242, Detroit, Mich.
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Many make \$30 \$50 \$75 a week

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HERE'S PROOF THAT MY TRAINING PAYS



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Get Ready Now for Jobs Like These
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Why Many Radio Experts Make \$30, \$50, \$75 a Week

Radio is young—yet it's one of our large industries. More than 28,000,000 homes have one or more Radios. There are more Radios than telephones. Every year millions of Radios get out of date and are replaced. Millions more need new tubes, repairs. Over \$50,000,000 are spent every year for Radio repairs alone. Over 5,000,000 auto Radios are in use; more are being sold every day, offering more profit-making opportunities for Radio experts. AND RADIO IS STILL YOUNG, GROWING, expanding into new fields. The few hundred \$30, \$50, \$75 a week jobs of 20 years ago have grown to thousands. Yes, Radio offers opportunities—now and for the future!

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National Radio Institute, Washington, D. C.

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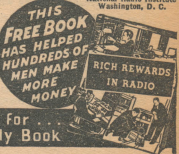
Money Back Agreement Protects You

I am so sure I can train you to your satisfaction that I agree in writing to refund every penny you pay me if you are not satisfied with my Lessons and Instruction Service when you finish. A copy of this agreement comes with my Free Book.

Find Out What Radio Offers You Act Today. Mail the coupon now for "Rich Rewards in Radio."

It's free to any fellow over 18 years old. It points out Radio's spare time and full time opportunities and those coming in Television; tells about my training in Radio and Television; shows you letters from men I trained, telling what they are doing and earning. Find out what Radio offers YOU! MAIL COUPON in an envelope, or paste on a postcard—NOW!

J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. SNF
National Radio Institute
Washington, D. C.



FIVE-NOVELS MONTHLY

F. A. McCHESNEY, Editor

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Volume 44

DECEMBER, 1938

Number 3

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FORECAST FOR NEXT MONTH

THERE'S *Trouble on His Wings* in L. Ron Hubbard's story of Johnny Brice, hard-working, devil-may-care picture-chaser for the newsreels. Whether on land or sea, or in the air, Johnny and his pal Irish corral trouble aplenty, stealing a foreign bomber, flying to the tune of machine-gun bullets, daring death and destruction. But it's all in a day's work for them—they just naturally belong to the breed of excitement-hunting men who risk their necks daily to "Get the news!" Five-star adventure—Hubbard's best.

From L. P. Holmes comes *Fury Pulls the Trigger*—wherein Gene Deckard turns lawman and follows killer sign until the trail flames into a duel with men whose speed on the trigger has pocked Comanche Valley with death!

For Lee Poston and Ford, rivals in sport, business and love, the Skaggarat skiing events capped a five-year battle. Sportsmen and fans alike laid bets with furious excitement, for as these two men flashed into action, it was all or nothing—and one of them would win *The Million-Dollar Jump!* Colorful and thrilling—Philip L. Scruggs' novel.

Neil Martin is with us again in *Shanghaied!* Waking up on a whaler—a sea-going "slaughter-house"—Steve Gormley finds himself signed on as Tom Wilson. Tricked into the four-year cruise, Steve keeps his wits sharp, trying to ferret out the racket behind this outrage. It's a tough job and a tough voyage, but Steve carries on.

In fog, to the moaning of buoys and the dismal wail of sirens, Tim White followed the strange trail of murder, shivering at its devious course, but undaunted by the eerie signals to "Keep Off!" John Murray Reynolds' exciting mystery, *The Killer Chose Fog!*

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H. C. LEWIS, President

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Because my training is on actual equipment and because the necessary theory is given you in a practical way you don't need previous experience or a lot of education. I have made it possible by my method of training for the fellow who hasn't been born with a silver spoon in his mouth to get a training that he can apply to earn a living—and by my "Pay after Graduation" plan I've made it possible for him to get this training without a large outlay of money. Send the coupon today for all details.

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500 S. Paulina Street, Dept. 98-18, Chicago, Ill.

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Address.....

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writes F. T. of Pa. "The PRAVER you sent me with my RABBIT'S FOOT has helped me wonderfully. I was nearly crippled. Now I am getting well again," says Mrs. L. C. of Ohio. "I now have steady work," writes Fred C. of Canada. Letters like these coming from grateful men and women all over the country make me very happy. It may be coincidence, or it may be the psychological effect, but whatever it is, these people believe I have helped them—and I would like to help YOU, too!

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So please hurry! Clip this message and mail with 25c (coin) to help cover my expenses. I want to help you as fast as I can. Your Sincere Friend, LADY HOPE, 116 Post Road, Noroton, Conn. © 1938, Lady Hope.



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SLAYING"

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INSIDE DETECTIVE

DECEMBER ISSUE 10¢

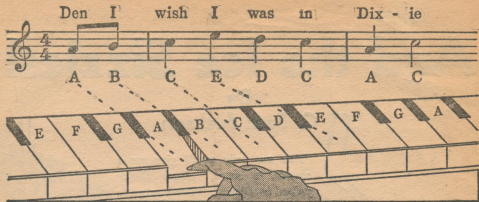
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*Actual pupils' names on request. Pictures posed by Professional Models.

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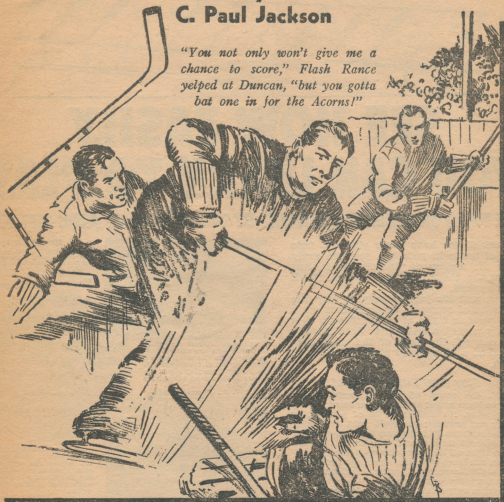
Town.....State.....

And the Ice Sizzles!

By

C. Paul Jackson

"You not only won't give me a chance to score," Flash Rance yelped at Duncan, "but you gotta bat one in for the Acorns!"



FLASHING blades sang on the ice of Olympia, Detroit's mammoth indoor sports arena, and the roar of twelve thousand hockey fans beat down on the ears of the Detroit Cardinals' newest recruit. Duncan Delbridge sat in the players' box with the rest of the spares and watched the great front line of the Montreal Maroons bewilder the Cardinals.

"Damn it!" snorted Pop Harder, grizzled veteran of twenty seasons in the hot-ice game and new manager of the Car-

dinals. "Can't Rance see that he's being sucked in on that criss-cross set-up?"

Duncan riveted his gaze on Flash Rance. Despite his resolve not to let hockey get him, the big rugged Scot felt strong emotions surging inside him. The light of battle showed in his clear gray eyes and little coils of muscle made ridges along his jaws. He wished he was out there in the thick of the battle. He said out of the corner of his mouth to Dud Cerlik, sitting beside him:

"Rance could wreck that play if he'd use his head. All he has to do is feint that wing on the outside of the triangle into the boards and go after the key-man when he commits himself."

Dud Cerlik grunted, looked hard at Duncan. Cerlik had been around big-league hockey ten seasons, had seen a lot of rookies come and go, but this husky, black-haired lad, who had come up from nowhere, had him puzzled. Something about Duncan vaguely reminded the veteran of someone, too, but he couldn't place it. And he certainly couldn't figure Duncan.

The referee shrilled his whistle for an offside and the spares in the box relaxed. Pop Harder motioned out a new front line and sent one replacement in at defense. Dud Cerlik looked speculatively at the recruit wing beside him.

"I don't get you, Duncan," he said frankly. "You say you don't give a damn for hockey, and that you don't know anything about it, yet you spot the weakness in Rance's play right off the bat. Why the hell don't you let Pop know you've got more on the ball than merely the ability to skate like fury? You expect to crash the regular line-up if you sit back and don't blow your own horn a little?"

A frown darkened Duncan Delbridge's face. He hesitated, then said bleakly:

"I don't want to crash the regular line. I have absolutely no ambition to be a big star." Bitterness crept into his tone. "That's what ruins young fellows in this racket. They come up to the big cities from backwoods Canada or some other quiet spot where they've been treated like ordinary mortals, play their hearts out and get in the limelight. Then what happens? All the leeches crawl out from under their stones and pounce on for the ride. The poor kids, elevated to a spot that makes them dizzy, are dazzled by the bright lights and—"

Duncan leaned forward again, as play started. His tones were harsh, as he went on:

"Not any for mine, thank you—I hate hockey! Temporarily it's of some use to

me, and I'll use it. After that—" his jaws set, and there could be no doubt that he meant what he said—"if I never see another puck or pair of hockey skates, it'll be too soon!"

A ROAR from the stands drowned out any more Duncan might have said. The Cardinal front liners were sweeping across the blue-line, flicking the puck in lightning passes across the ice. For just a minute, they flashed the smooth form Pop Harder had worked so hard all season to develop. The second period was nearly over and the fans wanted a goal.

Then something happened. A burly Maroon defenseman barged into the thick of the fray, dealt out a crashing check to a Cardinal wing, and snaked the puck away from him. He drilled the disc to a mate waiting at the blue-line, and quicker than scat the Maroon front liners were storming in on Alfie Bude, in the Cardinal nets.

The little goalie stopped a rifle shot from fifteen feet out, but a Maroon wing pounced on the rebound and blistered a backhand shot into the corner of the cords. The red light glowed back of the Cardinal nets and the electric scoreboard figures shifted to Montreal 4—Detroit 1. The bell rang for the end of the period at the face-off following the goal.

Lights of the big arena dimmed as the players skated from the ice. Dud Cerlik hung back, looked over his shoulder. As Duncan started down the ramp to the dressing rooms, Cerlik plucked at his sweater.

"Stick around a minute, kid, and get an eyeful of the babe. She's some number, and she can sing like nobody's business. She's probably number one Cardinal fan, too. Name is—"

"Your attention, please!" The metallic voice of the public address system interrupted Cerlik. "Kindly keep your seats one moment. At this time, Olympia management takes great pleasure in presenting for your entertainment that golden-voiced star of stage and radio, Detroit's own Miss Rhoda Yantiss!"

Dud Cerlik didn't notice the stiffening of Duncan's body as the black-haired wing heard that name. His face was a study. Curiosity was there, but something else—a hardness, and a momentary flash of hatred.

Rhoda Yantiss was one of the reasons why he had left a promising law career in a small city to fight his way through half a season in the hinterlands and up to the Detroit Cardinals. He slowly turned and let his eyes rest on the slender figure standing in the spotlight on the organ platform at the end of the arena.

Duncan didn't know just what he'd expected to see, but certainly he was unprepared for the loveliness of the girl before the microphone, her hands uplifted to hush the tumultuous applause. She was no more than five-feet-two, but every line of her figure was perfect, and for all her smallness, she dominated the huge crowd. With her deep blue eyes, her wavy corn-silk hair, and her oval, delicately featured face, she was as beautiful a bit of femininity as Duncan had ever laid eyes on.

"Did I say it or did I say it?" Cerlik grinned. "And wait till you hear her sing!"

Duncan Delbridge said nothing. His emotions were jumbled, confused and full of conflict. This girl couldn't be the cold, hard creature he had always believed her to be. Why, she was little more than a kid, and even the glittering aura of big-city entertainer could not conceal the sweetness, the unspoiled, youthful charm of her.

But Rhoda Yantiss was the girl's name he had found in his brother's effects. That name and another—Blake Fox—were the hated names that had brought him back to hockey; the names to which he charged the ruin of his kid brother—the brother who had died so tragically, and under a cloud.

THERE couldn't have been any significance in the song Rhoda Yantiss chose to sing that night—she didn't know there was such a person as Duncan Delbridge—yet she could have chosen no song better designed to appeal to that bitter and lonely man who stood there

with his heart torn with grief and hatred and uncertainty. She sang *Loch Lomond*.

*Ye'll take the high road, and I'll take the low road,
And I'll be in Scotland afore ye. . . .*

Duncan stood in the ramp, spell-bound, his eyes riveted on the girl in baffled wonder. How could a girl like her be the hard, gold-digging, calculating person that had driven Bob to desperate acts and then cast him aside, without mercy, without one shred of decent human feeling? Duncan's mouth hardened, his eyes turned icy. "She's an actress," he thought. "It's her business to look soft and appealing. She's rotten to the core!"

He wrenched his gaze from Rhoda Yantiss, clomped down the ramp to the club house. But he couldn't banish her blond loveliness from his mind even when Pop Harder really got going on the shortcomings of his boys. The Cardinal manager was fiery, as he told them off:

"—and by damn we're going to do something about it! You men are as good as any squad in the league, you're capable of playing winning hockey, and I'm tired of seeing you roll over and play dead to the other teams. The trouble is, you've got no spirit!"

Pop Harder's voice was strident.

"Detroit fans have been damn faithful. They've given us the same support they always gave the Red Wings when Jack Adams had the only major-league club in the city. We can't let 'em down. I'm gonna find some way to spark this outfit into playin' bang-up aggressive hockey, if I have to ship the whole lot of you out and bring up a flock of kids from the farm clubs!"

The veteran manager stopped for a moment and his eyes flickered over the red-jersied players clustered around him on the benches and floor. The lines etched in the weathered, tough old face seemed deeper. Pop got under a man's skin when he was like that. More than one of his boys squirmed uncomfortably. Then Pop went on, his voice razor-edged:

"Rance," he barked, "you were terrible out there! Time and again you let their front line make a monkey outa you on that criss-cross play. And I told you what was the matter the first time you came off the ice!"

Flash Rance, star wing for four seasons, and the man whom the Cardinals built their force around when Detroit enfranchised a second National Hockey League entry two years ago, flushed angrily. He wasn't accustomed to such talk from any manager.

"I'm a wing," he said sullenly. "It's up to the defensemen to break up plays. I do my part in—"

"That's where you're wrong!" snapped Pop. "I thought I'd made it clear that hockey—the way *my* teams play it, anyway—is a six-man game. Defensemen can't stop plays unless the front line is in there back-checking and harrying the offense before they get into the attacking zone."

The old fighter held Rance's eyes and added, "You're a big star, Rance, but you ain't bigger than the team. I don't give a damn—and the fans don't either, in the last analysis—who makes the goals. But I ain't gonna have a man on my club who dogs around when the other team has the puck, whether he's leading scorer of the league or not!"

Pope turned to Duncan. He barked: "You're in at left wing on the front line this period! It's up to you whether you stick or not—this is your chance. From now on, we ain't carryin' deadwood on this club, whether it's veteran or rookie!"

DUNCAN DELBRIDGE took the ice at the start of the third period with a queer, jittery coldness in the pit of his being. No matter how he had scorned hockey, no matter how he had kidded himself, he had a deep-rooted love for the game. It was in his blood. And it was something, even for him, to skate out on that smooth, blue and red marked rink, wearing the monkey-suit of a big-league hockey team before twelve thousand roaring fans.

Pictures of the past tumbled through

his mind. Another jammed rink, in an earlier day. A brawny sandy-haired giant of a man who, before the game began, stopped before two very proud youngsters in the stands and said, "Well, lads, here's where your old man shows the big leaguers that we play real hockey in the sticks!"

Duncan Douglas MacCrea had made good his boast to his two young sons. It was from that day, eighteen years in the past now, that the luster of "Dunc" MacCrea had started, a luster that had been added to and had remained unsullied for more than fifteen seasons—and then had been dimmed and tarnished by the exit from hockey of young Bob MacCrea, under a cloud.

Pictures too, of the crowds at McGill University when another MacCrea had made hockey history at this famous Canadian school. Flashes of big-league scouts bringing flattering offers for his name on a contract.

Duncan remembered with painful clarity the pleading, then the disappointed resentment and anger of old "Dunc" MacCrea when his elder son refused even to consider the offers to play professional hockey. Three years ago, that was, but the scene was still crystal-clear in Duncan Delbridge's memory.

"I won't do it, dad," he had said. "If you want the truth, I hate hockey, hate it for what it's done to you and to mother. All my life I've had stick-handling, feints, pivots, and speed on skates dinned into me. I've played hockey here at McGill for your sake, because you expected any man bearing the name MacCrea to star in the game."

He had met the stormy eyes of his father, and said:

"Now I'm through. I've been offered a position with a law firm in Vancouver and I'm accepting it. I never expect to hold a hockey stick in my hand again!"

The stormy session was indelibly etched in Duncan's brain. It had ended when the older man had at last given his ultimatum.

"Hockey has never harmed anyone," he said huskily. "You have no license to

—to blame hockey for your mother's death or— If I have flown a little reckless in my day, it's my fault, not hockey's."

Then old Dunc MacCrea's face had softened a bit. He had made one last plea.

"It's my life, Duncan, the MacCrea name. And I'm too old. The best I can hope for now is a coaching job, maybe a managership. But you—you've got the stuff! You can go farther than I ever did. You can keep MacCrea in the hockey headlines for years!"

And his features had darkened with rage when Duncan only reiterated his determination to follow the career for which he had prepared himself in college. The elder Duncan had said harshly:

"Mind this, then! If you take this job, turn your back on the grandest game of them all, you're no longer a MacCrea. I never want to see you again!"

And that was why Duncan Delbridge MacCrea had dropped the surname and become Duncan Delbridge. That explained, too, why he had been able to get a try out with the St. Louis minor-league club without being recognized. He'd changed considerably in the years following his graduation, was more mature.

He'd never mentioned his famous father, and had not regretted his choice. But he was a MacCrea, and he'd rejoiced when his kid brother Bob—following in his footsteps at McGill—had taken the hockey world by surprise by stepping from college ice to big-league rinks with the Cardinals and making good.

Duncan had followed the progress of his brother in the sport pages. Bob's meteoric rise to stardom must have been balm to his father. Duncan had dropped everything and hurried across the continent when Bob wired that he was in a jam. Now, facing his own big-league debut as an aftermath to Bob's trouble, Duncan realized that he was still a MacCrea.

AS HE skated to position for the opening face-off of the third period, the anonymity of his position kept Duncan from succumbing to the jitters. Here he was, a man who had scorned offers to play

professional hockey, had broken off with his father because he hated the game, and who would have bet any amount of money, a few short months ago, that he would never skim a hockey puck over the ice again.

Yet here he was skating on the smooth artificial sheet in Olympia Arena, his blades cutting the same ice that the big stars of the National Hockey League skated on—and he was getting a big thrill from it. He was like a retired cavalry horse who miraculously was returned to duty.

The referee tooted a shrill blast of his whistle and a black rubber disc spun to the ice between the clashing sticks of the two centers. Senmore, the pivot man for the Cardinals, outhacked his opponent, snaked the puck aside, and in the same motion flicked it skimming 'cross-ice to Miehl, at right wing.

"Here, Miehl!" Duncan banged the ice twice with the heel of his club and darted down the left boards.

Miehl dribbled the puck into the attacking zone, stick-handled his way past a poke-checking Maroon front-line, and foxed a defenseman by slanting the rubber into the sideboards and racing around him to pick up the rebound.

Senmore hadn't let any grass grow under him and he was clear in the center lane. The Maroon defenseman, who had tagged Duncan, sized up the play as a straight drive on goal from the front and sped off to cover Senmore.

He was a split-second late. Miehl feinted a shot, drew two Maroons frantically after him, and deftly swept the puck to Senmore as the defense closed. The tall center sensed the onrushing defenseman, hooked the flying puck deftly as he turned, and sizzled a pass to Duncan an instant before the defenseman crashed him to the ice with a hard body-check.

Duncan caught the puck in full stride and really turned on the heat as he thundered diagonally toward the net. His check left Senmore and skated furiously after Duncan.

Instinctively, and as smoothly as a veteran, Duncan did the right thing.

Feinting a shot twenty feet out, he stopped on a dime, pivoted right in the cloud of ice-spray his biting blades raised. The Maroon padman was one of the best goalies in hockey, but he was fooled by that maneuver. He dived across the net to guard the threatened corner, saw too late that he'd been sucked out of position, and threw himself backward at a whistling black streak sizzling into the other corner of the cage.

He didn't have a chance. All the power of Duncan's big sinewy wrists was back of that shot. The puck eluded the goalie's frantic stab and bulged the cords in the left lobe of the goal. A tiny red light at the top of a wire-protected cage back of the Maroon goal glowed its jubilant message. Goal!

OLYMPIA ARENA rocked with yells of approval from Cardinal fans. A flurry of scorecards hurtled to the ice. All through the crowd ran a buzz of excitement.

"Who is that guy? Did you see that shot?"

"Wow! Herbie Lewis never beat that one!"

Fans hurriedly consulted their programs.

"Number 13—Delbridge, Duncan Delbridge. A rookie from the minor league!"

"I don't care who he is, he's good! Man, that baby is *really* fast!"

The loudspeaker blared through the hum of approval:

"Your attention, please. Goal by Delbridge; assist by Senmore. Time, twenty-three seconds!"

Again a thunderous volume of sound broke from the crowd. A score in less than half a minute! Down in the Cardinal players' box, Pop Harder grunted. His keen eyes snapped and the lines in his leathery face broke into a grin.

"*That's* the kind of aggressive hockey we want!" he said.

Flash Rance scowled, snorted derisively, "Busher's luck!"

But in less than sixty seconds after the face-off following the goal, Duncan Delbridge gave further evidence that he was in there pitching all the time.

Senmore again beat his man at the face-off and fans screamed in anticipation of another score when he whipped the pass to Miehl identically as he had before. But this time Miehl was outsmarted by a Maroon wing and lost the rubber. Cardinals

skated back to their defensive zone, while the Maroons stalled long enough to bring up their front line and the defenseman who made up their most potent scoring threat.



"Dunker" Duncan

Duncan bit the blades into the ice, whipped around and sped to his area when the Maroons took the puck. Then here they came—and it was plain that they were hammering at the same old spot, the left wing.

The rookie sized up the play, caught in a flash the relative positions of Senmore and Miehl. He yelled over his shoulder at Cerlik, in at left defense, "The triangle criss-cross! I'll take the inside two!"

He'd sat in the box and watched the Maroons make Flash Rance look bad on this play for two whole periods. It had looked easy to stop—from the sidelines—but Duncan didn't fool himself. These Maroons slickers were too clever to have only one trick in their bag. If he barged in too fast, they'd pull an alternate angle of the set-up on him and he'd look even worse than Rance had looked.

Well, here was the test.

He watched the key-man's eyes, saw them shift momentarily to the left. Duncan feinted at the wing on the left of the triangle, as though he was fooled, then lunged back fast to the right. He saw the key-man's hands tense, knew that a pass was coming.

Duncan barged full into the man at the right, dealt out a tooth-rattling body-check that jarred the Maroon into the boards, and leaped around him. He took the surprised key-man's pass as though it had been meant for him.

Again the fans were brought to their feet as Duncan roared down the boards. Maroons strung out behind him, stretched their legs in long strokes to overhaul him. The lone defenseman between Duncan and the goal closed in diagonally across ice. Duncan saw that he'd meet the defenseman just across the blue line. Imperceptibly, he edged out a little from the sideboards, without slackening speed. He plunged toward the defenseman like a runaway locomotive.

A confident grin wreathed the burly Maroon's face. Just another rookie who thought fast skating was all there was to this game! Well, he'd cool this particular busher right now!

He braced himself, lunged toward Duncan at the psychological moment, fully expecting to jar the rookie with such a body-check that his ancestors would feel it. But a tenth of a second later the big defenseman crashed into the boards. All he had hit with that vicious charge was a spout of ice-spray. Duncan had faded around that check like a wreath of fog!

A STORM of noise roared from the fans as Duncan bore down on the nets. The goalie set himself, crouched in the goal mouth, prepared for anything.

"Do it again, busher!" he gritted grimly. "If you beat me this time, I'll eat the nets!"

Duncan started as though he was going to duplicate his former maneuver. And the goalie figured he was, and he didn't put all he had in going after that feint. Only it wasn't a feint this time. Duncan lifted the puck a good eight inches from the ice with a power-laden wrist flick. The disc burned the ozone, and numbed the goalie's foot as he frantically kicked it out.

But Duncan was ready for the save. He pounced on the rebound just outside

the crease, back-handed it into the net even as he went sprawling. He looked up at the goalie and grinned as the arena exploded with noise.

"Those cords are tough on your digestion!" he said.

It wasn't to be expected that any man could maintain the pace Duncan had set in his first two minutes of big-league hockey. The Maroons naturally concentrated their fire on the newcomer for the next few minutes and Duncan was really given a ride. But he liked it.

He was rugged as well as fast, and the natural ability he possessed had been beautifully developed by all those long hard hours of training. Dunc MacCrea had forced him to undergo. His black-thatched head bobbed like a burnt cork in an ocean of milk as the Maroons poured it into him, but he was always there, ready for the next scrimmage.

Olympia Arena was one continuous riot of shouts as the battle raged back and forth. Hard, clean hockey, all of it, but the thrilling, chance-taking slam-bang game that hockey bugs lay their money on the line to see.

It was inevitable that the brilliant play of Duncan should be reflected in his teammates.

"Give 'em hell, kid!" Dud Cerlik yelled. "We're all with you!"

But the Maroons were a really great team, and Duncan had been right in assuming that they were resourceful. They changed the tactics of their attack after Duncan and Cerlik had twice more wrecked the triangle criss-cross. They began firing fairly long shots at Bude and sending two forwards crashing in at the goal-mouth for pot-shots on the passes, or blistering rebounds.

Little Alfie Bude shuttled back and forth across the nets like a monkey on a stick. He made no less than eight tough saves in less than five minutes, and two of them were sensational.

Then, during an off-side face-off, Duncan skated near Miehle and Semmore.

"We can break up that game," he said, "if one of us rushes the man with the

puck in the center and the other two cover those wings. Cerlik and Moss can mop up, if we miss."

Senmore shot a sharp look at the rookie; he wasn't used to taking orders from a busher. But Senmore was a hockey player, and he saw the logic of Duncan's plan. He bit back the rebuke on the tip of his tongue.

"Oke," he grunted. "I'll take the shooter."

The fans howled more than ever when Duncan checked a Maroon wing and broke up the play by intercepting a floating pass down the center lane. The bugs had taken the rookie to their hearts.

IN A box not far from the Cardinal spares, a suave, well-dressed man leaned back in his seat and smoothed a nicely manicured hand over sleek black hair. His eyes were narrowed. He said out of the corner of his mouth:

"Who is this kid Duncan Delbridge? Why haven't I been told that he's the dynamite the Cardinals have lacked since MacCrea faded out?"

A rat-eyed fellow beside him whined, "Gee, boss, how was I to know? He's just another punk Harder dug up somewhere in the sticks."

The suave one grunted, said positively, "That shows what a bum judge *you* are. That lad is going to loom plenty big in the Cardinal future, or my name isn't Blake Fox. He'll own this town inside a month!"

He stroked a hairline mustache, almost as though he preened himself before a mirror, and figuratively licked the thin lips beneath it in anticipation of the feast that awaited him.

"We'll have to make the acquaintance of Mr. Duncan Delbridge, Limpy. Get all the dope you can on him. Where he comes from, where he's played—everything!"

Pop Harder left the Duncan-Senmore-Miehl line in for twelve minutes. Then as the referee caught a Maroon high-sticking and thumbed him to the penalty box for a two-minute penance, Pop slapped his second line on the ice, and a fourth for-

ward. Flash Rance was the extra front-liner Pop picked to throw the heat on for the tying marker.

"Play any damn way you want," he growled to Rance, "only don't let me catch you loafing on defense, or you'll be outa there faster than you can skate!"

The Maroons fell back on defense, fought furiously to hold their slender margin until they could have six men on the ice again. The Cardinals battled just as hotly to push a goal past the netman while the Maroons were short-handed.

Wave after wave of red-jersied skaters rolled across the blue line and in on the goal. The Maroon netman made save after save. The two minutes were almost up and the Maroon in the penalty box was straining at the gate, waiting for the time-keeper's nod.

Pop Harder snapped, "Damn it, why don't they give it to Rance on the old one-two!"

As though his players heard him, the center hooked the puck from a Maroon skating around back of the net to kill time, swept back of the cords the other way, and yelled, "Take it, Flash!"

He poked the puck to Rance, pivoted and drove for the goal. Rance stick-handled the disc past a lunging defenseman, whipped it to the center near the corner of the goal, and streaked straight at the net.

Flash Rance had earned his nickname. He was a red blur speeding in on the puck the center whisked back to him. He banged it going full speed and rode it right into the goal mouth. When Rance and the goalie were untangled, the little rubber disc nestled in the cords back of the steel goal support, safely over the red line between the goal cage posts.

Tie score!

TIME had to be called while attendants cleared the ice of programs, hats, and what-have-you. Detroit fans really go to town when they get excited. Remember Ducky-wucky Medwick and a Detroit baseball crowd?

With six minutes of the period remain-

ing, Pop Harder looked anxiously at his first line. He'd left them on the ice a long time, and two minutes' rest wasn't much.

"Can you guys go back in?" he asked, and looked at Duncan. "I want this one bad."

"Sure!" Senmore was climbing over the barrier already, and Duncan and Miehl were close behind. "We can take it!"

Pop left Rance in at a defense position, gambling that Cerlik could hold off the Maroons, if Rance's powerhouse drive went wrong.

And did the Cardinals turn on the pressure! The Duncan-Senmore-Miehl line functioned as if they'd been together for years, and Flash Rance, evidently aroused by Duncan's threat to his place as the fair-haired boy with the fans, turned in one of the greatest performances of his career.

They drove in on the Maroon net and set up a shot for Senmore from a tough angle, but the goalie made a sensational save by doing a split a chorus girl would have envied. They harassed the Maroon attack, back-checking, poke-checking, hurrying them, until Miehl grabbed the puck from an opponent right at the center face-off square.

This time it was Duncan who had the shot. He narrowly missed matching the "hat trick" he'd pulled in his first game, but it was hurried a little by a defenseman, and the goalie made a miraculous save.

A goalie is usually safe in passing out to a wing after a save, but this time the Cardinals were pressing for everything and Miehl pounced on the goalie's too-careless flick of the puck. He wheeled the disc to Rance, thirty feet out in front of the goal.

Rance let drive. It wasn't a particularly difficult save—easy, compared to the two the goalie had just made—but the same thing happened that occurred in the final Stanley Cup game last March in Chicago. Inexplicably the puck slid through the goalie's legs and slithered into the nets.

That was the ballgame. Maroons piled

a heavy four-man attack on Alfie Buck in the remaining minutes, but Cerlik and Moss—back at defense again—staved them off. The gong clanged with the scoreboard reading Detroit 5—Montreal 4.

Pop Harder waited with beaming face as Duncan skated along the boards toward the ramp. Then Pop swore luridly, for a well-dressed man in a box had stopped Duncan.

"Damn Blake Fox to hell!" Pop swore. "If he bothers Duncan, I'll—"

After some minutes of waiting, Pop turned away. Evidently Fox was selling himself to the rookie, Pop's face darkened and he came to a decision. He'd see Duncan that night before the rookie left the club house.

DUNCAN didn't know Blake Fox by sight and he certainly would never have been drawn to the man who stopped him as he skated past the boxes, but it was part of his plan to appear green and easily flattered, and he responded at once when Fox called to him.

"Great going in there, Delbridge! I'd like to shake your hand, mister. You're going places!" Fox said.

Duncan swerved in to the boards, cut the blades of his skates into the ice, and stopped with a flourish.

"Thanks," he grinned. "I guess I was pretty lucky."

"Luck nothing!" Fox said. Then, taking a card from a leather case and handing it to Duncan, "Let me introduce myself, Delbridge. I hope you won't set me down as just another autograph hound. I've followed the fortunes of the Cardinals for two years and—if you'll pardon me—you look like the answer to our prayers!"

Duncan glanced at the engraved name: Blake Fox! He masked his emotion, stuck out his hand. "Glad to meet you, Mr. Fox. I've heard of you. The handle is Duncan—to my friends."

Blake Fox smiled ingratiatingly. "I hope you'll consider me in that category, Duncan." His opaque black eyes flicked over Duncan briefly. Blake Fox decided that this green lad from the sticks was

ripe—no use delaying. He said smoothly, "You haven't been in Detroit long, Duncan, and you can't be very much entangled socially. If you're free, I'd like it very much if you'd be my guest the rest of the evening."

He forestalled any refusal Duncan might have made by hurrying on.

"You'd really be doing me a favor. I own the *Casa de Rhoda* a few miles out Woodward Avenue, and it would be a boost for the club to have you as a guest."

Duncan thought grimly, "He sure works fast!" Aloud he said, "*Casa de Rhoda*? Rhoda—isn't that the name of the little blonde who sang between periods?"

"Right!" And Blake Fox smiled to himself. Duncan was as good as hooked already! "Rhoda Yantiss. She's my feature attraction at the club. In fact, I named the place after her."

He glanced at his watch, said, "If you hurry into your clothes, we've just about time to make the eleven-o'clock floor show. I know Miss Yantiss would like to meet you."

Duncan tried to look undecided. He didn't want to appear too anxious, but he had no intention of turning down Fox's invitation. So Rhoda Yantiss worked for Blake Fox! And these were the two names he'd found in Bob's papers when his brother— He said doubtfully:

"Why, thanks, Mr. Fox. I'd surely like to meet Miss Yantiss and it's awfully kind of you to ask me, but—well, I'm new to big-city ways and to the Cardinals. Pop Harder might not like it. I'd better feel him out first."

Blake Fox frowned, then shrugged.

"Of course it's your business, Duncan," he said. "But if I were you, I'd get off on the right foot with Harder. You're going to be a big man—well, I wouldn't start out by running to him with everything. The Cardinals pay you for playing hockey. What you do outside is no concern of theirs. Surely you don't think I'd invite you into anything that would harm you?"

"No—not at all." Duncan appeared to consider. "Maybe you're right, Mr. Fox.

I'll meet you outside the club house in fifteen minutes."

"Good—and I'm sure you'll never regret it. I'll have my car there waiting for you."

DUNCAN'S mind was in a whirl as he entered the Cardinal dressing room. He vaguely acknowledged the congratulations of his mates. Things were happening a little too fast. He'd figured that it might take weeks of maneuvering before he lined up Blake Fox and the girl, and here he was getting an inning with both of them the first night he'd played with the Cardinals!

Pop Harder stopped before Duncan as the rookie peeled off his skates and pads.

"You looked damned sweet out there, Duncan," the manager said gruffly. "Drop in my office a minute after your shower, will you?"

Duncan pondered Pop's request while the stinging spray washed away the sweat and fatigue. What did Pop want with him?

"Does Pop make a practice of calling you in after every game?" he asked Cerlik, who was in the next shower. Dud Cerlik grinned, turned on the cold water.

"No," he gasped. "You're either honored, or else you're in for a hell-session. Cheer up, kid, the old man can't give you much hell, the way you went tonight! Maybe he's gonna hand you a new contract, with more dough!"

But Duncan knew it wasn't going to be pleasant the moment he came into the cubbyhole that Pop called his office. The grizzled manager motioned Duncan to a chair. He pulled out a smoke-blackened briar and packed it, while he seemed to be debating where to begin. Finally, when he had the boiler going, he said:

"Boy, what I'm gonna say to you is stuff I've never told anyone before. Maybe I shouldn't stick my neck out to you, and I wanta say right now that preaching ain't in my line, but—"

Pop puffed out a great cloud of rank-smelling tobacco smoke and scowled.

"I saw you gabbin' with that damn

Blake Fox out there, Delbridge, and the sum and substance of what I've got to say is this—don't get tangled up with that rat—he's poison!"

Duncan shot a puzzled look at his boss. He hadn't expected this. He opened his mouth, but Pop plunged on.

"I don't know much about you, but I'm takin' it for granted that you've had no chance to size up the kind of parasite Blake Fox is. I'm gonna tell you a story of what happened to the most promising young player I'd seen in twenty years—until you came along. I figure you've got enough sense to understand this and play wise."

A GAIN Pop fogged the battered briar for a minute or two. Then he said, "Two years ago, this boy I'm speaking of—hell, might as well name names, Bob MacCrea is who I mean—came to the Cardinals, straight from college. He was old Dunc MacCrea's kid and he had almost as much hockey savvy as Dunc ever had. He made good from the start.

"I was only a coach then, but I tried to steer the kid right." Pop sighed. "He went up too fast. In no time at all he was a headliner—just as you're gonna be. There's plenty of slimy leeches waiting for the chance to fasten themselves on any guy who gets in the limelight. They got MacCrea. He was a good-natured kid—his only fault was that he couldn't say no.

"They got him in their clutches, sucked him dry of everything he had, spent all his dough and—" Pop shrugged. "Well, I never believed it, but the story got around that Bob MacCrea was gambling on hockey games—betting against his own team!

"Old Dunc MacCrea and I played together on the Detroit Cougars years ago and I wired for him when things got so they smelled."

Pop's eyes were cloudy. "That's all, boy. Bob MacCrea faded—and took one of the grandest names in hockey down with him. And the guy who ruined Bob MacCrea was Blake Fox!"

Quiet held the little office for seconds. Duncan ran his tongue over dry lips. Old Pop had looked at him searchingly several times. Duncan wondered if Pop knew—or suspected—his real identity. He had to know.

"What became of MacCrea and—his father?" he asked in a low voice. He didn't meet Pop's eyes.

Pop's shoulders drooped. He said lifelessly, "Bob's dead. He was young, and when the rumors started, he began drinking. Killed himself and Dunc both in a car crack-up when he was drunk, somewhere up in Canada. We—we sent flowers, but the owners wouldn't let me go up there, under the circumstances."

Duncan swallowed, sighed inwardly. He was very close to telling Pop Harder who he was. He wanted to tell him that Bob MacCrea's dying words had been, "We were driving too fast, hurrying back to face it out, when the car skidded." But he didn't. He'd best go through with what he'd planned.

He said, "That's an interesting story, Pop, but I don't get the point. If MacCrea couldn't take prosperity, why should it be Blake Fox's fault?" He drew in his breath and added, "Fox asked me out to his night club and I'm going. I think you've got him wrong. He seemed like a decent sort, friendly and quite harmless."

CASA DE RHODA was a pretentious place, cleverly designed to catch the night-spot trade, with its architectural reproduction of a famous Spanish castle. Though it was comparatively new, its air-conditioned, glittering interior was well filled when Duncan and his host got there. At once they were given a ringside table, and Blake Fox began to put on a fine show for his guest.

He called notables in the crowd to their table.

"Meet Duncan Delbridge," he'd say to these big-shots. "Duncan is the lad who beat the Maroons single-handed tonight. He'll make this man's town forget Herbie Lewis and Larry Aurie!"

Duncan knew all this heavy flattery was part of Blake Fox's scheme, but he was human enough to like it. He had to pull rein on his exhilaration, remind himself that he was out to trap Fox, not fall for the man's line.

Then the lights were dimmed and the master of ceremonies introduced the feature attraction. Before he was through, the patrons drowned him out with applause. It was clear that Rhoda Yantiss was the magnet that drew most of them to the club.

The girl sang two songs and an *encore*, then came over to Blake Fox's table, as he gave her the high sign.

"Rhoda, I want you to meet another headliner, Mr. Duncan Delbridge. You and Duncan ought to get along well, angel. You're number one Cardinal rooter, and he's bound to be number one Cardinal star."

Once more Duncan felt baffled, as the girl gave him a firm handclasp, her eyes warm and friendly.

"I'm sure we'll get along," she said, with a smile. "I had to leave the game before it ended, Mr. Delbridge, but I saw the goals you made. You were splendid."

Blake Fox, always the diplomat, excused himself, and Duncan was left alone with the girl. Doubt and baffled anger smoldered in his eyes, as he grimly turned one question over and over in his mind.

Could this girl, so gentle-seeming and charming, have played a major rôle in his brother's terrible downfall?

They talked—chiefly about themselves—and Rhoda Yantiss seemed frank, friendly, quite without affectations.

"They bill me as Detroit's Own," she laughed, "but I'm really from Minnesota. I've been in Detroit only two years. I lived on a farm. I won a radio contest in our county and came to Detroit as a reward. Then I had the good luck to meet Blake Fox and—" She shrugged and changed the subject. "What town do you come from, Mr. Delbridge?"

Duncan watched her narrowly, as he said deliberately, "From the same town Bob MacCrea came from."

A frown crossed the girl's face. "You sound as though I should know," she said doubtfully, "but that doesn't mean anything to me."

Duncan parried any further questions. He was puzzled. It didn't seem possible that she could have known Bob and not know where he came from. But it didn't seem possible that she could pretend such innocence, either.

They talked, mostly about the small, inconsequential things that so often draw people together. They discovered that they had other interests in common besides hockey.

Blake Fox didn't return to the table,

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and at last the girl rose, saying rather nervously, "I'm afraid I'll have to leave you. I have a broadcast downtown at one o'clock, Duncan. Blake was going to drive me, but I don't see him, and—"

"Let me drive you down and back," Duncan said. "We can get a cab and—"

"What's this about a cab?" Blake Fox broke in, coming up. It was as though he'd been waiting for this moment. "You can't hire a cab here, Duncan—not while I have a car." He turned to the girl. "I'm terribly sorry, Rhoda, but I'm tied up here for an hour or so. Business deal."

He hesitated, and then put a hand on Duncan's shoulder. "Look," he said. "Why can't you take my car and drive Rhoda to her broadcast, Duncan? That is, if—"

"You must be a mind-reader," Duncan said. "Thanks, Blake. Come on, Rhoda."

Rhoda got a wrap and they went out. Blake Fox's eyes were bright with satisfaction as he watched them leave together.

"So it's Duncan and Rhoda already, eh?" he thought, "Well, Rhoda is always sure bait—especially when she doesn't know she's being used to lure a sucker on!"

DUNCAN wasn't the type to keep a scrapbook, but had he cared to do so, he could have filled a sizeable volume with sport-page clippings in the weeks that followed. His name was featured by sports-writers after that win from the Maroons, and as the Cardinals climbed steadily toward the top in their division, Duncan's name made the headlines.

Some writer dubbed him "Duncan the Dunker" after he scored the winning goal in overtime against the Bruins.

"Duncan Dunks Blackhawks!"

That was the line following the third win in the Cardinal lucky streak—a win that was especially sweet to Pop Harder, because his boys took Bill Stewart's Stanley Cup champs on their home ice in the Chicago Stadium.

"That's the old battle, gang!" Pop grinned, in the dressing room after the game. "You had Stewart so dizzy tonight watching pucks rattling at Karakas that

he didn't know whether he was bossing a hockey team or calling balls and strikes at the Polo Grounds!"

The Cardinals went from Chicago to Toronto, where they battled the Maple Leafs to a tie. The Frenchmen were in top form that night, and they're always tough to beat in their own backyard. They had the Cardinals down 3-2, with less than eight minutes to go. Then their center drew a two-minute session in the penalty box for too-enthusiastically checking Cerlik into the boards.

Pop immediately threw a power attack at the Maple Leafs. He played a hunch, sent his third line of forwards out, and barked at Duncan:

"Take Cerlik's defense post, and turn on the heat! Your speed oughta be valuable here!"

Duncan's speed *was* valuable, but in a way that Pop didn't anticipate. The Leafs were short-handed, but they stymied the Cardinals by going slam-bang after a score themselves, instead of dropping back to defense.

They caught the Cardinal frontliners flat-footed and Duncan—not used to defense play, and down ice to aid in the expected drive on the Maple Leaf nets—was badly out of position. Moss stalled a three-man attack, tried to hold them off until his mates could get back, but there was an inviting gap at left defense.

The Leaf center and one wing finally forced Moss to commit himself, and when he charged the puck, the center slid it across ice to the other wing—all alone on the left boards. It looked as if he had a clear drive at Bude—no one was in front of him.

But Duncan, burning the ice toward the danger spot, materialized from nowhere, poke-checked the puck from the amazed wing, hooked it in the heel of his club and went away from there.

"Stop heem! Stop heem!" the fans yelled. "Nail the beeg guy!"

Excited shouts from the crowd pleaded with their favorites to stop Duncan. He narrowly missed being sandwiched by two Maple Leaf men at the blue line, saved



*The man said, "You look like the
answer to our prayers!" It was
Blake Fox!*

himself only by deft stick work and a startling burst of speed. He cut diagonally across to the right boards to outskate the center, dribbling the puck well out in front,

skating with short and choppy strokes.

A defenseman nailed him at the second blue line. Duncan crashed to the ice, slid, and was up again so fast that it seemed he hadn't left his feet. He recaptured the loose puck before the Maple Leaf saw it, streaked toward the goal, hugging the boards.

"Get heem! Get heem! *Le bon dieu*, get heem!" some leather-lunged Frenchman in the stands yelled above the clamor of the crowd.

Duncan high-balled along the sideboards until he was almost even with the cage.

The defenseman who had spilled him at the blue line raced frantically to intercept the drive he knew was coming, as Duncan suddenly swerved and shot horizontally across the rink. He was eight or ten feet from the net, going like a stream-lined diesel-driven locomotive.

The goalie crouched at the corner, arms spread wide. A shot from a player tearing

transversely in front of the net—if he can shoot while traveling at top speed—is the toughest try a goalie has to save. The best padman in the business can only cover so much of the six-foot-long, four-foot-high opening in the nets.

Duncan didn't shoot at the near corner, and as the net-minder shifted across the goal mouth, it looked as though Duncan's opportunity was lost. Then suddenly a black streak blurred through the air, four inches clear of the ice, and lodged in the corner of the net the goalie had just deserted.

The Maple Leaf padman shrugged resignedly as he hooked the puck from the goal. No man can stop what he can't see!

IT WAS after the Cardinals' return to Detroit, following that successful road trip, that Duncan found Blake Fox waiting at his rooms. The night-club owner grinned triumphantly at him.

"I said from the start you'd own this town in a month," he said. He held out a paper to Duncan. "Cast the peepers over that, Duncan, my lad!"

Duncan scanned the document hurriedly. He saw that it was a standard contract form. The interesting thing was that his name was typed in and the sum of five hundred dollars. At the bottom was the name of a nationally known breakfast cereal. It was his first endorsement contract.

"That's only the beginning of the easy dough," Blake Fox said. He hesitated, and watched Duncan narrowly as he added, "I hope you won't be sore, but—well, maybe I overstepped myself a little. The local advertising man for that outfit was out to the club the other night. I guess I put it on a little heavy, acted as if I was your publicity manager and—well, there's the contract. You can take it or leave it."

Duncan grinned outwardly, but inside he was elated in a different way. This was what he'd been hoping for. Blake Fox was going to play him for a sucker just as he had done with Bob MacCrea. He said:

"Gosh, Blake, five hundred iron men

won't make me sore!" He signed the contract, handed it to Fox. Then he said thoughtfully, "Say, maybe I ought to have a kind of manager, at that. How do you go about getting an agent? And how much of a cut is fair for them?"

Blake Fox stifled a satisfied sigh. He'd thought he had Duncan figured right, but you never could tell.

"Why, look, Duncan," he said, "what's the use of cutting in an agent? I'm in as good a spot to do you some good as any agent. I'll act as your representative for commercial stuff, if you say the word. Glad to do it!"

"Gee, Blake, that's swell!" Duncan appeared to be a little embarrassed. "What about your—er—cut? We ought to have an understanding."

"Forget it, kid, I don't need your dough!" Blake laughed. "You can pay me by dropping in at the club now and then."

Blake Fox wore a satisfied smirk when he left Duncan. He muttered, "Maybe you're cagier than Bob MacCrea, big fellow, but you're a sucker just the same. And Limpy will find out what you're covering up with all this secrecy back in St. Louis. Maybe I can use that, too!"

DUNCAN didn't always score the winning goal and the Cardinals didn't win every game after he replaced Flash Rance in the first line. But Duncan did blink the red light three times in the next five games, and the club won two of them and tied another. And that is winning hockey against the New York Americans, Rangers, Canadians, Maroons and Blackhawks.

Pop Harder's club climbed steadily. They were only two games from the top in the International Division, and at that stage of the season, even Jack Doyle wouldn't have quoted odds of more than 1 to 50 that they wouldn't earn a play-off berth in the Stanley Cup series.

Duncan was riding high. Blake Fox had secured other endorsement contracts, he had a spot twice a week on a local radio station, and he was rapidly getting into

Fox's confidence. Then things happened with a bang. Looking back afterward, Duncan put his finger on the game against the Toronto Acorns, on Olympia ice, as the spot where events began to pile up on him.

That was the game where Miehl was injured and the Cardinal winning streak ended.

The Acorns led both sections of the league in the won-and-lost column, and they came on the ice a swaggering, swash-buckling band. Their every gesture in the warming up period before the game radiated cocky disdain for the Cardinals.

"Sure they've been on a hot streak," Bull Brideaux, star defenseman of the Acorns, told a sports writer. "But they haven't bumped into a real outfit yet. Wait till this 'Dunker Duncan' guy skates into a few of *our* checks! *We'll* cool 'im!

And from the opening face-off it was clear that the Acorns were out to make good Brideaux's boast. Sixteen thousand fans jammed the Olympia, and Grand River traffic had to be routed around the crowds outside. The hot-ice bugs must have had a hunch that this was going to be a bruising, knock-down and drag-out affair. It was.

The aggressive Acorn backliners refused to be bamboozled by the flashy attack of the Duncan-Senmore-Miehl combination. Senmore grabbed the puck at the face-off, wheeled it to Miehl, and Duncan raced across the blue line to be abreast of Miehl. Then it happened.

Miehl shot down the boards, tried to cut inside of Brideaux, and the burly Acorn defenseman rammed into him with a bone-jarring check. They crashed to the ice together and the whistle shrilled. Miehl had the puck under him, but a grimace of pain marked his face. His right shoulder sagged.

"What is it, Miehl? You hurt?" Senmore asked.

Miehl looked up at him, pointed to his shoulder. A spasm jerked his face when he tried to move his arm.

"Something's busted there," he gritted. "My collarbone, I think."

Duncan was arguing with the referee.

"Are you going to let Brideaux get away with that cross-check?"

The referee turned and skated away. Duncan followed, raging at his heels. Finally the official said:

"Pipe down or I'll hand you ten minutes in the box for abusive language to an official! He didn't cross-check Miehl or I'd have called it. I won't give a man a penalty because you guys can't take it! This is no cream-puff game!"

Duncan glared. His lips tightened into a straight slash.

"Okay," he said grimly. "You're asking for it! Those guys have been getting away with murder because you whistle-blowers give them the breaks. Okay! Be as blind as you like, but remember to be blind for *both* sides!"

NATIONAL HOCKEY LEAGUE officials are assigned by league officials, and they try to obtain competent men, but capable men don't grow on trees. Had a man the caliber of Ion or Bill Stewart—the fiery little manager of the Blackhawks was tops when *he* blew a whistle—been running that game, it would never have got away from him. But the official was the type that, while honest enough, lets rough play go rather than slow up the game with penalties.

Pop Harder sent Flash Rance to replace the injured Miehl. Rance muttered to Senmore and Duncan, "Pop says to give these bruisers as good as they send. Brideaux deliberately cross-checked Miehl—it was plain enough from the sidelines!"

"Don't worry," grunted Senmore. "We'll even the score!"

Duncan gripped his club in clenched hands. In that moment there was no vestige of hate for hockey in him. He strained at the leash for one good crack at Brideaux.

The face-off was just even with the red penalty line in the Acorn end of the rink. Senmore almost blasted the Acorn center off the ice with the viciousness of his thrust, hooked the puck in the heel of his club, and barged straight for Bull Brideaux.

Wham! Bang! Crash!

Senmore and the defenseman slammed to

the ice and the puck slithered away. No whistle! Duncan swooped in and snared the disc. He tore straight down the middle, literally bowled an Acorn wing from his path, and put all the pent-up fury at the referee into a savage, roundhouse swing.

The puck rose off the ice like a topped golf ball from a number one iron. The whine it made as it sizzled through the air was clearly audible. It rifled shoulder-high at the goalie and he instinctively ducked and threw up a gloved hand. But he wasn't quick enough. The hard rubber disc slammed into his forearm and dropped into the net as he clutched the numbed limb.

The red light back of the cage glowed—and then the riot started.

"You dirty rat!" yelled a husky Acorn, and started for Duncan, pulling off his gloves. "That was a deliberate high-shot! You tried to kill 'im!"

Duncan didn't back away. As he coolly pulled off his own gloves, something in his eyes made the belligerent Acorn stop before he swung on the black-haired Cardinal.

"There was no intention on my part to injure anyone," Duncan said hotly. "I'm sorry if your man's injured, but your gang of thugs deserve a little of your own medicine. This isn't a *cream-puff* game I've been informed!"

Duncan *was* sorry. He had no desire to injure any player. The fury he'd felt at the unjust sneer of the referee over a legitimate protest had spent itself. But these Acorns were a bruising, battling lot, known all around the circuit as a gang of gas-housers. It went against Duncan's grain to take a browbeating lying down.

The officials finally got things quieted. Two men, one from each team, were given two-minute penalties, and the game went on.

Slam, batter, ram, thud! The game was a bitter, bruising battling from then on. Pop Harder drew his first line off the ice after ten minutes.

"Watch out for Brideaux," he warned Duncan. "A guy just told me that he bragged he'd cool you!"

Duncan grinned tightly. "Let him come!" he said. "I'm ready!"

But Pop didn't relish chancing further loss, especially of his "spark-plug." He kept his patched-up first line off all through the second period, partly because he feared the smoothness of their play would be upset by loss of Miehl; partly because he knew Brideaux was a dirty player and the boys were getting away with everything but assault and battery this night.

That one-goal lead held through the second stanza and twelve minutes of the third. Then the Acorns beat Alfie Bude for the tying marker with a five-man power offensive, while Cerlik was doing time in the penalty box for tripping.

"Get in there!" Pop barked to his first line. "Get that goal back! I don't give a damn how, or who gets it, but *get it back!*"

Duncan didn't know it, but he was stepping into his Waterloo as he climbed over the boards.

FLASH RANCE took the face-off pass from Senmore and dashed down the right lane. His speed fooled one defenseman and Rance was across the blue line in the attacking zone before he was penned to the boards. He skimmed the disc to Senmore in the center and drove for the net.

Senmore flicked the rubber to Duncan and the black-haired Cardinal stick-handled it around his check. He caught a glimpse of Rance at the goal mouth, flexed his wrists to pass to the other wing when—*zowie!*—a tornado struck Duncan.

Bull Brideaux hit him with every ounce of his big frame back of the charge. He slammed Duncan into the boards. The butt of his club came up and rammed Duncan in the belly. Nausea sickened the Scot, and he bent forward in pain. He struggled to lift himself erect, battled to fight his way out of that maelstrom of hips, fists, and elbows.

Again the burly defenseman slammed his club butt-first into Duncan's face. At the same time, he gave him the hip. The club grazed the point of Duncan's jaw,

dazed him, and crashed into his mouth. He hit the ice like a wet sack. A jeering voice cut through the red haze of pain:

"Maybe *that'll* cool you for a while, busher! You're right—this ain't any cream-puff game!"

Duncan staggered to his feet, instinctively took after Brideaux. Flash Rance darted past him.

"Damn you, Duncan!" he snarled. "I *knew* you were a grandstander. You couldn't bear to have me make the goal, could you? Well, I'll get even for that!"

Duncan stared at him in bewilderment. He wondered if he'd heard Rance right, or if that shellacking Brideaux had given him had addled his brains. No, Rance meant it. He must be crazy!

The game went on.

Bull Brideaux wasn't especially fast nor clever, but he possessed the momentum of a ten-ton truck and he brushed aside two Cardinal attempts to check him. He was across the Cardinal blue line before Rance caught him. Rance buzzed around Brideaux like a fly around a horse, harassing him, darting out his club in quick poke-jabs. But Bull Brideaux kept the puck, barged inexorably in on little Alfie Bude crouched at the mouth of the goal.

Then Duncan caught the big fellow twelve feet from the crease. He swarmed into Brideaux just as the big Acorn tensed to shoot. The puck spun crazily in front of the goal, as Duncan, Rance and Brideaux crashed to the ice in a snarling, scrambling jumble of bodies, sticks, and steel blades.

Duncan reached out his stick to poke the puck out of danger and—he could take oath on it—Flash Rance slammed Duncan's club hard, slammed it into the puck, and the rubber disc slithered past Bude's skate and lodged in the nets.

Goal for the Acorns!

"That's great! That's swell!" Flash Rance yelled in Duncan's ear. "You not only won't give me a chance to score, but you gotta bat one in for the Acorns, trying to grandstand me outa any credit!"

Bull Brideaux shot a sharp look at Rance. Then he grinned. Nothing like

having the other fellows battle among themselves!

"Thanks for the assist, Duncan," he said derisively. "Dunker Duncan, eh? Looks like you dunked your last chance to take *this* one, busher!"

Bull Brideaux's prophecy proved right. Duncan and Senmore battled hard for a tying counter in the last four minutes, but Flash Rance refused to pass to Duncan, and a two-man attack isn't very potent. As the gong clanged to end the game, the scoreboard showed a 2-1 margin for the Acorns.

THAT was only the beginning of Duncan's grief. Pop Harder gave him hell in the club house after the game. Flash Rance had been grouching about the goal that won for the Acorns.

"Maybe Rance is right at that, Duncan," Pop said, sore over losing that battle. "Maybe if you didn't hog the puck, we might do a little better!"

Duncan stared at his boss. What was this? Pop Harder had told him in so many words that he was playing great hockey, team hockey. He opened his mouth to protest, then snapped it shut. Pop was wrought up now, and any excuse Duncan might make would only make him wilder. He'd show Pop the next game.

But he didn't. The Rangers handed the Cardinals a 4-1 lambasting the next Thursday in the Garden, and then the always tough Bruins hung a three-to-nothing horseshollar on them in Boston on Saturday.

Things went from bad to worse. Back on Olympia ice, Mush March and Doc Romnes had a field day for the Black-hawks, scoring two goals apiece and each getting assists by Johnny Gottselig and Paul Thompson. Little Mike Karakas, in the cords for Bill Stewart's champions, smothered everything the Cardinals threw at him, and for the second time in a week the Cardinals were blanked, 6-0.

"What the hell's the matter with you guys?" Pop Harder raged between periods. "You first liners are like wooden men! What the devil is wrong?"

Duncan said nothing. You couldn't com-

plain to the boss that one of your own men was deliberately messing up the attack. But he knew that the off-timing passes of Flash Rance and the clumsy handling of the puck by Rance on passes coming from Duncan was *not* accidental.

IN THE next five games, the Cardinals made a grand total of four goals. Duncan did not get even one of them. Newspaper experts began commenting on his reversal of form. One piece was typical of them all, after the Cardinals got looped in their seventh consecutive loss.

CARDINALS MAINTAIN TAILSPIN MAROONS DRUB LOCALS 5-1

Pop Harder's fading Cardinal pucksters dropped another notch nearer the cellar last night, when the Montreal Maroons skated them dizzy at Olympia. They are but one game out of the bottom spot now, and at the rate they are traveling, they are liable to drop right through the bottom before the season closes.

A threat to the league leaders a few weeks ago, the Cardinals are now faced with a fight to get into the cup play-offs. The collapse is inexplicable to Cardinal fans, but your correspondent believes the answer is Duncan Delbridge.

Labeled as a potential all-time great, this black-haired Scot has failed to maintain the pace he set in earlier games. We hate to say it, but in our judgment, Dunker Duncan is through—and with his finish go the Cardinal hopes. . . .

There were no more endorsement contracts for Duncan, and the radio interviews were cancelled.

Blake Fox scowled when he told Duncan he was off the air. Fox was worried. He hadn't yet cashed in on Duncan. Everything was set, but if Duncan didn't snap out of the slump—

"Hell, yes!" he said bitterly, when Duncan asked if both radio spots were

cancelled. "Those firms don't want *you* sponsoring their products now. Fans snap off their radios when you come on the air. What the hell's the matter with you?"

Duncan shrugged. He was so low that he didn't even care much that whatever chance he had to get Blake Fox was slipping.

Fox stared at him keenly. He hadn't heard from Limpy yet, though he'd sent his henchman out three weeks ago to dig up Duncan's past. He said solicitously:

"Is something outside the rink bothering you, kid? Something under cover? If that's it, spill it. *I'll* go to bat for you!"

Duncan jerked his eyes to Fox. He said quietly, "What do you mean?"

"Oh, nothing, nothing. You're a secretive cuss. You've never peeped about your set-up before you came to Detroit. I just thought—"

"You confine your thinking to the business end," Duncan said coldly, "my private life is my own affair!"

He slammed from the room.

"So there *are* some skeletons in your closets," mused Blake Fox. "Well, Limpy will uncover them, and we'll go to town." He scowled, and added, "That is, we will if you ever snap out of this damn slump!"

Of all the fair-weather back-slappers he had had when he was riding high, Rhoda Yantiss was the only one who stuck by Duncan now. She was deeply concerned at his apparent failure, but she kept a stiff upper lip when she was with him, taking long jaunts about the city, poking into odd corners, hunting up interesting spots, as they liked to do.

Duncan admitted to himself that he was in love with her. But every time he was about to go overboard, the ugly fact that she'd led his brother on to destruction stopped him cold. Rhoda sensed the barrier and brought the subject into the open that day when Duncan met her after the talk with Blake Fox. Duncan was staring moodily at a plate of minestrone, not eating, and she said:

"What is it, Duncan? You're worried, I know, and under a strain, but don't let

it get you down. You're bound to get going any night now."

He looked at her morosely. Then, before he knew it, he was pouring out the reason why the Cardinal first line was impotent.

"—and it's affected the whole team," he finished bitterly. "I'm a flop, all right. I came down here to—" Quickly he checked himself.

Rhoda looked at him, her eyes deeply troubled.

"Duncan," she said, "why don't you go on? It's always this way! We get to a certain point, and then you shut up like a clam!" She looked away, nervously toyed with a spoon. Then she said impulsively, "Why don't you trust me, Duncan? Can't you see—"

He looked at her searchingly, and the color rose high in her cheeks.

"Forget it," she said, and tried to make her voice light and casual. "If I were you, I'd go to Flash Rance and have it out with him. If anyone was doing me dirt, that is what I'd do—go and have it out face to face."

Duncan stared at her, half-tempted to yield to the urge to pull her close and tell her that he loved her. But an ugly doubt held him back.

"Maybe you're right," he said. "Yes, that's the thing to do. If someone has done you—or yours—a slimy trick, it's only right that you should face them with it!"

The vehemence of his voice startled her. It was as though he meant that she had wronged him in some frightful way. But that was absurd! What had she ever done that could possibly—?

DUNCAN took her advice to heart, so far as Flash Rance was concerned. He went to Rance's rooms that night, before he left for Olympia. Rance raised his eyebrows in surprise when he let him in. Duncan went to the point at once.

"Rance," he said grimly, "I'm here for a showdown. I don't know what your game is, but you know damn well that you haven't been playing straight with me on the ice."

Flash Rance's eyes wavered, under Duncan's steady gaze.

"So what?" he shrugged. "You're screwy, but even if it was true, so what?"

"So this!" Duncan grabbed Rance by the shirt-front, jerked the smaller man to him, his other hand balled into a fist. "You're going to cut it out! You're smaller than I, Rance, and I don't want to hit you, but— You're capable of playing smooth hockey. You're faster than Miehl, and a better stick-handler. You've got some cock-eyed idea that I resent someone else making the goals. That's foolish! I don't give one damn whether you flash the light or someone else! The goals are all that count!"

He shook Rance again.

"And it isn't love for hockey, either. I've got a job to do and your making me seem a dud on the ice is interfering with it. You're going to play ball!"

He flung Rance from him, turned to the door. He said calmly, but with a deadly seriousness, "I hope I make myself clear. You'd better come clean tonight or I'll be back. And next time you can bet it won't be talk!"

After the door had closed on Duncan, Flash Rance cursed hoarsely.

"That's what *you* think, you big lug!" he muttered. "I hate your guts, and you'll pay plenty for those threats!"

WHATEVER Flash Rance had in mind to do to Duncan, he had no chance to put into operation. Miehl was back in uniform that night—with a special brace-protection for the collarbone—and Pop Harder put him back on the starting front line.

Almost immediately the old fire returned to the Cardinal attack. Senmore bulged the cords for a counter in the first period, after Miehl and Duncan had outsmarted the defense and set up a cold-meat shot for him.

"By hell, I've been a sap!" Pop Harder mumbled, on the bench. "It's been that damn Rance all the time. They look like the old line, with Miehl in there!"

Duncan's line only played four min-

utes of the second canto, but in that time Duncan and Senmore maneuvered the defense out of position, and Miehl blasted a light-blinker into the cords on his specialty—a blistering angle-shot from the blazes, fifteen feet out from the nets.

"Come on, Duncan," Miehl said in the third period, as the front-liners climbed over the rail for their stint. "It's your turn. We gotta make it unanimous!"

And they did. Senmore lost the disc to the opposing center at the face-off, but Dud Cerlik slammed a wing loose from the puck with a ramming check, and swept the puck back to Senmore.

The tall center sliced it to the boards, and Miehl picked up the slanting rebound. He darted down the boards, cut sharply around a check, and the puck slithered off his stick to Duncan. Duncan raced straight in from the front.

"Dunk 'im, Duncan!" some loyal fan in the stands screeched.

And Duncan "dunked 'im." He caught the goalie leaning the wrong way, and that's all it takes in big-league hockey. Duncan's curved club shifted lightning fast and the puck sizzled over the ice. It clanged against the steel goal support and ricocheted into the right lobe of the nets.

The faithful fans—not so many tonight—turned loose a long yell. Duncan was back, the famine was over!

A new spirit pervaded the Cardinals as they packed for their last road trip after that 4-1 win from the Americans.

"We're back on the track," Pop Harder told newspapermen. "They can't keep us out of the Cup play-offs. Look out, Black-hawks, we're after that battered old mug!"

They won three and tied one on the road. The stand-off game was with the Rangers in the Garden. As always, Lester Patrick had his boys on the upswing as play-off time approached. But the Cardinals returned home jubilant. They needed only one more victory to insure themselves a spot in hockey's World Series. They had to play the Acorns at Toronto and close the season at Olympia against the same outfit. But the Acorns were the team the boys wanted.

Pop Harder sketched a new offensive set-up to Duncan and Senmore. "We'll smooth it up with a few secret workouts on our own ice and spring it on them at at Toronto. I figure it's made to order for their type of play."

"It'll have them flopping like fish," Senmore agreed. "But we'd wallop 'em anyway. Now that Duncan's shaken his jinx, we're in!"

But Senmore wouldn't have been so optimistic about Duncan's jinx, if he could have listened in on a conversation a few hours later in *Casa de Rhoda*.

BLAKE FOX scowled at the picture before him on the desk, a picture of a husky, black-haired lad in the hockey uniform of McGill University. Below the picture were the words "Duncan Delbridge MacCrea, Varsity Captain."

"It's him, all right," Fox muttered. "What's the dope?"

Limpby threw out his thin chest, pleased at the note of approval in his boss' voice. He said:

"I had a hell of a time diggin' that up. Took me three weeks in St. Louis to find somebody who knew where Duncan came from before he was there. Then I chased to hell 'n gone up in Canada. But old Limpy'll get the lowdown on any guy he sets out after."

"Never mind handing yourself the bouquets. What's the dope?"

Limpby told Fox what he had learned; how he'd discovered the law firm Duncan had worked for in Vancouver.

"They were closed-mouthed as the devil, wouldn't put out a thing, but I wormed the fact out of an office boy that this Duncan guy had gone to McGill. So I beat it back there, and, gee, is that a swell layout!" Limpy hurried on at the impatient gesture Blake Fox made. "Well, it wasn't hard to get what I was after then."

Blake Fox was no fool. As Limpy unfolded what he'd learned about Duncan turning down professional offers, Fox put two and two together.

"He's old Dunc MacCrea's kid, all right. A brother to the punk we took to the

cleaners last year. He must have got to Bob MacCrea before he died."

Fox drummed well manicured fingers on the desk. "The damn fool figured he could outsmart me—get something on me. *Mel!*" He laughed. "Well, Duncan Delbridge MacCrea has a lot to learn. This changes the set-up considerably, but no half-baked backwoods boy can give Blake Fox the works! Get word to Flash Rance that I want to see him."

Blake Fox stared at the picture after Limpy had gone.

"Sucker!" he spat at Duncan's likeness. "I *did* intend to just pluck your dough. But now—boy, you took hold of a wild-cat when you tried to put one over on Blake Fox!"

FLASH RANCE hurried through the swanky *Casa de Rhoda* and climbed the stairs leading to the office of Blake Fox at the back of a row of velvet-curtained booths on the mezzanine. It was early evening and the club was just beginning to come awake. Rance stepped aside as a girl came down the stairs.

"Hello, Rhoda," he said.

The girl smiled, said, "Good evening, Flash."

Then, because she was an ardent hockey fan and was friendly with all the Cardinals, she added, just making conversation, "I hope you aren't out for a party. We're going to need everybody in tip-top shape for the Acorns."

Flash laughed, "Nothing like that. We'll take those monkeys, all right. Why, Pop's just been drilling us on some new stuff that will knock their eyes out."

The girl smiled. "I know you Cardinals will beat them," she said, and went on down the stairs. She was on her way to meet Duncan for an early dinner.

Rance went on into Blake Fox's office. Fox was waiting for him.

"I couldn't make it any sooner," Rance said. "Pop kept us on the ice for two hours."

"It's okay, no particular rush. Sit down. Have a drink?"

Rance shook his head. "No, thanks. Not

much chance that I'll get in tomorrow night, but if I do, I want to be in condition."

Blake Fox said sympathetically, "Duncan's frozen you out right, hasn't he? Too bad, too. An old head could do a lot better in the clutch than a rookie."

Rance shrugged. He knew Blake Fox. "Skip the tear-jerking, Fox," he said. "Why do you want to see me? I know you didn't get me out here to weep on your shoulder."

"No, I didn't." Fox poured a slug of Scotch in a glass, said casually as he squirted soda into it, "I figured, since you wouldn't have much love for Duncan, maybe you'd like to dish him out a plate of grief."

Rance hesitated. "I hate his guts," he finally said, "but if you're thinking of something like you pulled on Bob MacCrea, count me out!"

Blake Fox sipped his drink, looked thoughtfully at Rance. He casually took a key from his pocket, unlocked a drawer in the desk. He pulled a lacquered metal box from the drawer and unlocked it.

"You know, Rance," he said, "there's one thing about me. Call it foolish if you like, but there it is—I never destroy a paper or scrap of evidence, when a guy does a job for me."

His tone suddenly hardened. "There's enough stuff in this bundle"—he waved a pack of papers at Rance—"to blow you right out of hockey! Count you out, eh? Let me tell you, you'll do what I say and *like* it!"

"You—you wouldn't dare show those papers!" Rance stammered. "You—you—they'd cook your goose, too!"

Fox replaced the papers and box, locked the drawer.

"Don't get excited," he advised. "I'm fully aware there is dynamite in that box. I'm only showing you, so you'll know where you stand. Be smart, Rance!"

The hockey player ran his tongue over dry lips. "What do you want me to do?" he said helplessly.

"Now you're talking sense!" Fox drained his glass, leaned forward. "I had a plan,

but I want to know what Pop Harder is cooking up. They wouldn't let me in Olympia this afternoon, wouldn't even let newspapermen in. What's he doing? Maybe we can use it.

"You give me the dope, that's all, Rance. I'll see to it that the Acorns get it. I know damn well Bull Brideaux will be glad to know if Pop's planning a surprise. And it'll be Duncan who gets blamed for tipping them off!"

"But that's selling out my team, Fox! I can't do that!"

"You fool, can't you see anything? Suppose the Acorns do win the first game? Nobody will know you had anything to do with it. Duncan will be discredited, kicked out. It will be Flash Rance who goes in and wins the game that gets the Cardinals in the play-offs! Flash Rance who leads them through the series, until they win the Stanley Cup! You'll be back on top—where you belong!"

An athlete is always the last person to realize he has passed his peak, and Flash Rance really believed he was a better man than Duncan. He hated Duncan because the younger man had ousted him from his place. His better nature fought for a moment, but lost.

"Okay, Fox. Here's the dope!"

IN A little restaurant downtown, Rhoda Vantiss and Duncan dawdled over their dessert. "I'm so happy that you've found yourself again, Duncan," the girl said. "And tomorrow night I'll be glued to the radio, rooting hard for you to beat the Acorns. Just think, one more victory and the team will be in the play-offs!"

Duncan grinned.

"It's a cinch," he said. "Pop's got a new offensive that ought to be good for a couple of goals before the Acorns figure it out."

"What is it, Duncan? I saw Flash Rance as I was leaving the club and he said you'd been working on it."

Duncan got a great kick out of Rhoda's keen interest in hockey. He took a pencil and a bit of paper from his pocket.

"Pop calls it the stream-lined express

play." He sketched swift lines on the paper. "Senmore sets it up in the neutral zone. Michl cuts here, and I cross over to his side. Dud Cerlik drifts along back of us until we cross the blue line. By that time we've got the defense bunched over here, and Dud gets a drift pass in the clear on the other side. It ought to work, because they'll naturally be covering the forwards more than they will Cerlick."

Rhoda studied the sketch. She surprised Duncan by saying:

"But isn't it dangerous? Suppose one of their defensemen intercepts the pass to Cerlik? They'd have a clear path to our goal."

Duncan looked at her admiringly. "That's the weakness," he admitted. "But the idea is to take them so by surprise that no one will intercept the pass."

The girl folded the paper, stuck it in her handbag. "I'll keep this and follow the radio description by it," she said. "I hope it works for a million goals."

"We'll settle for two or three," Duncan chuckled.

BULL BRIDEAUX stared at the paper the small, shifty-eyed lame man gave him. It was a perfectly diagrammed outline of Pop Harder's stream-lined express play, with a detailed description. Brideaux studied it for seconds, grunted. He said:

"What's the idea of bringing this to me?" He grabbed a handful of the fellow's shirt in his big hand. "Is this a fast one Harder is trying to pull?"

"Gee, pal, take it easy!" whined Limpy. "It's on the level. Harder don't know nothin' about that map. Lemme loose, pal! I tell you the guy I'm acting for is on the level!"

"Who is he?" Bull Brideaux shook Limpy. "Come clean, or I'll break you in two!"

"Gee, pal, I ain't supposed to tell! It's—it's Duncan," Limpy rushed on. "He's sore at Pop, see? Harder's been riding him because the team's been in a slump. Duncan figures to get even by tipping you guys off. It—it oughta be worth a century to you!"

Bull Brideaux narrowed his eyes. He remembered how Rance had blamed Duncan for that goal weeks ago. It was quite possible that there was bad blood among the Cardinals. This little rat might be telling the truth. Bull folded the paper. *He* had nothing to lose, anyway.

"I'll keep this," he said. "If it works out the way you say tonight, you'll get your hundred dollars. If it doesn't, I'll break your crooked neck!"

Bull Brideaux was tough and not averse to getting away with anything he could on the ice, but he didn't go for crooked stuff. Still, if the Acorns could win these last two, they'd finish on top in their division and get out of a tough play-off match. Bull Brideaux didn't propose to throw away any advantage he could get. He told his teammates about the Cardinals' scheme and showed them the diagram just before the game.

"We'll play it cagy," he said. "If they start out something like this, don't barge in too quick—it might be a trick. But keep a weather eye peeled on Cerlik. We'll have to chance a score to see whether it's on the level."

POP HARDER called his boys to the box before they took the ice. "Remember now!" he said. "Quick as you can get the puck, pull the stream-lined express set-up—and keep at it until they get wise. I figure it's good for at least three goals."

"Okay, Pop. Stream-lined express it is," Senmore said. "I'll beat that guy for the face-off, and we'll swing right into it."

Senmore was as good as his word. He snaked the disc from the Acorn center and whipped it to Duncan. Duncan drifted toward the boards, stalled until Cerlik could come up from defense. Then, at a signal from Miehle, the stream-lined express started.

Duncan and Miehle criss-crossed at the center, and for an instant the Acorns lost sight of the puck. Then they saw that Miehle had taken it as he passed Duncan.

Bull Brideaux charged Miehle, and the Cardinal wing cut sharply right, Bull right

after him. Duncan and Senmore cut diagonally toward the corner Miehle was headed for. The defense piled after them. Dud Cerlik drifted down the left boards.

Suddenly Miehle stopped short, pivoted, and lofted a lazy drifting pass 'cross ice. Cerlik came in fast, blistered the puck for the cage. But big Bull Brideaux threw himself around Miehle, skated fast for the cage. He threw himself in front of the flying puck.

In the Cardinal box, Pop Harder swore. "The damn lucky stiff! He didn't have any business being there!"

Flash Rance bit his lip, said shakily, "It'll work next time"

But it didn't work. It was several minutes before Senmore got the puck again in position for the new play. Then the front liners set sail for the Acorn cage again.

This time, a fleet Acorn wing drifted from the mêlée when Miehle arched the puck. He took the slow pass, stick-handled around Cerlik's belated check, and sped down the left lane with no one near him. And, miraculously, the other Acorn forwards had abandoned their chase of the Cardinals. They swarmed in on little Alfie Bude, three strong.

Bude didn't have a chance. They feinted him across the net opening, got him leaning off-balance, and blasted a counter into the nets that Bude didn't touch.

Twice more in that first period, Pop Harder's new play backfired. Both times the Acorns scored. Pop was fit to be tied.

"Damnation!" he roared. "What's the matter out there? Those Acorns act like they had a slow-motion picture of that whole play before it happens!"

"It sure looks like they've been tipped off," Rance said.

"They couldn't be. Not a damn soul knew what we were workin' on. They couldn'ta got a spy into Olympia!"

He sent out a new line, instructed them to try the thing once more. This time Pop watched the defense closely. Sure enough, the Acorns knew exactly what was coming. They broke at the exact instant the play could be wrecked. The grizzled manager's face was grim.

"By damn, they *have* been tipped off!" he muttered. "And that means one of my own players is a rat!"

Morale shaken by the boomerang failure of their new offensive weapon, the Cardinals couldn't get organized at all. They didn't quit, they fought to the final bell, but the three-goal first period margin was too much to overcome.

Duncan scored in the final period on a brilliant solo dash into enemy ice, but the Acorns skated off the ice at the gong on the long end of a 4-1 count.

BULL BRIDEAUX skated past Duncan. Scorn and disdain was in the big fellow's eyes. He muttered, "You'll get your dough, Duncan—you louse!"

Duncan stared in puzzlement after the big Acorn. "What's eating him?" he asked Pop Harder, beside him.

Pop looked his star steadily in the eye. "I wonder!" he said cryptically. There was a bitter taste in his mouth. He was afraid he knew what Brideaux meant. "Hell!" he told himself. "Duncan couldn't do a thing like that!"

But Pop changed his mind when he was handed an anonymous letter the next day. The messenger boy didn't know the man who had given him the note. The message read:

Sir:

I am a hockey fan and a lover of clean sport. It so happens that I was in a hotel room in Toronto yesterday afternoon and overheard a conversation.

The Acorns had complete information about your plan of play last night. It was sold to Bull Brideaux for one hundred dollars by your star player—Duncan. You can check on this by calling Bull Brideaux.

The lines in Pop Harder's face deepened. He knew instinctively that he had guessed right last night. But he called Brideaux at the Acorn's hotel. Brideaux stalled, but finally said:

"I ain't got any use for a double-

crossin' rat, Harder. Yes, we were tipped off. And your information is right; it was Duncan."

He listened to Pop's profane sputtering for a minute, and finally broke in, saying, "Go ahead and spill it to the league president—I haven't done any wrong. *You'd* done the same thing I did. Anyhow, it ain't gonna look so good for you when the papers get hold of it. You'd better sing kinda small!"

Pop Harder slowly pronged the receiver. Bull Brideaux was right. He couldn't kick up a row about it.

"But by damn I can see that Duncan never pulls another sell-out!" Pop muttered furiously.

He dialed Duncan's rooms. The phone rang and rang. Finally a sing-song voice answered.

"Mlister Dluncan not here," the voice said. "Me clean here. Mlister Dluncan say go to see Mlister Flox."

Pop hung up, reached for his coat. "That's it!" he muttered. "That scum of a Blake Fox is back of this. He's got his hooks into Duncan. Well, Fox and me are gonna have a showdown!"

DUNCAN had a hunch, as he took a cab to *Casa de Rhoda*, that Blake Fox was ready to spring his trap. There had been a suppressed excitement, almost a subtle sinisterness in the night-club owner's tone when he had phoned. Fox must be ready to show his hand.

Duncan knew he was right when he walked into the office of Blake Fox. Limpy was there, and a current of expectancy filled the room.

"Ah, Duncan," Fox said suavely, "sit down!"

Duncan dropped into the chair facing Fox. He refused a drink. Fox poured himself a stiff jolt and tossed it off neat. He looked at Duncan, thinly veiled triumph in his black eyes.

"I called you out here," he said carefully, "to sign a paper. It really isn't necessary, but under the circumstances I think you'd better sign it—just to keep the records straight."

He handed Duncan a typed form.

"You see, I've turned some of your dough from endorsements and the radio into a commercial investment. Things haven't been too hot lately with the club, and I've been using your money in the business."

Duncan jerked his gaze from the paper, looked at Fox. This was pretty raw, but Fox appeared coolly confident. The thought ran through Duncan's brain "That's what he did to Bob!" But he said nothing, but swiftly scanned the paper Fox had given him.

"Why, this is a power of attorney!" he said slowly. "I can't see why you want this. If you've put some of my money into your club, I don't understand why you want my power of attorney now."

"So you recognize it, eh?" Fox shrugged. "I told you it was only a matter of form. Since I've been acting for you all along, you're lawyer enough to know you wouldn't have a leg to stand on in court. Even a punk of a law clerk just out of college must know *that*!"

Duncan sat very still. Blake Fox watched him, smoke curling from his nostrils. Suddenly his tone was hard.

"Yes, wise guy, I'm hep to you! You thought you could pull a smoothie on me, did you? Well, you're left holding the bag. Not only is your dough all gone, but I've got a claim against you for five grand—a claim I could make stick in any court!"

Blake Fox went a little mad then. Like all crooks, he couldn't take it when his ego was injured, and the effrontery of Duncan in trying to outsmart him wounded his ego.

"You never fooled me—I knew you were phony from the start. You thought you were worming your way into my confidence. You figured you'd catch me off guard and clear the grand old name of MacCrea! Why, you poor sucker, you never had a chance! You'll never see the day when Blake Fox is outsmarted. When I get through with you, the MacCrea name will be dragged deeper in the mud than—"

DUNCAN hit him then. He lunged from his chair and swung a left to Fox's jaw, felt a savage satisfaction as his fist crunched solidly against bone. But he forgot Limpy. Fox's rat-eyed tool had edged around back of Duncan when his boss started raging.

Blake Fox hadn't much more than hit the floor before Duncan himself sagged over the desk. Limpy regarded the big hockey player briefly, then put the shot-filled leather blackjack back in his pocket. Limpy was an expert with a sap, he knew Duncan would be "out" for some time. He helped Fox to his feet.

"Gee, boss, he socked you so quick I didn't have time to cool 'im!"

Blake Fox shook his head, caressed a lump on his jaw. He poured himself a drink. Hate burned his black eyes as he stared at Duncan, crumpled over his desk.

"He'll pay for that—with interest!" he snarled. A commotion downstairs caught his attention. "Listen!"

"I don't give a damn if he is busy! I wanta see him, and I'm gonna! Where's he hang out?"

It was the strident voice of Pop Harder, telling a flunkie downstairs where to head in. Blake Fox jerked his head at the inert form draped on the desk.

"Drag him into the back room! Slap a strip of adhesive over his mouth and tie him up good. I'll have to see what's biting Harder."

Blake Fox straightened the chair Duncan had knocked over, went to the door and called, "It's all right, Gus. Send him up!"

Duncan struggled through a thick milky haze, tried to recover his senses. A thousand demons were inside his head, and each had a hammer, pounding in back of his ear. He groaned. He was conscious of voices cutting through the fog. Suddenly he recognized Pop Harder's shrill voice.

"Damn you, Fox, where is he? If the dirty rat is here, I want him to hear it, too!"

"I don't know what all the excitement is about," Fox's suave tones said. "I told you Duncan *was* here, but left some time

ago. What's the matter with you, Harder?"

"You know damn well what's the matter with me!" Pop yelled. "You're back of it somehow, I'll bet my shirt! Duncan's not the kind to sell out his team unless he was forced to!"

"Oh, I begin to see!" Blake Fox made the words sound as though a great light had hit him. "So that's what he was hinting at!"

Pop Harder said suspiciously, "That's what who was hinting at?"

Blake Fox put hurt reproach into his tone. "For some reason, Harder, you have it in for me, I know. But I'm going to tell you something you *don't* know." He reached in a drawer, drew out a picture. "Like I told you, Duncan was out here. He kept hinting at some way we could clean up a pile of easy money on the game tonight.

"I acted for Duncan commercially, but there were some screwy things about him from the start. I had him looked up. Maybe you'll understand now why he sold you out to the Acorns. Duncan is really Duncan Delbridge *MacCrea*!"

Pop Harder stared at the picture Fox handed him. Suddenly his shoulders drooped, and he looked years older.

"I never let out a peep last year," continued Fox, "when you believed I had something to do with that other MacCrea deal. But I know plenty about it. Young MacCrea was reached by the gamblers—and it looks as if brother Duncan has been reached too. I sent him about his business, told him I was wise to his true identity and wanted no part of him!"

Pop Harder said lifelessly, "Poor old Dunc MacCrea! It's a good thing that he's dead and out of this!" Then the grizzled old manager said, "Maybe I did have you wrong, Fox. I guess I owe you an apology. Duncan did sell us out to the Acorns yesterday—sold 'em a diagram of the secret play we'd worked out for that game!"

OUTSIDE the office, behind heavy velvet curtains, a girl pressed the back of her hand against her mouth to

keep from crying out in protest. Rhoda had been on her way to see Blake Fox about a change in the time for her show that night, so she could stay at Olympia for the whole game, and she'd stepped inside a little booth to wait, when she had heard voices. She hadn't meant to eavesdrop, but she couldn't help hearing the whole conversation. And suddenly many things were clear. But who had given Blake Fox the diagram? Not for an instant did she believe Duncan guilty. She guessed at once that Blake Fox had engineered the crooked deal. Then she remembered meeting Flash Rance on the stairs the day before.

"That's it!" she thought. "Flash! That's the answer!"

She sped away from there and picked up the first cab that passed up the avenue.

She was sending her name up to Flash Rance as quick as the cab could get her to his hotel.

Faint apprehension was in the look Rance gave her. He looked as though he hadn't slept well.

"This is an unexpected pleasure, Rhoda," he said. "What can I—?"

"Don't let's waste time, Flash," the girl said breathlessly. Words tumbled over themselves as she told him what she had overheard.

"So what?" Rance said uneasily. He couldn't meet the girl's eyes. "Am I Duncan's keeper?"

"Flash," she said, "you know Duncan didn't sell the Acorns anything." She hesitated, staked everything on a gamble. "I—I heard you and Blake yesterday," she lied. "I came back after a compact I left on his desk. You were the one who told him, Flash! Why?"

For a long moment Flash Rance made no sound. Rhoda thought she had lost. Then he growled:

"If you heard it all, you know I had no choice. That damn box Fox has could ruin me!"

The girl shivered with relief. She was on firm ground now.

"What box, Flash? I didn't hear that part."

Rance told her.

"He tricked me into jobbing young Bob MacCrea last spring," he said bitterly. "I didn't intend anything wrong, but Fox has stuff that wouldn't look good for me. He keeps it, locked in a metal box, in his desk."

"If I could get that box, Flash, and turn the incriminating papers he's been holding over you, would you go to Pop and tell him that Blake Fox forced you to give him the diagram?"

"You turn that stuff over to me," Rance said earnestly, "and I'll do anything you say. I—gosh, Rhoda, I've been a Cardinal ever since they were organized. I—I didn't know what I was doing. It was hell!"

RHODA laid her plans as she rode out to *Casa de Rhoda*. She knew that she possessed more than ordinary appeal for men. She had never consciously used it on any man, but Blake Fox was going to get the full charge.

Fox wasn't in his office, and that entirely suited Rhoda's plans. She made a wreck of the place, tore drawers from the desk, scattered papers, banged and pried at the locked drawer until it looked as though someone had made a desperate effort to get into it. Then she waited downstairs until Blake Fox returned.

She gave him just time to get to his office, and then climbed the stairs after him. He stood in the doorway, staring at the wreckage of his office, astounded.

"Well!" Rhoda said. "Somebody certainly wanted something you've got, Blake!"

Fox smothered a curse. His eyes darted to the damaged drawer.

"I'll bet it was that little black box you keep locked up," Rhoda said.

He whirled, grabbed her wrist. "What do you know about a black box?" he snarled.

Rhoda said coolly, "You're hurting me, Blake!" She held his eyes, smiled. "Don't you think it's about time we quit pretending? I know all about the box. I've known for a long time. It's the one thing about you that I've never understood—why a

clever man like you keeps such stuff lying around."

She edged her words with clear meaning. Blake stared at her.

"You mean that you're—"

"Wise to what goes on? Of course! Why do you think I've been leading Duncan on? I knew a long time ago that he was Bob MacCrea's brother. It's been amusing, watching you play him."

"You little devil!" Blake said. He pulled her to him. "And I've been holding off because I figured you for a corn-fed innocent!"

"Innocent?" Rhoda smiled up at him. "Maybe—but I admire cleverness above all things. You're good, Blake. You're a smooth actor. Why, you played Duncan like a—a trout!"

Then she smiled a little. "By the way, where is the gallant Scot? I saw him come in before Pop Harder."

"He's safe enough," Fox said, in wonder. "Limpy's watching him. Say, you know all the answers, don't you?"

"I don't know who is after your box. Do you?"

Fox swore. "No. But whoever is will be fooled. I'll hide it so—"

"Know where a really good hiding place would be? In the bottom of the trunk in my dressing room."

Lights played in Rhoda's blue eyes, warm, promising lights. Fox said:

"That *would* be a good place. Only thing is, I'd have to have a key to the room. I might want it any time!"

"Of course," Rhoda murmured. She dropped her eyes, afraid that Blake Fox would read the triumph in them. The slick Mr. Fox had *fallen* for her game!

DUNCAN MACCREA lay bound to a cot in a room of a house in Highland Park. He stared moodily at the ceiling. A radio blared, and the glare of a single unshaded bulb lighted the room. Limpy had taped his mouth again, and it was swollen and dry. That drink the little rat had given him hours before at *Casa de Rhoda* had been doped, of course.

Bitter thoughts gripped Duncan. He cer-

tainly had made a fine hash of things! He'd heard Pop Harder and Blake Fox, and he'd figured out where Fox got the dope on Pop's play. That was what Bull Brideaux had meant last night. Somehow Fox had contrived to make Brideaux believe it was Duncan who had sold out the Cardinals.

And Rhoda had given Fox the sketch he had made in the restaurant. What a fool he had been! His only excuse was that she had never made any effort to trick him before, had lulled his suspicions.

Duncan was honest with himself. He had fallen for Rhoda Yantiss, fallen for her, even suspecting that she had played a part in his brother's downfall.

Suddenly a name from the radio cut through his thoughts.

"—Detroit's Own, Rhoda Yantiss. Miss Yantiss will sing *Loch Lomond*."

Duncan would have cut off the radio, if he'd been free. It was gall and wormwood to lie there and listen to her rich warm voice.

*You'll take the high road, and I'll take
the low road
And I'll be in Scotland afore ye—*

She'd taken the low road, all right. And she certainly had got there before he had. She'd been way ahead of him all along!

The song ended. Duncan was suddenly electrified at hearing the voice of Rhoda Yantiss speak from the radio, clear and appealing:

"This is a message to Duncan Delbridge MacCrea or to anyone who may know his whereabouts. Duncan, everything is all right. Indisputable evidence that you were framed, evidence that your brother Bob was framed, has been turned over to Pop Harder! You *must* hear me, Duncan! You've got to play tonight!"

A GREAT happiness flooded Duncan's being when he assimilated the meaning of Rhoda's message. Then despair gripped him. How could he possibly get to Olympia? He'd heard enough, when

Limpy and Blake Fox brought him here, to know that Limpy couldn't be worked on. Blake Fox had laid plenty of money on the Acorns to win.

He struggled futilely with his bonds. A step on the stairs warned him that Limpy was returning. He feigned sleep.

Limpy tore the tape from Duncan's mouth.

"Here's a malted milk, punk," he grunted. He held a .45 automatic trained on Duncan as he loosed one arm. "Don't try anything funny!"

Duncan said, "Don't worry, I know when I'm licked!"

His brain raced while he drank the malted. He said to Limpy, "What time is it? The game must be nearly over by now. There doesn't seem to be anything on the radio about it."

A crafty look crossed Limpy's face. "Yeah," he lied. "You didn't wake up till almost ten. It's all over by now."

"You going to keep me here all night?"

"I'll keep you until the boss gives the word to let you go."

Duncan said, "Shut off that radio, will you? As long as we're going to be here, why can't we play cards to kill time?"

Limpy hesitated, then shrugged. "Oke by me. Only don't get any ideas about conking me—I'll keep the rod handy!"

"I told you I know when I'm licked."

They played pitch for what seemed hours to Duncan. Gradually Limpy relaxed his vigilance. He'd freed Duncan's hands, but left his legs tied to the chair. Limpy was winning. Duncan dealt the cards.

"That makes six bits you owe me," Limpy said, picking up his cards. He scanned them. "I bid three."

That was the last he said for quite a while. As he looked up, Duncan flung the cards full in his face. Instinctively Limpy ducked. Duncan lunged across the table, clutched the .45 as it was sliding to the floor.

"Don't open your mouth!" he gritted to Limpy. "Come around here and cut these ropes! And if I were you, I wouldn't give me an excuse to shoot!"

When he was free, Duncan stood for a minute or two until the blood ran into his legs. Then he motioned Limpy to the cot.

"Lie down there!" he ordered.

Limpy didn't move. His ratty eyes glittered. He was about to make a desperate play for the gun. Duncan let him have it. His left crashed to the point of Limpy's jaw.

"That's part payment for socking me on the head!" Duncan muttered.

He trussed Limpy securely to the cot, stuck tape over his mouth. "You'll come in handy when the blow-off comes for Fox," he muttered.

He ran down the street toward the traffic on Woodward Avenue. As luck would have it, the first car he flagged was a squad car.

"I'm Duncan Delbridge," he began. "I've got to get to Olympia right away. I—"

"Get in here, man!" yelled the officer. "Every cop in town's been looking for you since six o'clock!"

That was a wild ride. Siren whining, the police car cut through traffic, ignoring red lights and no-turn corners. They pulled up in front of the big Grand River sports palace in record time.

THE Cardinals were in the dressing room for intermission between the second and third periods when Duncan barged in. Pop Harder grabbed him, hugged him.

"Duncan!" he yelled. "Boy, I could

kiss you!" He turned to the players. "Men, you've heard all kinds of wild rumors tonight. Let me tell you there ain't a word of them true. Duncan played under his own name—part of it. The rest is MacCrea. And MacCrea is still a name to conjure with in hockey!"

Dud Carlik snapped his fingers. "MacCrea!" he said. "That's it! That's why there was always something familiar about you, Duncan. Your old man taught me all I know about the game, when I was breaking in!"

His mates gathered around Duncan as he piled into his uniform. An electric excitement filled the room.

"What's the score?" Duncan asked.

"They've got us down, three-to-one," Senmore said. "They got a couple of lucky ones by Alfie, and they're checking hard. But we'll get 'em now!"

"Let's go!"

For action-filled, thrill-packed hockey, that third period matched anything any of the sixteen thousand wild-eyed fans packing Olympia had ever seen. There wasn't a minute of the twenty that the crowd wasn't on its feet.

Volumes could be written about the hard-checking, hell-for-leather skating of both teams, but it can all be boiled down to five words—Dunker Duncan pulled the "hat trick."

The "hat trick"—for the benefit of any uninitiated—is a term used when a player makes three goals in one game. It is as much a rarity in big-league hockey as three home runs by one player in a baseball



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game. And Duncan MacCrea pulled the "hat trick" in one period!

His first goal came at the end of three minutes and forty seconds, when he passed to Senmore at the crease and slammed in the rebound of the center's shot off the Acorn goalie's pads.

Five minutes later, Miehl grabbed a loose puck at the blue line, raced in on the goalie, slickered a defenseman out of position and passed to Duncan, when the net-minder was set for a shot from Miehl. Duncan blistered a scorching back-hander into the cords.

Then for eleven minutes the teams battled furiously to break the tie. Both goalies saved time and again when it appeared that a score was inevitable. Men were almost continually on the ice, from battering body-checks. The hands on the time clock moved inexorably toward zero, and the fans visioned an overtime game.

But Bull Brideaux stole the puck from Miehl and barged down the right boards. Only Duncan stood in his path. The husky Scot remembered another time when he and Brideaux had tangled, and he hit the big Frenchman like a ton of brick.

THEY battled against the boards right in front of the box where Blake Fox sat. Fox didn't know it, but a husky plainclothesman waited in back of him, waited for the game to end—to arrest the slippery Mr. Fox.

Brideaux and Duncan crashed to the ice. Duncan bounded to his feet, pounced on the puck.

He shouted to Fox, "You're through,

you big stiff! Here goes *your* dough!"

He sped down the boards. A defenseman threw a check at him at the blue line, but Duncan was traveling so fast that he wasn't touched. Duncan out-guessed the Acorn center, swerved around his check in a cloud of ice-spray, like a halfback in a broken field.

The Acorn goalie crouched in the net. Duncan cut diagonally, flexed his wrists and—the goal tender leaped from his nets, sprawled frantically to the ice to stop a shot that never came. Duncan bit his steel blades into the ice. The goal mouth yawned. Calmly, deliberately, he lofted the puck into the cords.

The roof of Olympia bulged from the steel rafters at the terrific roar of the fans. Above the din, it was hard to hear the gong ending the game.

The Cardinals were in the Stanley Cup Series!

Hundreds of handshakes and scores of back slaps later, Duncan Delbridge MacCrea was standing with Rhoda, whose eyes were bright with joy in the Cardinal victory and Duncan's particular triumph.

"You don't hate the game now, do you, Duncan?" she said. "You couldn't possibly hate—"

"Hate?" he said. "I love it! I love—but what the heck! Let's get out of here! Let's go where I can tell you adequately!"

And so they wound up in Lee Hoy's little place, where the food was good, the lights soft, the service quiet and discreet, and Duncan MacCrea could say everything he'd wanted to say for weeks—and say it adequately.

(The End.)



Cheaters Face the Round-up

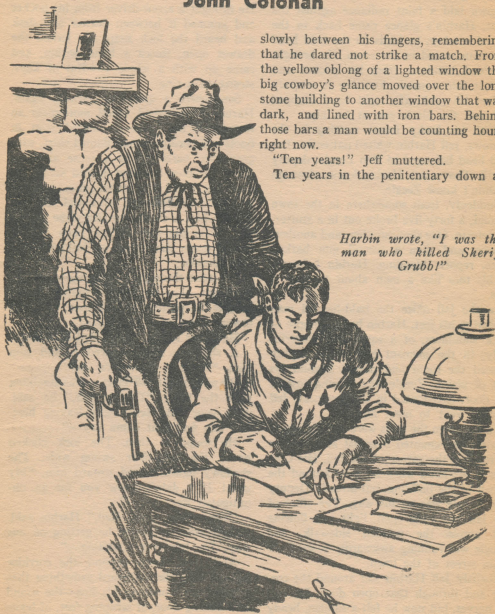
By
John Colohan

slowly between his fingers, remembering that he dared not strike a match. From the yellow oblong of a lighted window the big cowboy's glance moved over the long stone building to another window that was dark, and lined with iron bars. Behind those bars a man would be counting hours right now.

"Ten years!" Jeff muttered.

Ten years in the penitentiary down at

*Harbin wrote, "I was the
man who killed Sheriff
Grubb!"*



IN THE darkness in the shadow of a gallow's frame, Jeff Harbin rolled a cigarette. He shaped the paper cylinder mechanically, and then he crumbled it

Cañon City—that was what Red McGuire had drawn. Ten years behind stone walls, on a framed-up charge. Harbin shook his head. He didn't know much about the

case, but he did know Red McGuire. Once he and Red had been partners in a little cow outfit in New Mexico, before Red had drifted up into this Paradox country to try his luck.

Beyond the bulk of the jail, the lights of town laid a faint radiance against the night. Harbin's glance came back to the lighted window, to focus on the bald head of a man seated in the room. He brought a folded bandana from his pocket and built it into a mask, knotting it securely against his neck. His right hand dropped to brush the black gun at his hip.

With his lanky frame melting in the shadows, Jeff Harbin waited patiently. The bald head belonged to Ben Zeegle, deputy sheriff. That much Harbin knew, although he didn't know Zeegle.

Suddenly, from somewhere in the town beyond, a forty-five broke out in a stuttering refrain. One shot, another, and another. Silence, and then a second gun barked twice, reports blending. Harbin balanced on his toes like a man about to start a race.

In the jail office the bald-headed man pushed to his feet. Harbin had a glimpse of thick shoulders, of a squat and powerful body, in the moment before the deputy crossed the room and passed beyond his line of vision. Zeegle was moving toward the door. Soft-footed in the darkness, Jeff Harbin went to meet him.

In the town the guns were roaring again. Harbin had counted five fast shots before he reached the corner of the jail. His Colt was in his hand when he went around the corner of the building, but already Deputy Ben Zeegle was on his way. The office of the jail was wide open. Light was flowing out across the wooden sidewalk, and Zeegle was running awkwardly toward the main street of the town.

Swiftly Jeff Harbin slid around the corner and through that open door. He had no nerves, but now he felt a sudden, heady surge of exultation. All of this had been planned beforehand, and now each part was falling into place. He had thought to meet a locked door at the least, but now the door was open, and the office was

empty, and in a corner of the room was the big desk, just as it had been described to him.

He went across the room in long strides and dropped down on his knees before the desk. He tried a drawer, but it was locked. He brought a screw-driver from his pocket and jammed it between drawer and desk and heard the lock snap. He jerked the drawer open, thrust a hand within, and came up with a whole handful of keys, strung on a ring.

Somewhere a gun was barking again. Harbin straightened, stood motionless an instant, a big, wide-shouldered man in boots and corduroys and flannel shirt, with gray eyes narrowed to a tense alertness above the blue bandana draped across his nose. He flowed into action again. A heavy wooden door separated office and jail, and it took him a second to select the proper key. Then the lock clicked back and he looked down the tunnel of darkness of a long corridor.

He went through, closing the door behind him. Now he risked a match. Ahead he saw the pattern of iron bars. He went toward them, match flickering.

He called softly, "Red! Red McGuire!" A shadowy figure stirred behind iron bars. "What is it—what's up?"

By matchlight Jeff Harbin was fumbling with the keys. "This is Jeff," he said. "Get your hat, Red—we're leaving here. If I can find that damn key—"

He found it then. The lock clicked back; the cell door swung wide. The shadowy figure moved toward him. "My gosh! If I didn't know you for an unmitigated liar, Jeff—"

"Some other time, Red," Harbin said. "Right now we better be getting on our way. The broncs are waiting—"

And then, from beyond the corridor behind him, Harbin heard something that stopped the words on his lips—the sound of a closing door, of scraping feet, of boots moving across a floor. He knew that McGuire had heard it also, for McGuire stood silent at his side.

He had closed the heavy corridor door behind him. Now, beyond that door, some-

one was moving about within the office of the jail. In the solid darkness he saw a light shining ahead, and he knew then that there was a slot in the wooden door. And softly, with infinite caution, big Jeff Harbin crept toward that slot. He groped for the door, put his eyes to the narrow crack. It would be Ben Zeegle, the deputy, come back again.

But it wasn't Zeegle. This was another man, taller than Zeegle, with a full crop of iron-gray hair on his head, with gray mustache close-clipped above a steel-trap mouth. Harbin felt a hand on his shoulder, and he moved aside to give Red McGuire a glimpse into the office.

"Grubb," McGuire whispered in his ear. "Sheriff Grubb!"

HARBIN nodded. He had caught the glint of a badge on the man's vest. And he knew now that their luck had run out suddenly, for he and Red were trapped here in this pitch-dark corridor and the sheriff was standing between them and freedom. As soon as Grubb saw that broken drawer—

Harbin kept his eyes glued to the narrow slot. The sheriff had placed some papers on his desk, and now he was sorting through them slowly. One paper he put aside; the others he shoved into an inside pocket of his long black coat. He took the coat off then and went across the office to hang it on a wooden peg. As he started back toward the desk, Harbin saw his glance stop abruptly on that shattered drawer of the desk.

The big cowpuncher picked that moment. The wheels were turning, and Harbin had gone too far to turn back now. He jerked the big door wide and leaped into the lighted office. His gun was level in his hand.

"Get the hands high, Sheriff!" he barked.

The sheriff's back had been half-turned. Now he whirled. For the space of a single heartbeat he stood motionless, staring at the big man in the blue bandana mask.

Harbin tilted his gun. "Lift 'em, Sheriff!"

The sheriff looked at that leveled gun and didn't seem to see it. Not for an instant did he hesitate. Not a word did he speak. His hand struck suddenly for the big Colt at his hip.

He never had a chance. Harbin's gun was high, and ready, although he knew he couldn't use it, couldn't shoot that old man down. But his left hand darted out to grab the sheriff's wrist, and then Harbin dropped his gun and drove his right fist against the sheriff's jaw. That savage, short-arm jolt rocked Grubb's head back on his shoulders. His feet tangled and he went over backward, and, falling, his head struck with solid force against the base of the big heating stove which stood in a corner of the office.

"My gosh, Jeff," said Red McGuire, "you oughta pull them punches!"

Long afterward Jeff Harbin would recall that moment again, and in his mind each detail would be clear and plain and in its proper place. The sheriff was lying on the floor, arms wide, with his head resting at the base of the cast-iron stove. Red McGuire, big and rawboned and freckled, was looking down at him. The sheriff had been holding a piece of paper and now it lay on the floor beside his hand, and Harbin noticed that it was a *Reward* poster. There was a picture and a name beneath it in big letters, but Harbin had no time for that.

He swept his gun up from the floor, rammed it into leather. He turned the sheriff's head and saw blood running in a thin trickle through the iron-gray hair. But Harbin had looked at blood before. He felt the sheriff's pulse and grinned reassurance up at McGuire.

"He's all right, Red—just stunned. I reckon it's time to go—we better be long gone when this old jasper wakes up. He's a pretty salty customer!"

OUTSIDE, they slid around the corner of the jail, went through vacant lots at a dead run. Harbin jerked the bandana from his face. Fading through the darkness, he found time to reflect briefly on that gray-haired old man who had looked

at death and tried for his gun. A gamester, that old jasper.

They came to the high walls of a feed corral at the edge of town, and Red McGuire could hold back no longer. "It was ten years down at Cañon City, Jeff," he said. "I was framed, rottenly framed. Then, seeing you in that damn jail—hearing your voice—it still don't seem quite real!"

"Wait till morning," Harbin said. "We oughta be a hundred miles from here by daybreak. The broncs are just ahead."

He was leading the way through darkness, in an unfamiliar setting, McGuire at his heels.

"There was some shooting in town tonight," McGuire said.

"Some friends of yours," Harbin told him. "They built up a little gunfight, to stir excitement and pull the deputy from the jail. The sheriff was supposed to be outa town."

His eyes had grown accustomed to the darkness, and ahead of him he saw the dim shape of a single horse. He swore aloud.

"What's wrong, Jeff?"

They had reached the lone horse. Harbin's voice was puzzled. "We left two broncs here!" he said.

Far off, a locomotive whistled shrilly, and the swinging beams of a headlight stabbed across the darkness of the plain below the town. Harbin struck a match and found bridle reins still looped around a post. He picked up a bridle, understanding now what must have happened.

"Broken head-stall," he said. "The bronc jerked loose on us."

McGuire sounded glum. "What's to do now, Jeff?"

"Take Dixie," said Harbin. Dixie was his favorite horse. "You'll have to make the ride alone. But you'll be riding a lot of horse."

"I won't leave you afoot," said Red McGuire flatly.

Harbin chuckled. "Me? I'll be all right, Red. I ain't no criminal—nobody wants to put *me* in jail."

Then, once again, the silence of the

night was broken by the crashing sound of gunfire—five swiftly spaced shots. Harbin jerked a leather jacket from the saddle, passed the reins to Red McGuire.

"Time to go, Red. Take care o' yourself!"

"I can't leave you afoot, Jeff—"

"You always talked too much," Harbin said. "You'll talk us both back into the bastille again. Get on that bronc and ride!"

"I won't forget this, Jeff."

"Sure. I'll be seeing you!"

McGuire lifted a hand. "*Adios!*"

Jeff Harbin rolled a cigarette and listened to the fading beat of hoofs. A skittish horse and a broken head-stall had caused his plans to misfire, but he felt no particular dismay. Red McGuire was free, which was the thing he had set out to accomplish. A man could always find a horse somewhere.

A long train, traveling slowly, was puffing uphill toward the town, the beams of the engine headlight laying a path of light along steel rails. Harbin could see the yellow windows of a single coach bobbing far back at the end of the combination freight and passenger train. Smoking thoughtfully, he turned toward the tracks. He would have to risk a trip back into town again.

He was afoot on strange range now, but he was not greatly worried by his plight. He had ridden into this country only this morning, and only two men, besides Red McGuire, knew him by name. The two were Al Wilson and Joe Lambert, the same two men who had staged that phony gunfight in town tonight to cover up the jail-break. Both were friends of Red McGuire. To be sure, there was also Sheriff Grubb to be considered, but he had been wearing a mask when he bumped into the lawman.

The engine was crawling by. Harbin caught a glimpse of the fireman, silhouetted in the glow of firebox flames, and then a long line of boxcars went by, wheels grinding. The heavily-loaded train was barely creeping up the hill. He looked into windows of a lighted coach loaded down with passengers.

And suddenly Jeff Harbin grinned and slipped into his leather jacket, and as the coach wheeled slowly by, he caught the handles and swung himself up onto the vacant rear platform. He had been somewhat troubled about the little problem of slipping unobserved into town. This was one way of accomplishing it. He would re-enter Alagordo as a passenger on the train!

A MAN in a blue uniform, with a lighted lantern in his hand, came out to stand beside Jeff Harbin on the platform. "Just about there," he said.

The big cowpuncher nodded. "Yeah. It's been a tiresome trip."

And he remembered that this was a branch-line railroad, and that Alagordo was the end of the line. Already, inside, passengers were standing in the aisle, moving toward the front end of the coach. Harbin opened the door, stepped into the car. Nobody paid the least attention to the tall, bronzed-faced man in corduroys who took his position at the tail of the line of passengers. The train wheezed to a stop.

Slowly the passengers disembarked. Harbin moved with the line. The coach was very nearly empty and Harbin himself was at the front door, when the man ahead of him in line turned suddenly and started back through the aisle. He was a slim youth in a dark suit, with a queer, strained expression on his face. He shot a glance at Jeff Harbin and stopped short.

"Will you be staying at the hotel tonight?" he asked.

The question surprised Harbin. "I reckon so."

The youth held out something that looked like a red leather notebook. He spoke swiftly. "Please keep this for me. If I haven't called for it by morning, give it to Sheriff Grubb. Tell him Don Gentry gave it to you."

There was a note of urgency in that slim youth's voice, and in his face was something that was very close to fear. Harbin took the notebook.

"What's the trouble, son?"

"I can't tell you now," the youth said hastily.

He turned and went back through the open front door of the car. Jeff Harbin noticed that he limped as he walked, that he seemed to have one crippled foot. He lowered himself from the steps to the cinders of the station platform, and Harbin went down behind him. And then a hatchet-faced man in batwing chaps moved out from the station lights and laid a hand on the boy's shoulder.

"Just a minute, Gentry!" he said. "I'd like a word or two with you."

The platform was emptying rapidly, with passengers flowing toward the lights of town a block or so beyond. Jeff Harbin drifted with the crowd, but his mind stayed back on the platform with the youth who had handed him the red notebook. That boy had been afraid.

It wasn't the big cowboy's affair, and yet he couldn't quite brush it from his mind. Just ahead, a block of poorly-lighted street led to the main part of the town. At the corner of the station he pulled up for a backward glance, and he saw that the hatchet-faced man and the crippled youth were still standing where he had left them on the platform. The train was backing away from the station now and, but for those two, the platform was deserted.

Harbin circled the depot and went back toward the platform by way of the other side. Through a lighted window he saw a man in a green eye-shade writing busily under the light of a swinging lamp. He drifted past the window, reached a corner of the station, and stopped there in the shadows. The crippled youth and the man were still where he had left them. The man was saying something in a harsh, metallic voice, but Harbin couldn't make out the words.

He glanced around the corner and saw light gleam on metal in the hatchet-faced man's hand. That ended hesitation for Jeff Harbin. Soft-footed, gun in hand, he stepped out to close in on the pair. The man in chaps had his back turned.

Harbin's voice floated across space. "Steady! I've got you covered, friend!"

The man turned suddenly, saw the gun

in Harbin's hand. "What in all hell—!"

"That's what I thought," Jeff Harbin said. "Let that gun drop to the ground!"

Under the light, the other's face was ugly. "Listen, mister—"

Harbin notched his hammer back with a little click. "Drop the gun!" he said.

THE gun hit the cinders. Harbin closed the gap between them. He could see the man's face clearly now, a vicious face, full of venom. The man began a protest. "Let me tell you something—"

"Some other time," said Harbin. He looked at the crippled youth. "Were you heading toward town, son?"

The youth nodded. "I was, until this man stopped me—"

Beyond the rails of the main line, a lone box car stood on the siding. The door was open. Jeff Harbin pointed with his gun, spoke to the hatchet-faced man.

"You see that box car, brother?"

"I see it."

"Crawl in there," said Jeff Harbin. "You'll have a chance to cool off!"

"Listen—"

Harbin lifted his gun. "I'm nervous when I get excited—better do it the way I say!"

The hatchet-faced man went into the box car. He went reluctantly, but he crawled in, and Harbin slid the car door shut and dropped the hasp in place. He went around the car, struck a match, and saw that the other door was already locked. He turned back to join the boy.

"We might as well get on to town," he said.

They walked slowly toward the lights of Alagordo. Harbin asked no questions. After a space, the crippled youth spoke slowly.

"I can't begin to thank you. I think he meant to kill me—I think you saved my life back there."

"What's it all about?"

"It's a long story," the youth said. He didn't seem to want to talk about what had happened. "That book I handed to you on the train—I'll take it now. And much obliged to you. When I looked out

and saw Joe Turpin standing on the platform, I had a hunch—"

"Forget it," Harbin said.

The big cowboy had just recalled that he had a few troubles of his own. Just a little while ago he had helped in a jail-break, and now it was up to him to find some way of getting out of town. Not that he felt any particular alarm, for he believed that the very boldness of his present venture promised safety. No one would think of connecting a stranger, who had apparently just reached town by train, with a jail-break which had taken place a half hour before that train arrived.

Lights gleamed along Alagordo's main street. A crowd had gathered outside the doors of the hotel, and as Jeff Harbin and crippled Don Gentry came closer, the big cowboy saw that there was some deep excitement here. The crowd was dense, so that, for a moment, he could not see what was taking place, but he heard a harsh voice lift in anger.

"Keep on talking, Wilson!" the voice was saying. "Keep right on talking or I'll put a bullet through you here and now!"

Motion flowed through the crowd. Harbin caught a glimpse of one man pinned back against the hotel walls, of another man holding him there, a gun pressed against his chest. And Jeff Harbin's breath

caught suddenly in his throat, for the man against the wall was little Al Wilson—the same bow-legged little rider who, with Joe Lambert, had staged the phony gun-



Red McGuire

fight which had given Harbin the chance to free Red McGuire.

And now he could see Wilson clearly, and he knew the man with the gun was bald-headed Ben Zeegle, the deputy sheriff. Wilson was staring at the gun. And he was talking.

"His name was Harbin," little Al Wilson was saying. "Jeff Harbin. Him and Red McGuire had been pards down in New Mex, before Red came up here. This Harbin had just sorta drifted into the country—he came riding out to the ranch today. He didn't even know then that Red was in jail."

"Keep on talking!" Ben Zeegle said grimly.

"So we sorta held a council of war out at the ranch this morning, and this Harbin gent says why not try to break Red outa jail?"

MUSCLE made a hard knot at the angle of Jeff Harbin's lean jaw. Not that Wilson wasn't dealing in simple truth, he was—he was telling the thing as it had happened just this morning. Jeff Harbin *had* suggested the jail-break.

"You know how them things go, Ben," the little rider said apologetically. "We all figured Red had been framed and hadn't ought to go to the pen, so this Harbin says if Joe Lambert and me will rig up a little gunfight for some excitement, he'll try to break Red outa jail. We thought Grubb was outa town."

Zeegle's voice was harsh. "How did he know about the keys?"

"I was in to see Red yesterday," Wilson explained. "After I came out, Grubb locked up, and I saw him toss the keys in a drawer and then lock the drawer. I knew the keys would be still there, because Grubb pulled outa town right away."

"What sort of looking jasper is this Harbin?"

"He's a big guy," said Al Wilson. "Somewhat dark. Sorta slow talker. I thought he was bright enough, Ben—I sure never figured he'd do anything like he did!"

"We'll go down to the jail," the deputy said. He made little motions with his gun. "He was bright enough, Al. He got away. He put a bullet through Sam Grubb's head and then he rode away. You're the dumb one—you and Joe Lambert. You two gents stayed behind to face the music!"

BY DAWN of the next day, three separate posses had ridden out of Alagordo, three groups of tight-lipped riders, grimly determined to leave no stone unturned in their efforts to run down two men wanted for the brutal murder of a sheriff. And in the town itself, one of the men they sought slept peacefully through the night; he arose and shaved and breakfasted; and then he went back to his hotel room to muse on his predicament.

It was queer—queer as hell. Last night Harbin had doubted the evidence of his ears, but from a high stool behind his desk the wizened little proprietor of the hotel had confirmed the facts, while Harbin scrawled a name not his own across the hotel register. "Yep," the little hotel man had said. "They beefed Grubb, sure as hell. Put a bullet between his eyes!"

It meant, Harbin mused, that now, sitting here in a little hotel room, he was already a fugitive, with a murder charge hanging over his head. No court of law would ever believe the story he would have to tell to clear himself—no jury would ever believe that he and Red McGuire had left Sheriff Grubb lying on the office floor, stunned, but otherwise all right. He had gone into the jail-break with open eyes—but the murder of a sheriff was something else.

Yet strangely enough, he was safe for the moment, despite his precarious position. Al Wilson had gone to jail, and so had Joe Lambert, the other conspirator in the jail-break. Nobody else hereabouts knew Jeff Harbin. Soon there would be pictures scattered around, and accurate descriptions, but for the present he was safe. If it came to showdown, there would be crippled Don Gentry to testify that he had arrived in town by train a half hour *after* the jail-break.

He stood at the window of his room, looking over the long main street. There was quietness in Alagordo now. The men who could get away were gone with the posse, and the town seemed empty and deserted. And then, as Harbin stood at the window, dust stirred at the end of the long street and two jogging horsemen

rode into his line of vision. The riders were nearly abreast of the hotel when a man on foot came through the wide doors of a livery stable across the street and cut into the road to meet them.

Something in the appearance of that man on foot caused Harbin to watch him with a closer attention, and he saw then that here was the hatchet-faced man he had locked in a box car the night before. The three talked briefly, there in the center of the street, and then the hatchet-faced man—his name was Joe Turpin, Harbin recalled—went back to the livery stable. The riders turned in before the hitchrack of a saloon, left their mounts anchored there, and went in.

Jeff Harbin went downstairs, through an empty lobby, and across the street to the saloon into which the two riders had disappeared. The pair were at the bar now, the only customers in the long, cool room. Harbin lined up a dozen feet away, studied the two men with a casual eye.

One was immense, grotesque. Above his monstrous barrel of a body his face was bland and pink, like a baby's face. He was the fattest man Jeff Harbin had ever seen. His companion was a big man also, but there was a difference here. The second man was deep-chested, broad of shoulder, powerfully built, with a stubble of beard across his dark face, and a coal-black mustache above a bulldog jaw.

And something in that dark, bulldog face stirred a memory in Jeff Harbin. Somewhere he had seen that face before. He couldn't put a finger on the time or place.

The fat man was telling a joke. He came to the point of it, and he threw his big head back, and the very walls of the saloon seemed to echo to his booming peals of laughter. His vast girth shook like jelly in a tub; he wiped tears from his eyes and laughed the more. His glance rested on Jeff Harbin and seemed to invite the stranger to share the joke.

THE bartender was lanky in his white apron. He moved to serve Harbin. "Hot," he said.

"Plenty," Harbin agreed. "Make mine whiskey. Fill one for yourself."

The fat man skidded a dollar across the bar. The pair went out together, the fat man still laughing at his joke. Harbin watched them pass through swinging doors.

The bartender was filling up glasses.



Jeff Harbin

Harbin had already gleaned. He glanced at the bartender.

"That was Mosher?" he asked.

"The gent with the mustache," the bartender said. "That was Rube Mosher. Other gent was Fiddler Jordan. Quite a joker, the Fiddler is—always sees the funny side."

But Jeff Harbin was toying with an odd, elusive memory. That heavy, bulldog face—somewhere he had seen Mosher before.

"This man Mosher," he said thoughtfully. "He looks familiar to me. I'm a stranger here—just came in on the train last night. How long has Mosher been in this country?"

The lanky bartender laid two bony hands flat on the mahogany. "I'll drink your drink, mister," he said gently. "I'll swap opinions with you about the weather, or the price of cows, or the chances of hitting a four-card straight in the middle. About Rube Mosher—I don't know nothing. If I did, I wouldn't talk about it."

Harbin waved a hand apologetically. "No offense. His face looked familiar, that was all."

He paid for the drinks presently and wandered out into the empty, sunlit street. The man with the bulldog face was Rube Mosher, and Rube Mosher had been first

"Funny Mosher ain't riding with the posse," he said.

The name stirred an echo in Harbin's brain. A man named Mosher had found the dead sheriff—so much

to enter the jail after the jail-break. And Mosher, if a man might judge by the bartender's attitude, was a somewhat salty hombre.

Harbin had the feeling that he was close to some discovery, if he could but ferret it out. That affair at the railroad station last night, when hatchet-faced Joe Turpin had stopped young Don Gentry. And today Joe Turpin had stopped Rube Mosher and fat Fiddler Jordan. Rube Mosher it was who had found the dead body of the sheriff. . . .

Could it be that there was some connection between these separate events? And Mosher—where had he seen Rube Mosher before?

He returned to the hotel, thinking to try for further information from the little hotel man, but the lobby was empty and the desk deserted. Harbin went up to his room. He opened the door and looked down into the barrel of a gun.

A voice said, "Get your hands up, mister! Fast!"

IT WAS a girl! It was, Jeff Harbin decided instantly, the prettiest girl he had ever seen in a long and somewhat misspent life. Her blue eyes were flashing fire, and her face was set in what may have been meant for a ferocious scowl, but none of it altered the big cowboy's first opinion. This girl was out in front, so far as Jeff Harbin was concerned. In riding garb, she was as slim as a boy, and there were golden curls—

"Get those hands up!" she snapped. "I've been waiting for you!"

Harbin grinned cheerfully. "That's mighty nice," he said. "I've been waiting for you all my life."

She made motions with the gun. "Come inside," she said, and her voice was cool and businesslike. "I know how to use a gun—and this isn't any joke. I want to know what happened to my brother."

Harbin stared at her. "Your brother!" "I'm Eileen Gentry. Don Gentry is my brother."

Then it was that Harbin recalled that he had not seen the crippled youth since

last night. In the rush of events, he had almost forgotten young Gentry.

"You came in with him last night," the girl said accusingly. "You came upstairs with him—I've found out that much already from Wilkins. Now Don's gone."

"Gone?"

"Gone," Eileen Gentry said. "His room was not slept in last night. You were the last man seen with him."

He faced the girl gravely. "I met your brother on the train last night," he said. "We were strangers—I never saw him before. We walked to the hotel together. The last I saw of him was in the hall outside, when he was unlocking the door to his room. If he's gone I'm mighty sorry, but I don't know anything about it."

Should he tell her of that affair on the station platform last night, when he had interceded between her brother and hatchet-faced Joe Turpin? This girl was badly worried. Her face, her manner, the fact that she had thrown a gun on him—all these things testified that she was afraid of something.

She stared up at him. She whispered, "You're lying to me." But now there was no assurance in her voice, and her blue eyes were shadowed pools filled with a haunting fear.

"I'm not lying," Jeff Harbin said quietly. "I hope you will believe me. I'm a stranger, and I didn't know your brother until last night. If anything has happened, I don't know a thing about it."

Suddenly the big gun sagged in her hand. "I'm afraid—afraid!" she whispered, and started blindly toward the door. "Don wrote to me—"

It wasn't Jeff Harbin's business. He had trouble of his own, more trouble than he could handle. But this girl with the deep blue eyes had done something to him that he didn't quite understand. He wanted to help her if he could.

"Suppose you tell me about it," he said. "Maybe I can help."

She rested a hand on the door. "Our name is Gentry," she said bitterly. "That would explain most of it to anyone who knows this country."

"I'm a stranger," Harbin said.

"Lige Gentry was our father," she said. "He was the man who started the bank here in Alagordo. He—disappeared—a year ago."

"Disappeared?"

"A hundred thousand dollars disappeared with him. They said he stole it. They said he looted his own bank and ran away!"

AND then Harbin remembered a letter he had received from Red McGuire months before. Red had made mention of hard times—had said something about losing five hundred dollars in a bank failure. Red had said that the president of the bank had gone south with the money.

"It broke the bank," said Eileen Gentry. "It ruined a lot of people—cost some of them their life's savings. I—I can understand why they should be bitter. But it isn't fair to blame us. It isn't fair to blame Don—"

"You think that's—what happened?"

"I don't know." She made a hopeless little gesture. "People have been bitter. They've made threats. Don wrote me that someone tried to kill him in Denver—he's been over there, taking treatments for his foot. He's crippled, you know. He didn't tell me very much about it—"

She straightened to face Jeff Harbin defiantly. "It isn't fair! We've done everything we could—both of us—to pay it back. We turned everything that was left over to the bank—horses, cows, everything but the ranch itself. We couldn't give that to them because it was left in trust until I'm twenty-one. That's next month. Then they can have the ranch, too!"

It was all Greek to Jeff Harbin. "Maybe you're imagining things," he said slowly. "Maybe your brother just stepped out to visit friends, or something. Maybe he's gone on to the ranch."

Her father had disappeared. Her father had looted a bank and ruined a community and dropped from sight. Now her brother was gone. To Jeff Harbin, it seemed that Eileen Gentry had had more

than a fair share of trouble. He couldn't help thinking about that business on the station platform last night. No need to tell her that. Not yet.

"I'm sorry I bothered you," the girl was saying. "I—I must have been a little crazy, I guess. I thought you were a—a gunman, or something, so I sneaked into your room—"

"I left Don in the hall outside," Harbin said. "I haven't seen him since. I wish that I could help you."

She tucked the gun inside her blouse. "I'll look around," she said. "I may ride out to the ranch again. After all, Don doesn't know I'm home—I was teaching school over at Piñon, but the kids got measles and I got a vacation. I hope you'll forgive me."

From the hall, Jeff Harbin watched until the bright blond head had dropped from sight below the level of the stairs. He went back to his room and sat down on the bed. It wasn't his affair, and yet he couldn't seem to put it from his mind. That crippled boy—that slim and lovely girl—

Their father had looted a bank and disappeared. They had been left behind to carry the disgrace. Strange business!

Harbin stretched long legs and went out into the hallway. He tried the door of the room next to his own, the room that had been assigned to young Gentry last night. The door was unlocked. He went inside.

THE bed was rumpled and disarrayed, but there was nothing else to show that the room had been occupied. He was turning back toward the hall when he saw a spot of color on the floor behind the dresser. It was a small red book. He picked it up. It was, beyond all doubt, the same book Don Gentry had handed him on the train last night.

He recalled the cryptic remark of the crippled boy: "If I don't call for this by morning, give it to Sheriff Grubb."

Sheriff Grubb was dead now, and Jeff Harbin was wanted for his murder; three separate posses were out looking for him.

And in the very town in which the sheriff had been killed, Jeff Harbin was sitting on a bed in a narrow room and thumbing through the pages of a red notebook.

It was a diary—he saw that at once—a diary once kept by Lige Gentry, the banker who had disappeared. On the front page was Gentry's signature, and below was the first entry in the book.

Jan. 1. Snow again today—good for the range. Letter from Don arrived—he reports progress with the leg. He is a brave boy. Eileen is visiting the Vickers over the holidays.

Jeff Harbin's eyes skipped over the pages, remembering the importance Don Gentry had seemed to attach to this little book. It recorded, for the most part, unimportant items, the day-by-day record of a man precise in habits, but too busy to bother with details. There were items touching upon the bank, on business affairs, and there were intimate bits of family life. Nothing here to suggest that the writer was a thief who, even then, was contemplating the looting of his bank, the abandonment of his family.

Harbin came to the end of it at last—the record of events of the last week entered in the book.

June 27. Something has happened to the lock in our new vault. It will not work, although both Hasley and myself have worked on it. I am writing Kansas City for a repair man—too much money on hand to trust to a vault which will not lock. I am sleeping in the bank tonight.

June 28. Jud Bennett's gang stuck up the Monte Vista bank ten days ago and are reported still in the county. I hope they keep away from here, at least until our vault is repaired. Letter from Don today. He is cheerful. Poor kid, I am afraid he will always limp.

There were notes covering the activities of three more days, during which the

writer made no further mention of the defective vault. Then, the final entry—

July 2. Abe Slater placed thirty thousand dollars on deposit today, having sold his ranch to Ross Huffman for cash. Nearly a hundred thousand in currency on hand—and a vault which can't be locked! I talked with Fiddler Jordan today—he has the only substantial safe in town, in the Pioneer. Tomorrow is Sunday, and the next day will be the Fourth of July, a legal holiday. I am thinking of transferring the money to Jordan's safe until Tuesday.

There it ended. The entry for July 2nd was the last one in the diary. Jeff Harbin closed the book softly, understanding now why crippled Don Gentry had been so anxious that it should reach the sheriff. There was food for thought here. Harbin opened the book again to glance at the final sentence:

I am thinking of transferring the money to Jordan's safe until Tuesday.

Jordan—Fiddler Jordan. That would be that enormous tub of a man he had seen in the saloon a little while ago. The fat man with the booming laugh, who had told the joke to Rube Mosher. And Mosher had found the body of dead Sheriff Grubb. A queer thread of logic seemed to be running through the pattern of events, but Harbin could make nothing of it. Don Gentry had disappeared—

Was the answer here, hidden behind words in this little red book? Had Lige Gentry transferred the money to Jordan's safe, as he had said he might do in his diary? Had he been killed? Would that explain it?

Eileen Gentry had told him that someone had tried to kill her brother in Denver. Harbin himself knew that the crippled boy had been stopped on the railroad platform last night by a man who very possibly might have contemplated murder. Could it be that this little book was that important?

"A hundred thousand dollars is a lot

of money," Harbin thought, and rubbed his lean jaw thoughtfully.

A lot of dollars. Enough to ruin a whole community—to blacken a man's good name, to mar the future of his children. Yes, it was a lot of money.

Harbin rolled a cigarette and tried to tell himself that it wasn't his affair. He was in a jam himself; he had a full-time job of his own on his hands. Yet he couldn't put that crippled boy out of his head; and he couldn't forget Eileen Gentry.

HE HAD thought that he might see the girl again, might have a chance to give her the diary he had found, but the afternoon wore through and he concluded finally that she must have gone back to the ranch. At last he ploughed through dust to the livery stable, across the street from the hotel. A little, white-whiskered oldster was sweeping out the office.

"I want a bronc to hire," said Harbin. "I want to ride out to the Gentry ranch—Lige Gentry's ranch."

The little man put his broom aside. "Lige Gentry's gone," he said sharply. "Pulled out long ago—broke the town first, and then pulled out. You can't miss the ranch, though. Eight miles straight north along the road and you come to a fork. There's a wooden sign with a Star Cross burned on it. That was Lige's brand, in the days when the Gentrys were flying high."

He stumped back to the stalls, brought out a rangy sorrel horse, threw a saddle on the animal.

"How long has Gentry been gone?" Harbin asked him.

"That's easy," the little hostler said. "Nigh onto a year now. He pulled freight on a Sunday—July the third. The next day was the Fourth."

"I had an idea it would be," Harbin said, and he climbed aboard the sorrel. As he turned northward out of town, it occurred to him that he was risking the chance of being picked up by one of those possses now out looking for Red McGuire and himself.

The afternoon was gone. He held the rented mount to a steady, ground-covering jog, but even so, darkness was almost on him when he saw a Star Cross, burned on a board beside the road, and pointing to a side road which turned west, into the shadowed darkness of a rock-walled canyon. And it was quite dark when at last, far ahead of him, Jeff Harbin saw a gleam of light.

He rode down a dusty lane. He opened a wooden gate and went through, and before him was a great frame house. The front door was open and light flowed out across the wide porch, and Harbin saw five horses anchored in line to the railing of the porch. He added his sorrel to the string and mounted the steps.

From the shadows a man stepped forth to meet him. "What can we do for you?" he asked, his voice flat and unfriendly.

"I'd like to see Eileen Gentry," Harbin said.

"She's busy now," the man said. In levis, he was long and lean, with a gun strapped on his hip. "Come back some other time."

The front door was open, and from his position on the porch Harbin could see into a large, well-lighted room. Eileen Gentry was seated beside a long table. Rube Mosher was standing in the center of the room, looking curiously toward the door, and Harbin saw fat Fiddler Jordan standing beside an open desk. There were more men in the room, but before he could check them off, he saw Rube Mosher start toward the door.

The man in levis spoke harshly. "I told you she was busy, mister!" he said. "Suppose you ramble on! Come back some other time!"

But he made a fatal error then, for his hand moved in threatening gesture toward the black gun at his hip. And suddenly, for no reason that he could understand, Jeff Harbin was seeing red. His gun came up out of nowhere.

"Suppose you get to hell outa the way!" he said. "I came here to see Miss Gentry. If she's busy, I reckon she can speak for herself."

Rube Mosher's big body blotted out light in the open doorway. He loomed huge, formidable, his dark face in shadow.

"What goes on?" he said.

Harbin showed him the gun. "This," Jeff Harbin said, "goes off! Back up! I want to speak to Eileen Gentry!"

RUBE MOSHER stood solidly in the doorway. His heavy voice rasped, "What do you want?"

Harbin juggled the gun. "I'm hell for politeness. Still, I don't see how it could concern you, friend. I rode out to see Miss Gentry."

For a long moment Mosher made no move. He turned at last, deliberately, and his voice floated back to Harbin on the porch.

"Gent here claims he wants to see Miss Gentry, Fiddler!" He looked at Jeff Harbin. "Come on in."

Harbin let his gun drop back in leather and stepped around Rube Mosher and into the lighted room. Eileen Gentry came to her feet as he entered, and he saw that the girl's face was white and tense. Fat Fiddler Jordan stood on pillared legs and watched him without interest.

Harbin looked straight at the girl. "I didn't mean to bust in like this. I rode out from town to see you."

Her smile was something for a man to remember. "It's all right," she said. "I believe these men are leaving soon. If you're not in a hurry—"

"Not any," Harbin said. He moved a chair, sat down.

Fat Fiddler Jordan closed the desk. His fat, pink face managed to be at once paternal and regretful. His voice was a throaty gurgle. "I'm sorry about all this, Eileen. I was a director in the bank, and I must do what I can. I haven't liked any part of it."

Her voice was cool, skeptical. "I understand. Please don't apologize, Mr. Jordan."

Rube Mosher stood quietly by the open door. Harbin's glance caught on him for an instant, and again it struck him that he had seen this big, dark-faced man before.

Fiddler Jordan picked up his hat, waddled toward the door. "Good night, Eileen," he said. His small, expressionless eyes flicked over Jeff Harbin thoughtfully, and Harbin thought of that final sentence in Lige Gentry's diary:

I am thinking of transferring the money to Jordan's safe until Tuesday.

"We'll ride," said Fiddler Jordan.

They cleared out of the room. One man remained, a little, saddle-warped old waddy with a sandy mustache who seemed to belong here at the ranch. Harbin waited until the pound of hoofs had faded.

"It's not my business," he said, "I may be butting in. Still, that looked funny to me."

"That was a searching party," Eileen Gentry said.

"Searching party!"

"They seemed to think they would find something that would tell them where father had gone, or where the money went. When I rode up just a little while ago, they were ransacking the house."

"You didn't find your brother?"

She shook her head wearily. "No. I couldn't find him in town—and he hasn't been at the ranch."

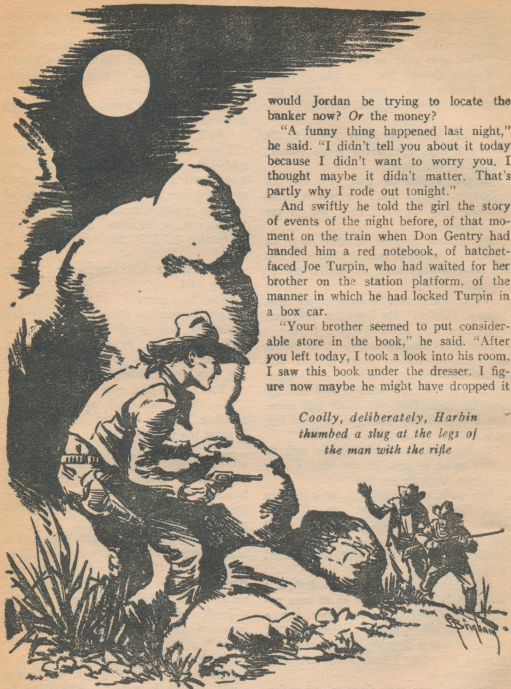
Harbin stirred in his chair. "I'm a stranger. Still, that seemed somewhat high-handed tonight, that searching party business. That fat jasper seems pretty important in this country, but searching people's houses—"

"Oh, it was legal enough—they had a search warrant. I didn't see it, but they showed it to Uncle Billy." She gestured toward the little man with the sandy mustache. "And Rube Mosher wears a badge—Jordan got him a special appointment sometime back, when Jordan's Pothook outfit was having rustler trouble."

"Jordan's a cowman, eh?"

"He owns the Pothook brand, a big outfit. Jordan is wealthy—everything he touches seems to turn to money. Rube Mosher is his foreman."

JEFF HARBIN thought of words scrawled in a diary. He shook his head thoughtfully. All during that long



would Jordan be trying to locate the banker now? Or the money?

"A funny thing happened last night," he said. "I didn't tell you about it today because I didn't want to worry you. I thought maybe it didn't matter. That's partly why I rode out tonight."

And swiftly he told the girl the story of events of the night before, of that moment on the train when Don Gentry had handed him a red notebook, of hatchet-faced Joe Turpin, who had waited for her brother on the station platform, of the manner in which he had locked Turpin in a box car.

"Your brother seemed to put considerable store in the book," he said. "After you left today, I took a look into his room. I saw this book under the dresser. I figure now maybe he might have dropped it

*Coolly, deliberately, Harbin
thumbed a slug at the legs of
the man with the rifle*

ride out from town he had been building a theory in his mind, and now it was beginning to look as if the theory wouldn't hold water. For if Lige Gentry had placed that money in Fiddler Jordan's safe, why

deliberately—might have left it there to be found."

He handed her the book. "It's a diary. Your dad's, I think."

Eileen Gentry took the little book,

turned it in slim fingers, opened the cover. "It is—it's dad's diary. He always kept one. He was particular about it."

"The last item is dated just a day or so before he disappeared. It made me wonder somewhat."

She was turning pages slowly. Harbin waited patiently. The little man with the sandy mustaches fidgeted in his seat. At last the girl closed the book.

"There never was a finer man than my father," she said. "There was never a man more honest. The bank was his life. I've always known that he didn't steal that money—that there must be some other explanation."

"You read that part at the last?"

"I read it," Eileen Gentry said.

"You think maybe he did leave that money with Fiddler Jordan?"

She shook her head wearily. "I don't know what to think. Jordan owned the Pioneer saloon then. He'd taken it in on a mortgage, and he sold it out afterward. He was one of Dad's best friends."

"Lemme see that book!" said Uncle Billy suddenly.

He ran stubby fingers through the pages. He stopped at the last entry, read it through slowly, his lips moving with the words. He stood up, pointed a shaking finger at the girl.

"That's it!" he cried. "There's the answer right there, Eileen! There's where the hundred thousand dollars went—the money they said Lige stole!"

"We can't be sure, Uncle Billy."

"Listen to me, girl!" the little man said harshly. "I was in the Pioneer that day myself. Lige came through while I was at the bar, and he was carrying a suitcase. I remember wondering about it at the time—it was just after banking hours. Lige went on through to the office in back. The safe is back there, you savvy. The saloon was empty at the time—just me on one side of the bar and Long Jim on the other. Fiddler Jordan was back in the office. Lige went back there. I never saw him again."

Eileen Gentry was white-faced, trembling. "He wasn't a thief," she whispered.

"I've always known he wasn't a thief!"

An hour Jeff Harbin stayed at the Star Cross. When he left, Eileen Gentry walked with him to the porch. They had decided by then that, in the absence of a duly appointed sheriff, she should turn the red notebook over to the county judge. On the moon-drenched porch, the girl was slim and lovely.

"I'll never be able to thank you enough," she told Jeff Harbin. "This—this may clear my father's name, at least."

"I hope things turn out right," he said.

And then he rode away—rode away wondering how things could ever turn out right for that girl he had left standing on a moonlit porch. But it might be that the diary would serve to clear Lige Gentry's name.

And Don Gentry? What had happened to him? Had he disappeared, just as his father had disappeared before him? Did that little red book hold the answer to both mysteries? Had Don Gentry dropped from sight because he knew too much?

He shook his head. This was strange range, and there was much he didn't know. Gladly would he have helped the girl in any way he could, but there was little he could do.

HE RODE slumped over in the saddle, letting the sorrel horse make the pace. A sliver of moon floated overhead. He jogged through a sloping cut, where trees laid a shadow across the road.

He heard the swish of a rope that brought him wide awake all at once, but too late. From the dark mass of trees above the cut, a rope curled through the air to tighten across his shoulders. One arm was caught. He felt the loop jerked tight, heard a snarling command:

"Snake him down!"

To fight that rope was folly. Harbin knew that. Swiftly, instinctively, he did the one right thing. He jerked the sorrel back, spun him around, and with the rope tightening around arms and shoulders, he shoved steel to the horse and sent him charging straight up the darkness of the slope, straight toward a patch of trees

from whence had come that swift rope.

In the darkness he saw shadowy forms diving away from the plunging horse. He had gained slack in the rope now, and he pulled the loop loose and flipped it over his head. His hand found his gun, and, reining down the frightened horse, he sprayed trees and brush with bullets.

Crimson flame stabbed at him from somewhere just ahead. The high-walled mountains sent crashing back the echo of roaring guns. There was a sharp stab of pain above the elbow of his left arm, and he knew then that he had been hit. Deliberately he emptied his Colt, and then he whirled the sorrel and sent him plunging across the hillside.

Beyond the shelter of a hog-back ridge, he pulled the horse down. He sat quietly in saddle for a moment, listening for sounds of pursuit. He heard nothing. Blood was running down his arm into his left hand, and a queer, hot anger was pounding through his veins. He knew he had been ambushed by some of Fiddler Jordan's men. He knew there couldn't be any other explanation for the attack.

He left the saddle presently, left his horse anchored to a tree. He climbed the ridge and looked across moonlit space toward the patch of darkness from which the attack had come. From here he had lost sight of the road. At his back, and below him, the hog-back ridge flattened out into a level bowl. He could hear nothing now of those men who had tried to drag him from saddle, but he knew that they must still be in this immediate neighborhood.

"They want war!" he muttered.

He might have ridden off in peace, but he chose another course. He went back to where the sorrel waited. Working fast, out of a length of rope he contrived a set of hobbles for the sorrel's forelegs and slipped them on the horse. He knotted bridle reins across the saddle horn and turned the sorrel loose. The horse, already jumpy, began to drift down the hillside. Harbin loaded his gun and went back to wait at the top of the hog-back ridge.

The horse was dropping down the hill-

side, toward the level flat below. Awkward in the hobbles, he was making plenty of noise. Loose rocks clattered after him. And, crouching behind the shelter of a



Fiddler Jordan

great boulder, Harbin saw a man with a rifle break from a patch of trees fifty yards away and start across the moonlit space of open ground. A second man fol-

lowed after him. Fooled by sounds made by the hobbled horse, they must have concluded that Harbin was beating a retreat.

He waited until they were very close; no more than forty feet away. They were toiling up the slope toward the top of the hog-back ridge. He heard a rasping voice say, "He's heading down the hillside!"

Jeff Harbin spoke suddenly. "You're wrong, mister. I'm right here behind a rock. Which one of you gents threw that rope?"

IT WAS funny. Both men were in the open, in bright moonlight. Tricked by noises made by the straying horse, they had taken no precautions. For a single moment they stood rooted, like two figures turned into stone. Then, with a snarling oath, the man in front threw up his rifle, firing frantically at the sound of that mocking voice.

It was moonlight, and they were too close for Harbin to miss. Coolly, deliberately, he thumbed a slug at the legs of the man with the rifle, and saw the man go down as though his feet had been cut out under him. The second man turned to flight. Harbin splashed lead at him, but the running man dived for trees and disappeared in darkness.

The first man was on the ground, groaning. At last he shoved to his knees and began to crawl painfully back toward the

trees in which the other had disappeared. Jeff Harbin could have killed him then, but he let the man go. He had balanced the ledger on that bullet-hole through his arm, and some of his first anger had evaporated. He watched until the crawling man was swallowed by the darkness.

Some time later he heard horses moving beyond the ridge and knew that the enemy was giving up the field. He waited until the sounds had faded into distance, and then he dropped down the hillside toward that level bowl, where he anticipated no difficulty in picking up the horse he had hobbled and turned free on the slope.

But the moon went behind banked clouds as he descended and left the land in darkness. Reaching the level ground, he could see no sign of the sorrel. A judicious use of matches showed him tracks, and he could tell that the animal was still hobbled. Optimistically he took up the trail.

A long time later Jeff Harbin came to a cut-bank canyon. He had stumbled all the way across that level plain and failed to catch up with the sorrel horse. He had lost the animal and, worse yet, he had managed to lose himself, for right now he had no very clear idea as to where the road might be. He was in strange country. He went on through the canyon, cursing ruefully the motive which had caused him to set himself afoot.

He reached a road at last. He used more matches here, fruitlessly. There were hoof-prints in the soft dust, but no prints of a horse wearing hobbles, and the tracks that showed were headed in the wrong direction. Somewhere along the way the hobbled horse had detoured on him. Harbin decided to give up the unprofitable pursuit. He would have to walk back to the Star Cross and borrow another mount.

The moon came out again from behind the clouds. Harbin trudged disgustedly through white dust, in high-heeled boots which had never been meant for walking. A blister formed on one heel and grew steadily. Jeff Harbin trudged on. A mile, and another, and another.

There was only moonlight now. And

Harbin was a stranger in this land, and he didn't know the road, but presently the gnawing conviction began to fasten on him that this road he traveled now was not the road to the Star Cross.

And then at last the road dipped in a long, steep slope ahead of him, and Jeff Harbin knew his worst fears had been realized. There had been no such dip in the road he had traveled earlier tonight. This was not the road to the Star Cross.

He sat down on a rock to think things over. "Of all the dumb fools!" he murmured feelingly.

Clumsily he rolled a cigarette, while he considered the situation. He was lost on strange range. He was afoot. He was wounded. He was wandering aimlessly through territory which even now was being combed relentlessly by half a hundred men, all looking for the man who had killed Sheriff Grubb.

And he, Jeff Harbin, was the man they were looking for!

PAIN from his wounded arm was pulsing in slow waves through his body, and his left hand was wet and sticky with blood. Scraping brush together, he built an Indian fire, and by the flickering light he examined the jagged hole where the slug had torn through the muscles of his left arm. He tore his undershirt into strips and awkwardly bandaged the wound to stop the flow of blood.

He put the fire out then. He was lost. He had no idea where he was, and all this country looked alike. He shoved to his feet again and started wearily down the road. He would have to trust to luck to bring him out.

The wounded arm throbbed and pounded. He stopped again, long enough to make a sling out of the same bandana handkerchief which had once served him as a mask. With the arm cradled, the pain decreased. He thought of water—long drinks of water, out of a dripping, moss-covered bucket.

At long last, and far ahead, he saw a bright gleam of light, which vanished almost at once. He kept on toward where

the light had appeared, and wondered if he were walking into a trap. The moon flitted in and out of clouds, and finally Harbin saw a small cabin, perched on rising ground, at the head of a shadowed draw. That way he turned his steps.

A light showed in the window as he drew nearer to the cabin. He remembered he was a fugitive, a wanted man, and the thought lent caution to all his movements. He circled the cabin and came down on it through a shelter of trees and brush bordering the clearing. Creeping closer, he looked through a window into a room.

It was a kitchen, sparsely furnished. There were a stove and table and chairs, and Harbin could see the bulk of a cupboard in one corner of the room. A man was seated at the table, doing something with a length of rope. Jeff Harbin could see his back, his head of tangled black hair. The man turned his head suddenly.

Then it was that the big cowboy knew that luck had surely turned against him. This man he knew! This was Joe Turpin, the hatchet-faced man he had locked in a box car in the railroad yard the night before!

Harbin's lips curled back in a painful grin as he crouched there at the dirty window, peering in at lanky Joe Turpin. This was the final touch—there would be no help here. After a long moment, the puncher faded back, until he stood again in the fringe of trees surrounding the cabin.

Behind the cabin was a barn and a quakie-pole corral. It occurred to him that Turpin must have a horse or two within the barn. He might steal a horse.

But in the end Harbin voted the idea down. To try to steal a horse would be to take a chance on arousing Turpin; and that might result in setting a posse pounding at his heels. It would be wiser for him to wait for daylight, and then try to find his way back to the Star Cross.

At his back a wooded slope climbed steeply toward the distant mountain wall. He dropped down into timber, to sprawl his lanky frame at last wearily beneath a pinyon tree, resolved to wait for daylight

before trying to find his way out of this maze.

THE night wore on. Beneath the pinyon tree Jeff Harbin tried for sleep that would not come. Toward dawn he dozed fitfully, to wake with the sun shining down through leaves into his face, with his wounded left arm stiff and throbbing.

Standing up, he saw that, from his position here, high up on the wooded slope, he had a clear view of Turpin's cabin, down below. Blue smoke made a thin plume above the chimney of the cabin, and as Harbin stood looking down into the clearing, he saw the hatchet-faced man carrying a bucket of water from a spring.

Beyond the cabin he could see the road he had followed the night before running straight out across a level plain. On that road now dust was stirring in the far distance, and it appeared that a party of horsemen was riding in the direction of Turpin's cabin. Joe Turpin came out into his yard and stood looking toward that moving cloud of dust.

Once more the hatchet-faced man entered the cabin, to emerge with something that might have been a tray. He cut across the yard toward a sod-covered cellar some fifty yards beyond the house. He unlocked the cellar door and disappeared. Minutes later he came out, empty-handed.

The dust was closer now, and Harbin saw that it had been kicked up by four horsemen riding toward the cabin. The men pulled up before Joe Turpin's door, and the hatchet-faced man came out to talk with them. Big Jeff Harbin felt a growing interest in the scene. One of the horsemen was Fiddler Jordan; and he was sure that another was Rube Mosher.

After a brief conversation, Fiddler Jordan and Mosher followed Joe Turpin around the cabin. The other two riders remained in saddle, but Jordan and Rube Mosher trailed Turpin to the door of the sod-covered cellar. A thought stirred in Jeff Harbin's weary brain.

Don Gentry! Had blind luck led him to the crippled boy?

He waited patiently. The pain of his wounded arm forgotten now, he crouched in brush and watched the door of that sod-covered cellar. The three were staying inside a long time—and the longer they stayed, the greater grew Jeff Harbin's conviction that he had stumbled onto the answer to the mystery of young Don Gentry's disappearance.

The three came out finally, talked for a moment in the yard, and then Fiddler Jordan and Rube Mosher once more climbed into saddle and the four men rode away. Joe Turpin went back to the cellar and seemed to be locking the door. Then he returned to his cabin.

Fifteen painful minutes later, Jeff Harbin knelt in underbrush not fifty yards from that cabin. That long it had taken him to reach this position, snaking his way cautiously through trees and brush. Now, wounded arm hanging in a sling, he gave thought to the best way to approach the cabin.

Bright daylight now, and fifty yards to cross, with Joe Turpin in the cabin! Turpin was not a pleasant customer at best, and now, if what Harbin suspected were true, the man would be pure rattle-snake.

CIRCLING the clearing carefully, Harbin saw that one side of the cabin had no windows, and he knew that here lay his best chance to cross that open space unobserved. He broke from shelter to race down on the cabin, and he pulled up unseen in the shelter of log walls.

Gun in hand, he crawled around the corner. He reached a window and cautiously peered inside. Neither blind nor curtain had the window, and the cowboy found himself peering into an empty, untidy bedroom. He crawled on. From that one glance inside he knew that the cabin had but two rooms, and since the bedroom was empty, Joe Turpin must now be in the kitchen.

He slid around a corner of the cabin, and he saw then that the kitchen door was closed. He had to crawl under a window to reach the small stoop before the

door. On the stoop, he came swiftly to his feet, gripped the door-knob with his left hand. But at the precise moment that he set to jerk that door wide and fling himself into the room, he heard a small sound at his back.

He whirled like a spinning top. Joe Turpin had just come through the door in the makeshift stable behind the house. He was just as surprised as Jeff Harbin. They weren't thirty feet apart. Then suddenly Joe Turpin was galvanized into action. With a snarled oath, he stabbed for his gun.

The two shots blended in one report, and echoes bounced back from the rugged mountain wall. Harbin heard Joe Turpin's bullet smash through the wooden door above his head. He saw the hatchet-faced man take two quick steps and go face-down in the dirt.

Harbin closed in on him. Turpin's gun lay on the ground. The man himself was sprawled face-down, and Harbin turned him over. He saw a great bloody stain spreading swiftly across the front of Turpin's faded blue shirt, and knew that the other man had passed beyond the need of help.

He crossed to the sod-covered cellar, but there was a rusty padlock on the door, and he had to go back and search Turpin's pockets for the key. He unlocked the padlock and pulled the cellar door open. He went into cool darkness, and for an instant, after bright sunshine, his eyes could make out nothing at all within the room.

Then he heard a voice. "What do you want now?" that voice was inquiring wearily. "I've told you all I know!"

Harbin lit a match. A man, bound hand and foot, was lying in a corner of the cellar. Don Gentry!

"Not yet you haven't," Jeff Harbin said cheerfully. "You haven't told me what you're doing here."

WITH a pocketknife, Harbin slashed the ropes that held Don Gentry bound. He had to help the crippled boy to his feet, had to half-carry him through

the cellar door and into the bright sunshine. He saw then that Gentry's face was covered with dried blood from an ugly gash across his forehead.

"I've heard tell of guardian angels," the boy said weakly. "I never much believed in it, but I guess you must be mine. This is twice."

Harbin was looking at the gashed forehead. "How did that happen, kid?"

"Rube Mosher hit me with a gun."

"Why?"

"He didn't say," Don Gentry said.

"How did they get you out here?"

"They came into my room that night," Don said. He shook his head. "Funny—it was just the night before last, wasn't it? It seems like something that happened months ago. I was asleep, and when I woke up, one man was standing over me, holding a lighted match, and another was pushing a gun against my head."

"Who were they?"

"Three of them. Joe Turpin—I didn't know the others. They made me dress, and took me down the back stairs of the hotel. They had horses waiting in the alley."

"What did they want?"

"Money."

"Money!" Harbin said.

Young Don Gentry's voice sounded tired. "They wanted the hundred thousand dollars my dad was supposed to have stolen from the Alagordo bank. You see, Fiddler Jordan and Rube Mosher think that money is somewhere out at our ranch."

Harbin said, "This thing is getting complicated. Let's go inside and wash that cut, and slap a bandage on it. You can tell me while I'm patching you up."

There was a fire in the cabin, and hot water on the stove, and Harbin set to work sponging blood from the ugly gash on the crippled boy's forehead. "You say they figure the money's still at the ranch?" he said.

"That's what they told me," Gentry said. "Oh, they told me quite a lot before they were through with me. I guess they figured that dead men tell no tales, and

that I was as good as dead. Only they had to let me live a while longer, because they thought I had some information they needed. They did quite a lot of talking—and yet I should have figured it out long ago myself, because it was all there clear and plain. Only—Fiddler Jordan had me fooled."

Harbin soaked a rag in water. "He's a peculiar jasper."

"He was one of Father's best friends," Don Gentry said. "He's eaten dinner out at our place a hundred times. He was big and fat and good-natured, and everybody liked him. He always had a joke, Fiddler did. It used to be funny seeing him and Rube Mosher trailing together, because everybody knew that Mosher was a gunman and a killer. And all the time, the Fiddler was worse than Rube Mosher ever thought of being. Mosher hit me with a gun. But it took Fiddler Jordan to do this—" And suddenly he held his left hand up, and Jeff Harbin saw that the fingertips were blistered and red, and raw. The puncher took that pitiful hand and stared at it.

"Jordan—did that?"

"He held matches to them. Seemed to think I wasn't talking quite fast enough."

Harbin's lips tightened. "That was about the money?"

"You've got a right to know," Don Gentry said. "It goes way back. You see, when Dad was in the bank, he had a cashier named Hasley. This Hasley was supposed to be from the East—but somehow Fiddler Jordan had something on him. I don't know what it was, because Fiddler didn't go into that, but he had enough on Hasley to get him to jam up the lock in the new vault Dad had just had put in the bank. Hasley fixed it somehow so the lock wouldn't work."

Jeff Harbin nodded, remembering Lige Gentry's diary.

FIDDLER JORDAN was figuring on a bank robbery then," Gentry said slowly. "Of course he'd have stayed in the background—he was just the brains of the deal. But he knew the lock was

on the bum and he was ready to move—and then Dad came to him one day and told him all about the lock—you see, he was Dad's friend. And Dad wanted to know if he could use the Fiddler's safe for a few days, until he could get a man to fix the vault. You should have heard Fiddler laugh when he told that part of it. He's got quite a sense of humor, Fiddler Jordan has.

"So he told Dad sure, that he could leave the money in his safe. That was when Fiddler owned the Pioneer saloon. He sold out afterward. The safe was in the office in back of the saloon, and that same afternoon Dad brought a suitcase back and put it in the Fiddler's safe. The Fiddler locked the door. That was on a Saturday afternoon."

He looked up at Jeff Harbin. "They killed Dad that same night," he said steadily. "Rube Mosher trailed him out of town and shot him in the back. And then he buried the body."

Harbin shook his head. "Fiddler Jordan told you that?"

"He told me all about it. He seemed proud of the trick. Dad was dead and buried, and the money was gone from the bank, and people were bound to figure that Dad had stolen the money and run away. And all the time, you see, the money was in that suitcase back in Fiddler Jordan's safe."

The crippled boy stared up at big Jeff Harbin. "Only it didn't work that way," he said. "The suitcase was full of books."

"Books!"

"Books," Don Gentry said. "There wasn't any money. Maybe Dad had a suspicion that day—maybe he changed his plans—but anyhow, some way he crossed the Fiddler up. The money wasn't in the bank, and it wasn't in the suitcase."

"Lemme see that hand!" said Harbin.

Gentry held out his burned fingers. Jeff Harbin found some salve and went to work on the burns.

"It was a hundred thousand dollars," Gentry said. "It was gone and Dad was gone, and everybody figured he'd run off

with the money—everybody but Fiddler Jordan. Fiddler knew what had happened, but he didn't know what had become of the money. He thought Dad must have hidden it out at the ranch, but he didn't know where. Then Eileen—that's my sis—and me began to sell off the stock, to give the money to the bank. We couldn't sell the ranch until Eileen was twenty-one."

He flinched slightly, as Harbin began to bandage the burned hand. "Eileen was teaching school over at Piñon. I was in the hospital in Denver. We'd left Uncle Billy Mort to sort of look after things at the ranch, but there were lots of times when Uncle Billy had to go to town. Fiddler Jordan and Rube Mosher went through the house a dozen times while Uncle Billy was gone, but they couldn't find any trace of the money. I guess both of them must have been half-crazy, thinking of all that money lying around somewhere and them not able to put a hand on it!"

"It would be aggravating," Harbin agreed.

"I took a trip home two months ago," Gentry said. "At the ranch I raked up all of Dad's old papers—everything I could find. I wanted to see if I couldn't find something—some reason to explain what had happened. I found a diary of Dad's, and in it was something that should have put me on Fiddler Jordan's trail right away. But I didn't get it then. You see, I'd known Fiddler Jordan ever since I'd been a kid and I thought he was one of Dad's best friends. But in this diary Dad had written about the lock of the vault, and he put down that he was thinking of leaving the bank money in Fiddler Jordan's safe for a few days."

CAREFULLY Jeff Harbin was bandaging that burned hand. Don Gentry watched him for a moment. "So I wrote to Jordan. I asked him if Dad had left anything with him before he disappeared. Jordan wrote back that he hadn't. But my letter must have worried him, because a week later my roommate was killed."

"Your roommate!"

"He was killed one night at the door of the rooming-house. He was just about my size, and he had a limp just like mine. We'd met in a doctor's office, where we both were taking the same treatment—that was how we started rooming together."

"You figure the bullet was meant for you?"

"I know it now," the boy said. "Fiddler Jordan had sent a man over to Denver to kill me. He didn't know what I'd found out, but he thought it might be dangerous. He told me about it today—just before he burned my fingers. That killing sorta opened my eyes. I thought maybe I better bring that diary back and show it to Sheriff Grubb. That was the night I met you on the train. I saw Joe Turpin waiting outside on the platform. I knew he worked for Fiddler Jordan off and on, and I had a hunch maybe he was waiting for me."

"I found that diary in your room yesterday," Harbin told him. "I gave it to your sister."

Don Gentry stared at him. "You—gave it to—Eileen? You're wrong! Eileen is teaching school over at Piñon—you *couldn't* have given it to her."

"There was some measles," Harbin explained. "She got a vacation. She's at the ranch. I was talking to her last night."

Gentry came to his feet. "You mean," he asked incredulously, "she's at the ranch now?"

"She should be. . . . What's the matter, kid?"

For the crippled boy was standing now, and he was staring at Jeff Harbin the way a man might stare at a ghost.

"She's at the ranch!" he said.

"What's wrong with that?"

The crippled boy's face was ghastly. "They were burning my fingers," he said unsteadily. "They seemed to think I might know of some secret hiding place where Dad had put the money. They thought I'd found out about it somehow. So I told them that there was a hidden compartment in the stone fireplace in the

living room. I told them I'd found a letter—that Dad had hidden the money there. They said they'd come back and kill me if I lied—but I knew they meant to do it anyhow."

"You mean there *isn't* any such compartment?"

Don Gentry shook his head. "No. It's just a fireplace—it was in the house when I was born. But Fiddler Jordan and Mosher think the money's there. And if Eileen is at the ranch—"

"I guess," said Jeff Harbin, "we better see can we rustle us a pair of broncs!"

THEY found two horses in the makeshift barn behind the cabin. Don Gentry's left hand was swathed in bandages now, and Harbin had a bullet-hole in his left arm, but between them they managed to get saddles on the horses. Harbin dragged the body of Joe Turpin to the shelter of the barn and closed the door. He came back and handed Turpin's gun to young Gentry.

"This might come in handy," he said.

Then they rode.

For a mile they followed that same dusty road over which Jeff Harbin had wandered aimlessly the night before, and then young Gentry, riding in front, quit the road to send his mount racing straight across a broken, gully-torn expanse of wasteland.

"We'll cut the ranch road in two miles," he shouted back to Harbin.

He could ride, that boy. He had one injured hand, one crippled foot, but he was setting a reckless, headlong pace across the broken ground, and Harbin was pounding at his heels. But Jeff Harbin's thoughts were riding far ahead.

For it was more than likely that Fiddler Jordan and his crowd were already at the ranch. There was the chance that they might have found nobody there—that Eileen and saddle-warped little Uncle Billy Mort might have ridden into town to deliver Lige Gentry's diary to the proper authorities. But there was another chance that Jordan might have found the girl still at the ranch.

Harbin shook his head. A man couldn't see into the future, he could only take things as they came. They went down a rock-strewn slope at breakneck speed. The cowboy saw a ribbon of white dust ahead of them, and then they were on the road to the Star Cross.

Don Gentry shot a glance at him. Beneath a white bandage, the boy's face was tense. "Three miles to the ranch," he said.

Harbin threw up a hand. "Wait!"

Gentry jerked his horse down. "What is it?"

"Listen to me, kid," Harbin said. He spoke swiftly, urgently. "Let's do some figuring ahead. Let's figure those jaspers are already at the ranch. The moment they see you, they'll know the play is over, and then all hell is going to break loose. And if Eileen is there—"

Don Gentry stared at him wildly. "We can't help that now! We've got to do what we can!"

"How far is it to Alagordo?"

"About nine miles."

"You're setting a good bronc there," Harbin said. "Pound him on the tail and you can make town in less than an hour. In another hour you can be at the ranch with a posse. We've got to remember there's three men riding with Fiddler Jordan—three tough gents, if I'm a judge. That figures the odds two to one."

"You mean"—Don Gentry was incredulous—"we should ride on to town for help?"

"You ride," said Harbin. "I'll go on to the ranch. I'm a stranger here. Those gents don't know me—they won't be looking for trouble from me. With any kind of luck, I'll be able to stall them until you can get back with help."

But Gentry shook his head grimly. "Eileen's my sister. You ride to town—I'm going to the ranch."

"You're riding to town," Jeff Harbin said. "You listen to me now, kid! This is the only way. We've got to think about Eileen!"

It took time—too much time—but in the end Jeff Harbin won his point. In

the end, persuaded against his wish, young Gentry whirled his mount and sent him racing at gallop down the road toward Alagordo. And before he had swung from sight around the first curve, Jeff Harbin was on the ground, examining tracks in the soft dust of the road.

He climbed back into saddle, knowing now what lay ahead.

FOUR riders had passed along this road just a little while before. In the soft dust, the tracks were still fresh, still undisturbed, Fiddler Jordan and Rube Mosher and two others were ahead of him!

He kicked his horse into a gallop, sent him racing down the road. He had his bearings now, and he knew where he was going. After two miles, he dived his mount into the shelter of a deep gulch running parallel to the road. He was building plans ahead.

This horse he was riding now had belonged to Joe Turpin, and it was possible that Jordan or Rube Mosher might recognize the animal. And that meant that he would have to discard the horse before he reached the ranch, that he would have to approach the Star Cross on foot. He would have to plan a story to explain that fact.

He reined his mount in abruptly. The gulch had widened suddenly, and ahead of him now, in the center of a great triangle of green plain, lay the buildings of the Star Cross brand. The big house sat on the top of a rolling knoll. Behind it lay buildings and sheds and pole corrals, and all the paraphernalia of what at one time must have been a big cow outfit. And before the long porch stood four horses, standing slack-hipped in the sunlight.

Deep in the high-walled gulch, Jeff Harbin anchored his horse. Crawling up the bank, he stopped for just a moment to study that peaceful scene spread out before him. Smoke curling from the chimney of a big white house—four horses standing side by side in sunshine before a porch—there was no further sign of life anywhere.

In the swift current of events, he had forgotten his wounded arm, but now, as he rested on the gulch-bank, pain rolled over him in slow waves, although the arm itself felt numb and dead, like a piece of wood. He brought his gun from holster, looked at it, and shoved it back into the leather. Then, crawling up the bank and stepping out boldly, he started down the dusty road toward the house.

He was in the open now, moving in plain sight of anyone who might be watching from the house. This part of it he didn't like, but there wasn't any other way that he could see. The house stood in the open, and to have tried to approach it by stealth would have used up time that Jeff Harbin didn't have to spare. He came to the big wooden gate before the lane. He went through, closed it carefully behind him, and walked on toward the house.

And if he had felt any faint doubt before, he knew now surely that this was Fiddler Jordan's crowd here at the house, for the big black horse, at the outside of the string, was the same black horse Fiddler Jordan had been riding that morning. For a moment Harbin's mind dwelt musingly on that monstrous man with the booming laugh and the baby face. He thought of Don Gentry's burned fingertips.

No matter now. The big house was very close, and in seconds, now, he would know what he was facing. He would know if the men had found Eileen here. He stepped up onto the porch. The living room door was open.

And then, suddenly, Rube Mosher's big square body filled the doorway. Rube Mosher had a six-gun swinging in his hand, and his face was like a mask.

"I guess," Rube Mosher said, "you better put your hands up, friend!"

JEFF HARBIN stopped. It was show-down, a trifle sooner than he had anticipated. He looked at Mosher's gun, and lifted his right hand shoulder high.

"I thought this was the Star Cross spread," he said. "I didn't know you

gents had moved in here permanently."

"Turn around," Rube Mosher said.

He came out on the porch to lift Harbin's gun from leather. Behind him Fiddler Jordan appeared in the doorway, to watch the operation with a bland smile on his fat, full-moon face. Mosher looked at him.

"What'll I do with him, Fiddler?"

The fat man beamed. "Bring him inside, Rube," he said genially. "Bring him right on in!"

Rube Mosher jolted his gun solidly against Harbin's back. "You heard what the Fiddler said!"

The fat man faded back into the living room. Jeff Harbin followed him.

He stopped just beyond the doorway. He saw Eileen Gentry seated quietly in a chair pushed back against the wall. The girl looked up at him as he entered the room, and there was some message in her blue eyes that Jeff Harbin couldn't read. She didn't speak. Her slim body was stiff and straight in the chair, and Harbin knew that her hands were bound behind her back. And then, not four feet from where he stood, the cowboy saw the body of little Uncle Billy Mort, lying face down in a spreading pool of blood, with a gun just beyond his outstretched fingers.

And big Jeff Harbin looked at a clock ticking on the mantel-piece across the room. Ten minutes after one! Don Gentry was racing in to town for help. How long had he been gone now? Thirty minutes?

Rube Mosher's gun was hard against his back. Fiddler Jordan was standing still, looking at him. The Fiddler's flabby hands were folded across his swelling paunch.

"You picked a poor time to call," said Fiddler Jordan. "What brought you here today?"

Ten minutes after one! Time—time was the trick now. Don Gentry should be nearing Alagordo. It would take a posse an hour to ride from town to the ranch. If he could stall this crowd—

A broken-nosed rider in levis and batwing chaps was leaning negligently against the big fireplace built into the farther

wall. Another, a smaller, fox-faced man, stood by the door. The fireplace was of stone, and it had been built solidly and well, but Harbin saw that now a corner had been torn away. Evidently he had come upon them in the very act of wrecking the fireplace, looking for that secret compartment which young Don Gentry had told them they would find hidden in its wall.

They would find no such compartment. In his desperate need, the crippled boy had built that story out of whole cloth. But it would take time for this crowd to wreck the fireplace—to find that they were following a false lead. And if Don Gentry met with no mishap along the road to Alagordo—

Jeff Harbin looked at fat Fiddler Jordan. "I'll tell you," he said slowly. "Some jaspers tried to dry-gulch me as I was riding into town last night. They shot me through the arm. I lost my horse, and then I got lost myself. I slept out last night, and I've been wandering these hills all morning. Then, just a little while ago, I saw this place, and thought maybe I could borrow a horse to get back to town."

"I see," said Fiddler Jordan. He stroked his fat chops musingly. He looked at Mosher, standing with the gun shoved against Harbin's back. "Suppose we tie him down, Rube? Suppose we tie him down, until we see what happens?"

THEY tied Jeff Harbin in a chair, across the room from Eileen Gentry. The broken-nosed puncher did the work, while Mosher stood by with his gun. Disregarding the wounded arm, they tied Jeff Harbin's wrists behind his back, and then they bound him in the chair. Then fat Fiddler Jordan spoke benignly.

"That will hold him, Spargo—that will do!" His little, flesh-buried eyes rolled over Harbin. "You see, my friend, you butted into a little private matter. We're busy now. But we'll get around to you."

Only by an effort did Jeff Harbin keep his eyes away from the clock. "Don't bother about me," he said mildly. "I can wait."

"Let's get on with the job, Rube," said Fiddler Jordan.

While Jeff Harbin watched from his chair, the men resumed their task of demolishing the big stone fireplace. Fiddler Jordan took no part in it. Fiddler Jordan stood by, a huge, grotesque figure of a man, with hands folded over his vast paunch, and watched Rube Mosher and broken-nosed Spargo tear at the solid stone of the fireplace wall. The fox-faced man had gone outside, apparently to serve as lookout.

It wasn't real, that scene. It was like something lifted out of a nightmare. Rube Mosher, his sleeves rolled back to show the great, corded muscles of his arms, was systematically tearing that fireplace apart with strokes of an iron bar. He laid the bar aside and picked up a sledge hammer. Spargo was trying to drag crushed rock out of his way, but it was Mosher who was doing all the work. He was smashing the fireplace into chunks of rock with crushing hammer blows.

And over against the wall Eileen Gentry sat in her chair and watched with never a word. She was slim and lovely, and she had known too much of trouble already, but she was not afraid. Her chin was high, and there was no fear in her face.

But it was Fiddler Jordan who dominated that scene. On pillared legs, the huge man stood braced, hands folded, and on his fat, full-moon face there was no least sign of emotion. Nothing showed through—not even curiosity—as big Rube Mosher smashed and hammered at the stone. Harbin thought of Don Gentry's horribly burned fingertips.

And then Rube Mosher laid the hammer down. One wall of the stone fireplace was completely gone, and the rest had been reduced to crumbled stone. Perspiration made a thin streak along Mosher's forehead, ran through the dark stubble on his jaws.

"That damn thing is just stone, Fiddler," he rasped. "That story was a lie. There ain't no secret compartment here."

"Now take it easy, Rube," said Fiddler. "You haven't reached the back. Keep on a little longer, Rube."

"I tell you there's nothing there!"

"It's a hundred thousand dollars if we find it, Rube. It's worth a little work. And we've got lots of time."

Twenty minutes to two! Don Gentry should have reached Alagordo by now. Perhaps right now a posse was forming in the town. How long would it take them to reach the ranch?

RUBE MOSHER picked up the hammer again. He smashed at the rock with savage, raging blows. He fought that fireplace with vindictive fury, as he might have fought a man. He grunted with each solid blow, stopping only long enough to wipe sweat from his eyes. Flying white rock-powder colored the dark stubble along his jaw. The hammer blows rang loudly through the big house.

Jeff Harbin watched. There was nothing in that fireplace—there had never been anything in it but solid stone. What would this crowd do when they found it out—when they understood at last, beyond all doubt, that crippled Don Gentry had sent them on a wild-goose chase? How much longer would it be before they knew?

Not long. The fireplace was crumbling under Mosher's furious assault; one side was completely demolished and the other was just a rubble of broken stone. In minutes, now, these men would know surely that they had been tricked.

And then Rube Mosher brought the hammer down in another smashing blow, and there was no ring to the sound. There was, instead, a dull and crunching noise that might have been made by a paste-board box collapsing, and Harbin saw that the head of the hammer had broken through the fireplace wall. Rube Mosher jerked the hammer out, struck three sharp, tapping blows. In the wall a black hole was appearing now.

Mosher laid the hammer aside. He went down on his knees, thrust hand and arm into that black and yawning hole. He fumbled there for a moment. He looked

up at Fiddler Jordan and his dark face was transfixed.

"It's here!" he cried. "The money's here!"

He brought his arm out then. In his closed hand he held a great, wadded mass of greenbacks!

TWO o'clock! Two o'clock—and everything was changed. Everything was changed now, because these men had found the money. It was strange. In desperation, trying to save himself from torture, young Don Gentry had sent them on a wild-goose chase—and he had sent them straight to that hidden cache! He hadn't meant to do that; Jeff Harbin knew the crippled boy hadn't known that the money was there. But there it was, and everything was changed because of it—and the clock on the wall across the room was striking two!

Rube Mosher was smashing at that fireplace again, tearing wider that black and yawning hole. He was working furiously, with a madman's strength. He went down on his knees, clawing back the loose rocks with his hands, and then from the hole he lifted a square iron strong-box. The lid was already open, and Mosher thrust a hand inside and came up with another handful of bills.

"A hundred thousand dollars!" he said, and his voice was soft and filled with wonder. "It's right here, Fiddler—every dime of it!"

He was piling money on the floor. He was pulling money from the iron box in great handfuls, package after package of green currency, and he was building a little mound in the center of the floor.

"Get a sack, Spargo," Fiddler Jordan said.

It didn't seem to touch the fat man. Rube Mosher's excited voice had brought the lookout from the porch, and the three of them were staring at the money, wide-eyed as children at a Christmas party, but Fiddler Jordan stood back, unmoved, unperturbed.

"Get a sack," he said. "We'll put it in a sack."

He wasn't quite human, that huge man. There was something wrong with him, some twisted kink in his brain that made him different from other men. If he hadn't known it before, Jeff Harbin knew it now. And Fiddler Jordan looked at the girl across the room.

"You see, Eileen my dear," he said, in his throaty, gurgling voice, "Lige stole the money, after all."

"That's a lie," the girl said clearly. "If Father put that money there, he had some good reason for it."

They were shoving the money into a gunny-sack—stuffing packages of currency into an old sack as if it was so much worthless paper. The fat man watched them idly. It didn't seem to touch him. He watched big Rube Mosher carry the money from the room, and then he spoke to Spargo.

"Take Eileen out of here," he said.

"Where?"

"The next room," said Fiddler Jordan.

Spargo shuffled toward the girl. Her hands bound behind her back, she stood up without speaking. She looked across at big Jeff Harbin with a smile. "Goodby," she said.

She caught the cowboy by surprise. "Goodby, Eileen," he said. It wasn't what he had meant to say at all, because he wasn't ready to say goodbye to Eileen Gentry yet, but now the girl was gone.

The girl was gone, and Fiddler Jordan was looking at him oddly, and he saw now that the Fiddler had a six-gun in his hand.

"This is tough on you, my friend," said Fiddler Jordan. "You could have saved yourself some trouble by walking around this ranch. You might have lived to be a real old man."

Jeff Harbin knew what he meant. Although the fat man's face was bland and his voice was softly regretful, there wasn't any chance for the bound man to miss his meaning. Uncle Billy Mort was lying dead there on the floor, and now it was Jeff Harbin's turn.

"I see what you mean," Jeff Harbin said. "I can see how it might be unhandy for you if I was to go on living. That's

what you're getting at, isn't it? I'd like to know, because if you're figuring to beef me, there's one little matter I'd like to straighten out before I go."

Fiddler Jordan was toying with the gun. "What's that?"

"My name is Harbin," the cowboy said. "Jeff Harbin. Would that mean anything to you?"

The fat man blinked. "Not—not the hombre who pulled off that jail-break the other night?"

"The same," said Harbin evenly. "And if I've got to die, I'd like to straighten out that business before I go."

"They've got your pardner in jail now," said Fiddler Jordan.

Harbin looked up sharply. "How's that?"

"They've got Red McGuire in jail in Alagordo now. He rode in last night and gave himself up. He said he decided to surrender as soon as he heard that Grubb had been killed—said that he didn't want to be blamed for a killing he hadn't done." The fat man shook his head sorrowfully. "But I'm afraid he's due to hang just the same. They were talking lynching when we rode outa town last night."

And suddenly Fiddler Jordan laughed. "Funny thing," he said. "It turns out now that Sheriff Grubb had been working on Red's case the day that he was killed. He'd dug up enough evidence to clear McGuire on the rustling charge. All Red had to do that night was stay in jail and he'd have been a free man in the morning. He wouldn't have gone to the pen at all. Now—now he's got a murder charge to beat."

"That's it," Jeff Harbin said. "That's the part I want to straighten out. Red never had nothing to do with that murder. I was the gent who killed Grubb!"

TWENTY minutes after two! And Red McGuire was in the Alagordo jail, and he was facing a murder charge. It was tough on Red—but Jeff Harbin wasn't thinking of Red McGuire just now. He was thinking of a girl. But when a man's hands were tied behind him there wasn't

much that he could do but talk—and stall for time—and pray that young Don Gentry might get back with help before it was too late.

He had the fat man's interest now. But Rube Mosher had come back into the room, and Mosher was getting nervous. "Let's clean it up and get out of here," Rube Mosher said.

But Fiddler Jordan held up a flabby hand. "Easy, Rube!" He looked at Jeff Harbin. "You say *you* killed Grubb, friend?"

Harbin nodded. He had been talking for time, building up the story as he went along, and now the parts were falling into place.

"I killed him. I was holding a gun on him while Red made his getaway. And Grubb dived at me and tried to get my gun, and I killed him. And I'd take it kindly if you'd let me put it all down in a confession before I cash in my chips. I'd hate to see Red McGuire hang for something I did."

"I like your nerve, Harbin," said Fiddler Jordan. "I always did admire to see a man with nerve. I reckon if you want to write out a confession—"

"This is dynamite, Fiddler," Rube Mosher said. "Let's clean up and get out of here!"

"Now don't be nervous, Rube," said Fiddler Jordan. "After all, it isn't much he asks. I wouldn't be able to sleep well at nights, knowing I'd refused a dead man's last request. Get him a pencil and some paper. And cut him loose, Rube—you can hold a gun on him while he writes."

They untied Jeff Harbin's hands. Rube Mosher got paper and a pencil from the desk across the room. While Fiddler Jordan played with the gun, Harbin began to write—

I, Jeff Harbin, being of sound mind—
Jordan was looking over his shoulder. "This is a confession, Harbin, not a will!" he snapped.

"Give me time," Jeff Harbin said. "I want to get it right."

I, Jeff Harbin, being of sound mind,

do hereby confess that I was the man who helped Red McGuire break out of the Alagordo jail. I was the man who killed Sheriff Grubb. Red McGuire had nothing to do with it. I was holding a gun on the sheriff while Red made his getaway.

THE lookout man came from the porch. His face was white and strained. "Someone riding around Lizard Head, Fiddler. Riding this way!"

The fat man's voice gurgled in his throat. "Who is it?"

"Too far away to tell. Half a dozen riders—"

Rube Mosher flowed into sudden action. He went across the room in long strides, his gun swinging in his hand. He went out onto the porch, and the fox-faced little lookout followed him. Jeff Harbin saw the smaller man pointing.

And big Jeff Harbin knew that here was a chance that might not come again. For now, and for just a moment, he was alone in the living room with Fiddler Jordan. He didn't know what Fiddler Jordan was doing, because the fat man was behind him and hadn't moved in his tracks. There wasn't time to try to find out now. Jeff Harbin came out of his chair like a man propelled by springs.

He whirled on Fiddler Jordan. And he saw then that for one time in his life the fat man's icy poise had deserted him. The fat man had forgotten Jeff Harbin. His gun was dangling in his hand and he was staring out through the open door. He turned as Harbin leaped to his feet, and frantically he tried to swing his gun around.

But Harbin threw himself at the fat man in a long dive, and his shoulder knocked Fiddler Jordan off balance just as the fat man's finger tightened on the trigger. The bullet missed. Jordan didn't get a second chance. Jeff Harbin crashed his fist to Jordan's face, and every ounce of his weight was riding behind the blow. That solid smash drove the fat man backward, sent him toppling to the floor. Jeff Harbin leaped for the open door.

HE SLAMMED the door shut just as Rube Mosher started back into the house. There was a key in the lock; he turned it. He heard Mosher drive his shoulder against the door once and again, and then bullets ripped through the panels in a fusillade of crashing sound. And, almost at his feet, Harbin saw the gun which little Uncle Billy Mort must have drawn just before he died. It was lying on the floor just beyond the little man's outstretched hand.

He stooped and grabbed the gun. Across the room a Colt roared twice and lead slugs thudded into the wall above his head. He spun around to see broken-nosed Spargo firing at him from the hallway door. He thumbed two shots at Spargo and saw the man break at hip and knees and go down in a heap. And he saw Fiddler Jordan, huge as a bear, shoving ponderously up from the floor. He saw the Fiddler lift a gun.

It was life and death then, and he shot the fat man twice at point-blank range. Blood gushed in a stream from the thick column of Fiddler Jordan's throat. The fat man went over with blood bubbling on his lips.

Jeff Harbin grabbed a moment then to reload his gun. He was thumbing shells into the cylinder when he saw a flitting shadow drift past a window, and he knew that someone was running around the house. Swiftly he crossed the room, slipped down the hallway. He had reached the kitchen when he saw the back door opening slowly.

He waited. He saw a head thrust cautiously around the door. It wasn't Mosher—it was the fox-faced little rider who had served as lookout. Harbin smashed two shots through the door, in line with the head. It disappeared from sight. He crossed the kitchen, slammed the door, and shoved the latch home.

He ran back toward the living room and met Eileen Gentry in the hall. The girl's hands were still bound behind her back, and he took time to cut the rope. Her blue eyes were bright with excitement.

"What—what's happening?"

"Hell broke loose," he said. He gave her a reassuring grin. "Help's coming now—I think we win. But keep back—Rube Mosher is still around somewhere."

They went through to the big living room together. There was still no sign of Mosher, but through the window they saw mounted men riding up into the yard. Harbin looked at the girl.

"Stay back, Eileen—I'm going to open the door."

He turned the key in the lock, jerked the door wide. Some half dozen riders were swinging down from saddle, walking toward the house. A chunky, heavy-shouldered man walked in front. It was Zeegle, Ben Zeegle.

And then Jeff Harbin saw big Rube Mosher slide around a corner of the house and walk to meet the posse. Mosher's harsh voice floated back.

"I'm glad you gents showed, Zeegle," Rube Mosher said. "We found the money that Lige Gentry stole from the bank! And we got the gent who killed Sheriff Grubb dead to rights!"

JEFF HARBIN sat in the office of the Alagordo jail, with handcuffs on his wrists. He had been in this office but once before, but that one time had served to imprint each detail of the room indelibly across his brain. Sheriff Grubb was dead now, and Ben Zeegle was the new sheriff, but in the office itself there was no change. There was the same battered desk, the same swinging lamp overhead, the same stove which Sheriff Grubb's head had struck that night when Jeff Harbin had knocked him down.

That time, there had been Grubb and Red McGuire and himself here in the room. Now Grubb was dead, and Red McGuire was back again behind iron bars in the jail, and the office was filled with the men who had made up that posse which had ridden with Ben Zeegle to the Star Cross. Crippled Don Gentry was here, and his sister, and big Rube Mosher was seated in a chair with handcuffed hands folded across one knee.

Rube Mosher it was who had found

Sheriff Grubb dead that night, here in this very room. Jeff Harbin kept remembering that all the time Mosher was talking. And Mosher was talking pretty steadily. He was lying like a cornered horse-thief, but it was beginning to look as if he might be putting it across.

"The Fiddler had figured for a long time that Gentry might have hidden that money at the ranch," Mosher was explaining. "He figured young Gentry knew about it—that the kid was lying low until the fuss died down. Then he'd take the money and join his dad—"

Don Gentry broke in on him, harsh-voiced: "You killed my dad, Mosher. You told me about it today, out in Joe Turpin's cellar. You bragged about it—"

Mosher's dark glance rested on the crippled youth. "You're lying, son," Rube Mosher said, and his eyes turned back to Sheriff Ben Zeegle. "So the Fiddler thought if he could get young Gentry to talk—"

Zeegle's face was stony. "Was that why you burned the kid's fingers?"

"Fiddler did that," Rube Mosher said. "I didn't like it much myself, but Fiddler was the boss. And Lige Gentry had stolen a hundred thousand dollars, and the Fiddler had lost a lot of money himself when the bank went bust, and he figured the kid knew where it was. He was sore about it."

"You were trying to locate this money to turn it over to the bank?" said Sheriff Zeegle.

"Sure. Fiddler was one of the directors of the bank, you'll remember. I was just working for him."

"You're lying!" Eileen Gentry cried out suddenly. "It's all lies! You and Fiddler Jordan meant to steal that money—I heard you talking! And you shot poor Uncle Billy—"

Zeegle looked at the dark man. "What about that, Mosher?"

"Bill Mort was one of them," Rube Mosher rasped. "When we rode up to the house he tried for a gun, and I shot in self-defense. He was as deep in it as the rest!"

Jeff Harbin sat quietly in his chair and

watched that dark-faced man admiringly, for Mosher was revealing talents entirely unsuspected. Rube Mosher was on thin ice now, and knew it—but he was skating skilfully. And Harbin watched the black-mustached man and mused on a matter that had troubled him since the first time he had laid eyes on Mosher. Somewhere he had seen that face before!

It came to Jeff Harbin all at once—just like that—and with it came the memory of another time in this same room, when he had stood with eyes glued to the narrow slot of a door and watched an old man with iron-gray hair sort papers on a desk.

ON THAT night when he had helped Red McGuire break out of jail, they had stood in the dark jail corridor and watched the old sheriff sorting papers on that desk across the room. The sheriff had put one paper aside, and the rest he had shoved into an inside pocket of his long black coat, and then he had taken his coat off and hung it on a wooden peg on the wall. Jeff Harbin lifted his eyes, and he saw that the coat still hung where Grubb had placed it on the night he died!

Harbin stood up. Zeegle glanced at him curiously. "I guess," Jeff Harbin said, "Red has told you what happened the night we broke the jail?"

Zeegle's face was hard. "He told us a yarn," he said. "He never told us how Sam Grubb got a bullet-hole between his eyes."

"It was Mosher who found Grubb?"

Zeegle nodded. "Yeah—Rube found him. He was dead then."

"Wait!" Jeff Harbin said. He went across the room and took the black coat from the wall. He was gambling now, because he couldn't be sure of what he'd find, but he shoved a hand into an inside pocket and brought out a bunch of papers. And then he knew that he had won.

He put the coat back on the peg. He crossed to the desk and laid a single sheet of paper before Ben Zeegle. It was a Reward poster. At the top, in big black letters, ran the legend *Wanted—for Murder.*

And below was the picture of a man, followed by paragraphs of print.

"Ever see that face before?" Jeff Harbin asked.

It was the face of a young man, but it wasn't very clear. Ben Zeegle looked it over thoughtfully.

"I don't seem to place it right off," he said.

"Got a pencil?" Harbin asked.

Zeegle had a pencil. He handed it to the cowboy. Harbin made a few soft lead strokes across the picture. When he pushed it back, the pictured face had a black mustache.

"Would you recognize it now?"

"Mosher!" Ben Zeegle cried. "Rube Mosher, sure as hell!"

Jeff Harbin spoke softly, regretfully. "Red and I left Grubb lying on the floor, with another picture just like that one lying on the floor beside his hand. That was how Mosher found him. He wasn't dead then. He was just stunned from hitting his head against the stove. He wasn't dead until Rube Mosher saw the picture—"

There was a flutter of commotion across the room. Rube Mosher was standing now. His manacled wrists were crossed, but in one hand he held a gun. In that moment when attention had been distracted, the dark man had grabbed a gun from the closest holster. He was backing toward the door now, the gun swinging in a short arc before him.

"Hold it, everybody!" he snarled. "I'll kill the man that moves!"

And a gun roared. But it wasn't Mosher's gun.

It wasn't Mosher's gun, because that gun was slipping from the big man's fingers, and Rube Mosher's handcuffed hands were out before him in the blind, instinctive gesture of a falling man, and a small patch of blood was spreading wider on Mosher's forehead, just above his glaring eyes. Then he went down.

Across the room Don Gentry's face was ashen. Smoke was curling upward from the barrel of the gun in the crippled boy's hand.

"He killed my father," Don Gentry said. "He belonged to me!"

"I RECKON you go free," Sheriff Zeegle told Red McGuire. This was somewhat later, when they had brought the big, raw-boned, freckle-faced man into the office. "Sam Grubb had cleared up that rustling charge against you before he died, and now this Harbin gent has straightened out the murder business. Seems like you two jaspers still oughta be guilty of something, but I reckon the books are balanced. Harbin, here—" He glanced around, but Jeff Harbin wasn't here. He wasn't in the office.

Someone spoke. "Harbin and Eileen Gentry were talking—they walked out together. If you ask me, I think that jasper's in love."

Ben Zeegle scowled. "He's still handcuffed," he said, somewhat moved. "Maybe he doesn't know it—maybe somebody better go out and rope him. Love or no love, he's got to bring them handcuffs back!"



MISSING! ONE GROUCH

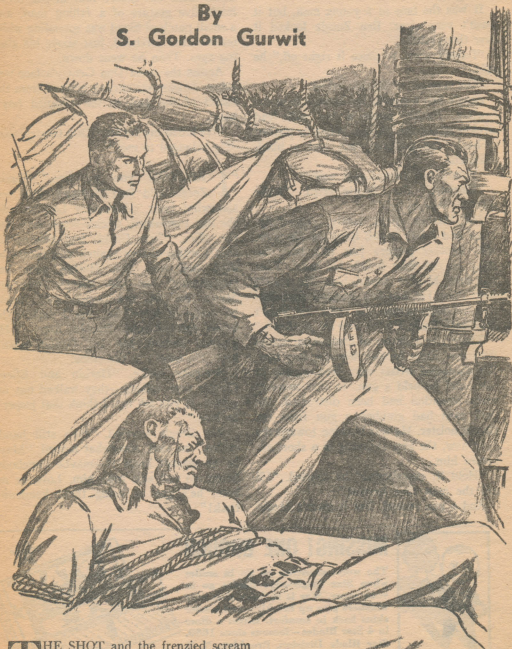
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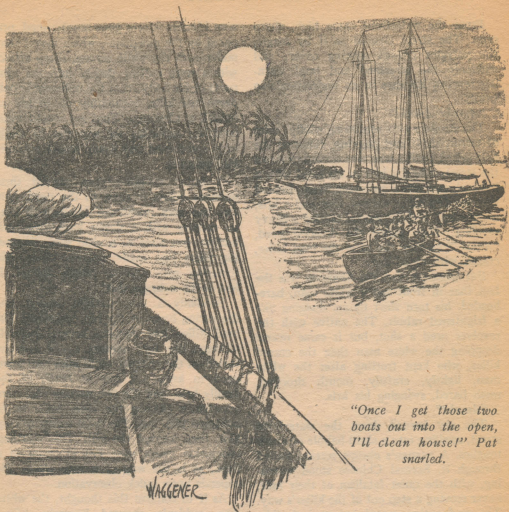
SATAN'S HORDE

By
S. Gordon Gurwit



THE SHOT and the frenzied scream shattered the drowsy, sun-baked calm that hung over Madang. Pat Shannon, ex-Sergeant of Philippine Scouts, wheeled instantly into the nearest doorway. He swayed lithely forward from his

hips, his hand darting to his belt. In Papan ports, one acted fast—or it might be forever too late.



*"Once I get those two
boats out into the open,
I'll clean house!" Pat
snarled.*

A moment before, he had been swinging along blithely, despite the thick, steaming heat that covered the little frontier town like a tainted blanket. His eyes had wandered over the dancing heat-devils, shimmering above the corrugated waterfront godowns, to where his small, free-trading barkentine, *Hawk*, had dropped anchor that morning. Now she was framed against the smooth, long-South Pacific swell, a white dot on a heaving, purple, water-shot silk.

He had sold his cargo of gold-edged pearl shell, picked up in an unnamed, uncharted lagoon, for one hundred English pounds, and his fingers were caressing the bundle of notes in his pocket. He had decided that he would now sail north, for Papua was torrid at the tail end of the

rainy season; and Madang was humid and moist and foul with the reek of coral trash, brine and rotting pearl shell, piled high on the beach; and, added to this, the odor of overripe durian and other quickly spoiling tropical fruits was adding injury to insult.

The big American wrinkled his nostrils, grinned and sweated, and pushed his energetic way through the mixed tide of black, brown and yellow humanity that was taking to the street, now that the sun was on the flaming horizon of the Pacific.

Then he had heard the racketing shot and the scream.

Street sounds died out. Only in the café, opposite, the vacant, liquor-tuned laughter of golden-brown sing-song girls continued, a jarring note that seemed to remain suspended in the thick heat.

From the waterfront came high, sharp cries. The street cleared as if by magic, the polyglot crowds seeking cover; and suddenly the screamed and fatal warning reached his ears in an understandable word:

"*Amok! Amok!*"

The strollers were scattering wildly; cries of terror, shrill and piercing, followed the half-naked native who was sprinting down the street, a bright kris in his hand with a blade shaped like a quivering flame. Behind him ran two other natives. One had a kris, unsheathed, and the second carried a heavy revolver. They yelled the dreaded word, "*Amok!*" as they ran after the mad killer, crazed with blood-lust.

But what startled Pat Shannon was the fact that in front ran a white man, bare-headed, his torn shirt flying, dodging like a frightened rabbit. The native with the revolver fired a shot, but it came nearer dropping the white man than the crazed killer, who kept trotting after the white man, lightly, craftily, mouth drooling, teeth bared, swinging his kris.

"*Amok!*"

The cry keened down the waterfront street, swelling into a shrill babble of many tongues. A woman's abrupt scream knifed through it. Several Chinese stood watching, with the quiet fatalism of their race, never moving a step out of the killer's way. The mad native veered not an inch. The kris in his hand flashed like a silver streak and one of the Chinese dropped and lay still. The killer had barely halted in his stride.

The pistol blasted in the hands of the native pursuer—for the law of the *amok* is that anyone may slay the killer—but the killer came on, after the white man.

PAT had moved out of his shelter and was loping toward the center of disturbance. There was blood on the white fugitive's shirt, and the killer seemed bound on catching him. The two native pursuers, running behind, seemed to make no real effort to stop the madman.

Pat's mind flashed back to his years in the Philippines, where, too, he had heard the dreaded cry of "*Juramentado!*" He had

seen Moslem Moros gone murder-mad, prepared by the panglima—which meant that, underneath the white sarong, sharp *bijjuca* withes were cutting deeply into the vital parts of his body; that the unbearable pain drove the killer inexorably on to kill an infidel, a Christian. That act would mean complete expiation for any sins he might have committed and would insure entrance into paradise.

A bullet wouldn't stop one of these maniacs unless it went to the right spot. Pat had seen maddened Moros still keep on coming with a dozen bullets in their bodies—but none in a vital spot. Wounding shots just made matters worse, like torturing some vicious jungle animal. It had to be a brain shot.

Suddenly a new thought leaped into the racing brain of the big American. The mad killer had avoided several possible victims. His fury seemed to be concentrated on the panting white man who managed to keep just out of reach of the deadly kris; and the two natives who were apparently chasing the killer must be in collusion with him. Far from trying to stop him, they wanted the kill! This startling conclusion swept over Pat Shannon in a flash, as is the way of a man whose life depends upon quick observation.

As if to confirm this thought, the white man suddenly shouted hoarsely, "Stop 'em! It's murder!"

The killer had almost reached his victim, and he struck, viciously, but the white man dodged and shouted, staggering on.

Pat trotted faster. "Too far," flashed the thought in his mind. "Too many people around. This has to be a brain shot!" His long-nosed revolver was hanging in his fist. Suddenly the white fugitive collapsed. Pat raised the revolver and it bucked in his hand with the blast of the explosion. The killer paused, his evil brown face contorted with hatred. There was a blue hole between his eyes. He fell forward, across the body of his intended victim, and did not move again.

A cry went up from the frightened crowd and they began to pour around the two bodies in the dirt. The two natives

who had run after the killer were bending over both the dead man and the white man. As the crowd thickened, Pat had to push his way through.

The two natives were picking up the white man, and it looked as if they intended to carry him away. The man was bleeding and his face was gray with terror, his eyes wide with fear. He struggled and suddenly saw Pat Shannon. A vast relief swept his shattered features.

"For God's sake," he croaked hoarsely, "don't let them take me! It's a put-up job! You're a white man—"

Pat went into action—the kind of action that had given him his hard name in the Archipelago, in every trading post of the Unfederated States.

"Let him alone!" he bellowed. "Take your hands off!"

The two natives glared at him, but held on to the white man, trying to carry him away into an alley. The crowd began to scatter again, scenting trouble.

A muscular brown arm and a thin hand, from one side, snatched at Pat's revolver. Pat grasped the arm and pulled. The man screamed. Pat's big revolver crashed on his head and he slumped into the dust as if his bones had melted. The two natives were carrying the white man into an alley when Pat overtook them.

"He wounded," rasped one of the natives, in explanation. "Take to doctor—"

"Hands off, I said!" snapped Pat.

ONE of them pulled his kris, dropping the white man's feet. The gun in Pat's hand bucked and roared, and the native died before he knew what had hit him. The other straightened up, dropping the white man's shoulders. Pat knocked the big revolver out of his hand a second before the native's finger could pull the trigger. The native screamed with terror, for there was death in Pat Shannon's icy gray eyes. Pat held the native off as one would a poodle, swung his big right fist and felt the other's teeth and jaw collapse. Muffled cries came from the watching crowd.

Pat picked up the almost unconscious

white victim as one would a child. The man was moaning, gasping for breath, barely conscious. His scalp wound was bleeding. Pat strode down the street with his limp burden tucked under his left arm, sweat running down his face and chest, his right hand clutching the big revolver. No one opposed him.

There was no sign of the two "white trash" policemen, attached to the Residency. The official residence was at the other end of Madang; and the Magistrate was, as Pat knew, off in the Government steam launch, on official business in one of the islands. Madang was on its own.

"Too many here," thought Pat grimly, "trying to get this poor devil. Better get him aboard the *Hawk*, where they can't get at him—until I find out what this is all about."

The crowd followed, at a respectful distance, but no one interfered when he placed the now unconscious man in the bottom of the dinghy and turned. He stood a moment, facing the polyglot curious who had followed, a smile on his lips that was nothing more than a snarl over bared fangs. The crowd came no nearer.

The scar of an old bullet wound ran like a vivid streak of lightning along Pat's temple; there was the scar of a knife-wound on his square chin. He was a huge young man, bronzed, lean, crammed full of powerful manhood.

A Eurasian in the crowd recognized him.

"That's Shannon," he said softly. "They call him 'The Parson.' A mad American!"

If the unconscious white man who had been the intended victim of the amok had any more enemies in that watching crowd, they did not want to try any further conclusions with this unexpected and formidable champion who seemed as thick across the chest as he was wide. They had heard tales of "The Parson" and they had just watched him handle a gun.

Pat picked up his oars and rowed out to his ship, with easy, powerful sweeps that told of the tremendous power in the big shoulders. His Chinese mate, he saw, was waiting at the rail; and behind him were the Kanaka crew, Pat grinned.

The curious onlookers, ashore, were already scattering. Sudden death was no novelty in Madang.

THERE was a bloody gash on the white man's shoulder, and he had a messy scalp wound. Pat fixed them both up quickly with material from his first-aid kit; then he poured whiskey into the stranger until he groaned and cried out hoarsely.

His red-rimmed eyes, filled with terror, settled blankly, at first, on the big man who bent over him. Pat saw that the stranger's body bore the scars of numerous injuries; he was gaunt, his skin stretched like waxen parchment over his bones; and he was trembling as with palsy. Slowly, his eyes focused and he sat up.

"Lord!" he groaned. "You managed to pull me away from those murdering devils!"

Pat nodded. "There seemed to be four of them after your hide. Two are permanently accounted for. I hope you've got a good story, because the Magistrate will want to know why I shot the two and bent up the others."

The stranger stared, still trembling. He nodded. "Thanks," he said. "I won't forget what you did for me. Got a drink? I'm scuppered!"

Pat poured a stiff drink, and the other drank it convulsively. The *Hawk* curtseyed gently to the long Pacific swell. She was anchored several hundred yards off shore, and a slight trade, bearing the faint scent of oleander, soughed in the rigging. It was the only sound to be heard. The stranger's eyes lost some of their apprehension.

"Your ship?" he asked.

Pat nodded. "Free trading barkentine, *Hawk*. I brought you out here. Thought it might be safer."

"American?"

Again Pat nodded. "And you?"

"I'm Tom Kelly. From 'Frisco. I'm a mining engineer. Came out to Brisbane three years ago on a job." He added, in a semi-whisper that had a note of desperation in it, "I've been through the pits of hell out here!"

"Want to tell me about it, Kelly?"

A flicker of doubt leaped into Kelly's eyes for a moment. The thin, pale face was twisted with suspicion. An unnamed terror came to his watering eyes, and he cringed as if to ward off some horror. Pat poured him another drink.

"Drink that, old man, and forget about explanations, if you'd rather not make any. You don't have to."

Kelly gulped the liquor and glanced around at the neat cabin. He said, "I'm not forgetting the debt I owe you. Who are you?"

"My name's Pat Shannon."

Kelly's eyes opened wider. "Pat Shannon, eh?" he repeated. "Black Irish! A Mick! Had a hunch it would be something like that, by the looks of you. You're the man they call 'Parson'?"

"I've been called that—among other things."

"I've heard of you," said Kelly.

"No good, I expect!" grinned Pat. He knew there were stories going around, but, hell, you had to be tough, two-fisted and horny-handed, if you wanted to survive in the Islands—these pepper-sprinkled, primitive hell-holes on a fever-smitten sea. They called him "The Parson" because, humorously, unlike his namesake, he unleashed, when sufficiently aroused, strings of blistering profanity that had a lash and a bite to it—and achieved new highs in originality.

Kelly said, "If the stories told around the Archipelago are true—"

"What stories?"

Kelly's eyes had lost their fright now, and were keen with a hooded speculation. "Well, there was one about Subaya Island."

Pat grunted. His black brows raked into a frown. "They killed one of my men," he snapped, "from ambush, and took his head. I don't allow that. When I demanded that the killer be punished, their young men danced at me and made the cannibal sign." He grinned, in a wide snarl. "They draw away the hand from the mouth, fast, which means that they'll tear your bones with their teeth."

"Yes?" urged Kelly.

Pat Shannon shrugged. "In primitive countries, Kelly, it's the survival of the fittest and the fastest. No room for crackpot sentimentalists. I took my sub-machine-gun ashore and cleaned house."

KELLY'S ashen lips twitched. He reached for and took another drink. "You'll understand, then, what happened to me," he said. "I came out from the States three years ago. Had a job with the Inter-Island, as mining engineer, on their Ronga development."

"The gold mine—near the Dutch border?" asked Pat. "It blew up, didn't it? I heard it was abandoned."

Kelly nodded. "It was. The vein petered out. It was very rich, for a while. Got to be a big development, with over five hundred men working there. Then the vein failed. The operations stopped and the company quit cold."

"A lot of mining ventures in the Islands explode like that," said Pat grimly.

Kelly went on: "The engineers—all the whites—left, and the company took off most of the Chinese. Left about a hundred who wanted to stay and work the tailings on their own. I stayed, too—because I had a hunch." Kelly's face grew haggard again. Some haunting terror returned to his sunken eyes. In a flat monotone, half whispering, he continued:

"Nothing happened for several months. Then the natives found out that the place was short-handed. They drove the Chinese out on a small island. The coolies were helpless. The Karakaras kept them there, guarding them like chickens in a coop, and carried them off, to eat, a few at a time, until the supply ran out."

Pat's face was grim. "I know the Karakaras," he nodded.

"They ate a hundred or more of those poor devils in two months," whispered Kelly. "I couldn't do anything about it—I had to take to the bush to save my hide. Had to live off the country—no fires to cook. It was hell!"

"You couldn't get away?"

"Not a chance. And I found the rich

vein I had a hunch about—nugget gold, man—nuggets as big as your fist! I found four of them. Hid them in my shack, in the jungle. Then one night I was raided, and I lost them, with my guns and ammunition. And so—I was up against it. I just managed to get away alive."

"Karakaras?"

"No. A gray schooner put in, and the crew began to prow around. They were led by a big blond man—Satan, I heard him called. Looked like a 'breed of some kind. Part German, and the rest God only knows what!"

Pat Shannon's face clouded with a fierce frown. He snapped: "Satan Stallheim, you mean?"

"Yes," said Kelly. "Twice he almost had his hands on me, but I got away by a whisker. Know him?"

"No!" barked Pat Shannon, and justified his nickname by letting go of a picturesque and original curse that left Kelly goggle-eyed. Pat added, "But I'd like to meet that gent!"

"The pleasure's all yours," said Kelly. "I wouldn't!"

"Parson" Pat Shannon scowled. Satan Stallheim was a notorious semi-pirate, a scourge to the lonely trading posts. Pat thought of the scene he had come upon, a year ago, on Aowla Island. The lonely trader, a Dutch friend of his named Waldeen, and his wife, had been ruthlessly shot down. The natives, peaceful islanders, had been wantonly slaughtered; and Waldeen's daughter, a slim, golden girl of seventeen, had driven her knife through her heart to escape falling into the hands of the raider. That was the scene Pat had found.

One lone surviving native had come cautiously out of the bush to tell the big American the story. The native didn't know the name of the schooner nor the name of the despoiler; but Pat had every reason to believe it had been Satan Stallheim and his crew—although he was not positive.

All the earmarks had spelled Stallheim.

Pat muttered a sizzling oath and said, "Go on with your yarn, Kelly."

KELLY took another drink, shuddered with reaction and went on: "You know, that part of Papua was once German. This Satan Stallheim, I've heard, was a government officer of some kind. The story is that he's sworn to kill every Englishman who sets foot in the place. I saw him often, Shannon. He's even bigger than you are—a great blond tiger of a man—hardly human."

"So I've heard," nodded Pat darkly. "Has Island blood in him, but the natives indignantly deny it. Go on."

"Well—as I said—I found the gold, and he robbed me of it. I was in the bush for a month, dodging the Karakaras and Stallheim's crew. Cold-blooded devils, Parson, wiry and tough, with black-pointed teeth and whiskers like a cat—"

"Murats, eh?"

"I guess so. One day, after a hellish fight between the Karakaras and Stallheim's crew, the savages drove them back to their ship."

"Have a cigarette?" offered Pat.

Kelly accepted and went on: "Finally, one night, I managed to steal a native dugout. I made an outrigger out of it, and put to sea. Used a piece of old tent for a sail. Some of Stallheim's crew, fishing in a whaleboat, saw me and tried to stop me, but I got away. I sailed only nights and hid in coves during the days; but later, I found that four of them, in the big whaleboat, were after me." He sucked cigarette smoke hungrily into his lungs.

"You see," he went on, "Stallheim found my gold nuggets. He and his gang searched for me all the time. They'd seen glimpses of me in the bush and knew I was around; and the gold in my hideout told them that I knew where it could be found. Twice I came face to face with Stallheim. Anyway, they couldn't catch me. If they had, I'd have *had* to tell where the gold came from. You know Stallheim!"

"And you reached Madang today?" asked Pat. "That was some trip for an amateur navigator, Kelly! You're lucky to be alive."

"I didn't get here today," said Kelly. "I was here some time ago. I caught a

trader to Port Moresby. There I paid down every cent I could beg, borrow or steal for a year's operating lease on the mine. The company was glad to take any amount, because they think the mine worthless. It took every dime I had saved in a 'Frisco bank—and all I could raise, besides.

"I tried to persuade one or two traders to help me operate the mine, but they laughed at me, once they heard about the Karakaras and Stallheim prowling the place. And they contended that the mine was played out; if it was any good, wouldn't the Inter-Island still be operating it? I had no samples of the ore to show them—my nuggets were gone—and I was afraid to tell them too much, because you never know what might happen. I came back here to try to get some help, to talk to the resident Magistrate, see if he'd help me while I worked the mine—keep Stallheim and the Karakaras off me."

"And those Murats jumped you?"

Kelly nodded. "I lost them, but they waited here for me. Stallheim couldn't come into an English port, so he sent his killers to get me. The *amok* was a fake."

"So I concluded," nodded Pat. "And the local Magistrate can't help you, Kelly. He has only four men. It would take many armed men to keep the Karakaras off, let alone Stallheim and his mob. You've bought yourself a useless mine lease."

KELLY considered the big man with crafty eyes. "There's a fortune waiting there," he said slowly, "for men who are not afraid to go and get it. Nuggets, man, as big as your head! Sixty and seventy pounds a piece! Is that a bad lease?"

Pat shrugged. The story sounded improbable to him; and he knew the Karakaras. If there was gold in the Ronga mine, it would take considerable getting out.

"Parson," said Kelly, "you've got a reputation in the Islands for getting what you want. If you'll help me get this gold out, I'll cut you in for an equal half."

Pat grinned. "Be your age!" he scoffed.

"You've got the men, the ship, the guns, the provisions," went on Kelly eagerly. "I've got the lease, and I swear to you that there's a ton of gold that you can see waiting for us to take!"

Pat still stared. His keen eyes seemed to pierce into Kelly, as if he were trying to read the other's inner soul. Kelly's eyes did not waver. He added earnestly:

"Look, Pat Shannon—my name's Kelly. A good partnership—just a couple of Swedes! With your help, we can both be rich for the rest of our lives. I swear to you—as a Kelly to a Shannon—that the gold is there. I'm offering you a half share in my lease. I wouldn't lie to a brother Irisher. I didn't tell anyone else how rich the mine is. It might have started a rush, and a lease doesn't mean anything in the Papuan wilds. But I'm telling you because you're an American—and a Shannon." Kelly stopped with an anxious grin. His fear had gradually left him. Eagerness flamed in his face now.

Pat Shannon pursed his lips and did not take his eyes off Kelly while the other was talking. He continued to stare, but Kelly met his searching scrutiny with a look as steady as his own.

"Let me think about it a minute, Kelly," said Pat. "Pour yourself another drink, if you want it."

Kelly shook his head. He sat and watched big Pat Shannon staring out through the port, immovable, his deep-set eyes set on invisible horizons.

IF WHAT Kelly said was true, thought Pat, it was a chance—the chance he had been looking for ever since he had first gone after adventure, years ago, and joined the Philippine Scouts. He had been constantly seeking a stake—a big stake—but he had never caught up with it. It had always seemed just over the unbroken line of the horizon ahead.

If Kelly was telling the truth, a half interest in the mine operating lease at Ronga might be the long-sought-for Bonanza. Dead ahead! Most of his life, he'd been wandering. With a real stake, he could go home—and in style!

But claiming the gold at Ronga would be a doubly desperate business. First, the Karakaras, haunting the bush, head-hunters and cannibals; killing as casually as they would eat a meal—and eating what-

ever they killed just as casually! Then Stallheim, and his crew of savage Murats. They might both lose their lives, and he might lose his beloved ship.

She had cost him all the money he



Pat Shannon

had saved out of six years of dangerous service in the Philippine Scouts; and he had only recently paid the last installment out of profits—profits that had been meager enough.

Since his earliest recollections, as a boy in a New England seaport town, he had always dreamed of owning a ship. The dream had come true, by hard labor and sweat; but the *Hawk* was his now, and he loved the neat craft.

Old sailors had laughed at him when he had bought her from her Dutch owner. They said she was nail-sick and hogged, her bottom foul; that she was beamy as a tub, and about as fast. They said that he, a soldier, ignorant of ships, had been tricked when he bought her. But she had stood the gaff. Gradually, he had repaired her, until her ancient planking no longer kept up an endless feud with her groaning timbers. Her hemp rigging was taut, her bottom clean; she was as white as an egret; and her two-cycle, auxiliary gas engine, snugly berthed under the flooring of the cockpit, barked like a perfectly functioning machine-gun.

Pat had sailed her far and wide. It had been a colorful, if profitless Odyssey, from Sandakan to Banjarmasin; from Surabaya to Batavia; from Tandjong Priok to Madang and Port Moresby; to a hundred

isolated islands and trading posts on a steaming ocean, varied by pestilential rivers and stagnant, dry-rotted frontier towns. A thrilling Odyssey, with little profit, but it had possessed the excitement of far and alien places, the tang of adventure, and he had enjoyed every minute of it.

"We can take out half a ton in a month," prompted Kelly eagerly. "There's osmium-iridium, too. We'd be taking big chances, sure, Parson—but the stake is worth it. And from what I've heard, you'd be the man to go through with it."

"It's a deal, Kelly," said Pat Shannon slowly. He stuck out his hand. Kelly's eyes glistened as he grasped it, shaking it convulsively.

"Okay, partner!" he cried delightedly. "I couldn't ask for a better man. This is great luck! But how about your crew? Will they stick if the going gets rough?"

"My mate will, and I'll put it up to the others, facts all on the table. They can take it or leave it. I'll offer a share to every man who goes along and takes the chances."

TEN minutes later, the Kanaka crew filed out of the cabin, whispering excitedly among themselves. They had all decided to go. Tao, the mate, half-Chinese and half-Papuan, remained in the cabin. His clear brown eyes were serious.

"The Karakara have big *mana*," he told Pat and Kelly solemnly. "Big chiefs not liking you, they make *mana*. Then soon man lay down and die. He can no help."

"I'll take a chance on the *mana*," said Kelly, "if they'll leave their seven-foot bows and blow-guns at home."

Tao left, shrugging. Kelly said:

"It isn't the savages that give me the creeps. It's the damn slinky Murats and Stallheim." He paused, and then said uneasily, "When the Karakaras chased me out into the bush, I used to watch those Murats, now and then. You know, Ronga used to be a big outfit. There were hundreds of Chinese working there for almost six years. There's a big Chinese cemetery

back of the diggings." He shuddered.

Pat scowled. "Yes?" he said.

"Nights," continued Kelly, "when the Karakaras weren't too troublesome, the Murats used to come and prow the cemetery. I saw them—like ghosts. I saw some hellish things, Shannon—things to make your blood curdle and freeze. I could never watch very long—I was alone and couldn't take too many chances; but I did see one or two things that—" He shuddered violently.

"Maybe I'll tell you about it later," said Pat, his eyes gleaming. "If it's what I think it is, it isn't pretty." He got up and stretched his great limbs. "The time to do anything," he said, "is now. Let's go." He went topside, to the deck, and Kelly followed, limping painfully.

"Haul in the hook!" snapped Pat to Tao. "We're going north, to Ronga!"

PAT SHANNON had his first glimpse of Ronga when the *Hawk* dropped her anchor in the little land-locked lagoon that lay in front of the development; a strange, dark, stormy-looking place, under brooding, low clouds.

The dead and disintegrating mine, a welter of deserted derricks, shafts, sheds, engine houses and dumps, loomed incongruously against a background of deserted wilderness. A tense hush seemed to hover ominously over the jungle, as primitive now as it was the first day after Creation. Thunder bellowed down from a sky grown suddenly black. Green-looking rain slashed in from the lowering sky; the lagoon grew green, reflecting the wet forests, and the sago thatches were running with emerald icicles, glinting weirdly in the half-light.

"It won't last long," said Kelly. "This is the tail end of the season. The sun'll be out soon and we can take a look around."

Pat nodded, shooting a swift, appraising glance at Kelly. The man's spirit had climbed a hundred per cent since he had snatched him from the killers in Madang. Kelly, with true Irish resiliency, had recovered his inherent poise and courage.

He was bright and cheerful, eager; his gaunt cheeks had filled on the trip up, and color flowed in them. Kelly was ready to take on the world again, and no holds barred. A square-shouldered, thin-waisted, bronzed man, hardened to the toughness of steel, with a ready grin and eyes as bright and quick as a monkey's.

Pat's eyes swept back over the mine buildings. There wasn't a sight or a sound of a living thing; only the slanting rain drummed down, bringing the cool, green, orchid odor of the wet forest. Pat shrugged. He knew something of this Papuan Wild West—and nothing to its credit.

"If we can keep the Karakaras off," said Kelly, "for a few weeks—and if that damn Stallheim doesn't come back—we can finish here in a hurry, Parson, and be on our way back to civilization with a thousand pounds of virgin gold in the hold!"

"If!" repeated Pat, with a crooked smile. "A large word, Tom, in this country!"

The rain stopped. Pat left Tao on guard aboard the *Hawk*, while he and Kelly, heavily armed, went ashore in the dinghy for a look around.

A brooding silence lay on the wet land. The abandoned mine buildings lay be-draggled and rapidly decaying, under the onslaught of tropical rains, the encroaching jungle, borers and termites. The buildings shrieked of the extravagance that had brought the place to black ruin, once the richest veins had given out.

They walked up a pathway of yellow and vermilion croton shrubs, crystallized with rain; they stopped to look at the thatch and sago-bark dwellings that had once housed the workers and the officials of the company, now dripping and sagging forlornly. There was silence, with only the drip from wet leaves to break it.

"The vein," said Kelly, "is deep down in the north tunnel. We can go down tomorrow and look around. It'll be too dark now."

Pat nodded.

Kelly went on. "Back there is the ceme-

tary where Stallheim and his Murats were prowling." His eyes swept the forest and his hand went to the belted revolver hung at his waist—automatic pistols being considered too uncertain in the wet Papuan country, where metals rust and corrode overnight.

They both walked toward the burial ground and stood looking at the Oriental pagodas, the hundreds of bizarre concrete pillars, impregnated with bits of broken crockery, pearl shell, bits of mirrors and other bright objects that would keep the evil spirits away.

"Used to be more than five hundred Chinese working here," said Kelly. "There was a Chinese company store down there. The old Chinaman who ran it did a thriving business in opium and smuggled whiskey. He sold pearls, too. Jungle fevers and the Karakaras filled up this place."

An enormous loneliness filled the scene. Pat stared at the curiously painted plaques, and frowned when he thought of the hundreds of alien yellow men who were rotting-under the lalang grass in this far jungle. A rocketing flame flashed in the forest, proclaiming a bird of paradise in flight. Kelly swore softly, his quick eyes taking instant note.

"Easy, Pat," he said, out of the side of his mouth. "Karakaras! They disturbed the bird! Walk back to the beach slowly!"

PAT'S keen eyes roved the jungle wall. He too was forest wise, trained in the mountains of Luzon and the jungles of the Islands, but he saw nothing. The dragon-skinned sago palms stood huddled together; he saw something ghostlike flit in the green darkness.

"No use," he said grimly. "If you turn your back, you'll get a six-foot arrow through you. Better let 'em have it to begin with—and teach 'em respect and manners!"

"The way to the mine and the beach is open," said Kelly. "They're in the jungle. Back up!"

A long arrow hissed past Pat's head, and he swore softly, such a weird blending of words as to catch Kelly's attention

even now. "The Parson" had earned his curious nickname.

Kelly fired suddenly. Pat had a momentary glimpse of a hideously painted face, a glinting, boar-tooth necklace against a dark breast. The big revolver bucked and roared in his fist and the Papuan howled.

A whooping flight of arrows fell, driven with man-drilling force by the big bows, but there were no savages to be seen, no movements heard, although Pat's senses were razor-sharp. Kelly's eyes were the keener. He fired again, and a savage screamed, fell from behind a palm and went desperately crawling along on all fours to get out of range.

Then Pat saw the Karakaras—men who looked like demons out of the nether pits, with black eye-circles and red-streaked cheeks, feathered and painted, maddened now to a frenzy. A score or more came out of the jungle, swinging pineapple stone clubs and fistfuls of barbed arrows.

"Hell!" cried Kelly, and fired.

Pat laughed, and the sound shivered along Kelly's spine, for there was jagged ice in the sound of it, and no mirth. He looked at the big man fleetingly and his eyes narrowed. "The Parson" had killed before, and the look of the killer was in his gray eyes now—pin-points of green fire, sharp as electric sparks. Steady shots came from his big guns. He had one in each fist now. And every bullet took its toll with mechanical precision. Then, suddenly, the jungle was quiet, a tense quietude in which hung the tranquility of death.

The Karakaras had vanished, leaving their dead behind. The thunder muttered again, seeming to skip from lagoon to lagoon and dying away in the far reaches of the blue mountains in the interior.

"Now we can go aboard," said Pat. "Those savages won't be back tonight."

Kelly turned and strode toward the beach. There was a puzzled look on his face. He had seen plenty of fighting men in his day, but nothing to equal this cool killing-machine that strode at his side. He began to understand why the "Parson" had the reputation he did.

"When you go down for the gold," said Pat, "I'll stay topside with my little pet. It's a cute little thing—fires two hundred and fifty bullets a minute. Forty-five caliber. We'll also have to arrange watches. Happen to know where the Karakara village is?"

"Not exactly," answered Kelly. "Back there, a couple of miles, somewhere in the foothills."

Pat grinned. "Might be an idea," he offered casually, "to go there and clean house."

"Are you crazy?" said Kelly, astonished. "There might be hundreds of them, Pat!"

"So what?" asked Pat. "A rapid attack is always the best defense!"

RAIN lashed down in a torrent again, and they ran for the dinghy, but could not save themselves from a drenching. Pat's mighty arms sent the dinghy back to the *Hawk* with a bone in its teeth, and Kelly sat and watched his huge partner with mouth slightly agape and brows drawn. Pat Shannon was something outside his experience.

They sat that night in the cozy cabin, planning, through the dead hours of a roaring, rainy night, lashed by furious trades; and Pat gulped a stiff drink while he doctored the gash made by a Karakara barb in his thigh.

"We'll start on the mine in the morning," he said, to Kelly. "Hope there's no poison in this thing. Hand me that bottle—a disinfectant won't hurt it any, just in case."

Kelly handed over the indicated bottle just as Tao came to the door and fired a rapid string of Kanaka at Pat. Pat cocked one eye and shot back a short reply.

"Schooner, off the coast," he explained. "May be trying to find an anchorage to lay to, until it clears. Let's have a look!"

They both went topside and stared at the sea. Beyond the outer coral reef they saw the dim loom of a ship. The Kanakas stood in the driving rain, heedless of the weather, watching. Pat buttoned his oilskins and stepped out, and Kelly followed.

Through his binoculars, Pat studied the dim schooner a moment.

"Might be nothing, and it might be something," he said. "Have a look at her, Tom. Ever see her before?"

Tom Kelly took the powerful binoculars and spanned the miles between him and the dim ship outside. The illumination was good, and even as he looked, a green flash of lightning zigzagged across the ominous sky. An exclamation broke from his lips.

"It's Stallheim and his betel-chewing murderous Murats!" he barked. "I'd know that hellish hooker anywhere!"

Pat grunted. "Thought so," he snapped. "Well, he won't try to come through the reef tonight; but we'll set watches and see what he's up to if he does come in. I've heard quite a lot about Mr. Stallheim—it's about time we got acquainted!"

Kelly said: "He must see the *Hawk*. Don't forget, Pat, he has the four nuggets I found. He won't let anyone else get any others if he can barge in and get them for himself. He's tough, Pat, and this looks like trouble."

Pat growled, "And am I scared!"

But his vast courage made him too confident. He didn't know then that he had spoken too soon.

PAT, Tom, Tao and the crew were on watch at the first crack of dawn, scanning the sea. As the early wind strengthened, they saw the schooner round a concealing headland and bring up in the wind. She headed for the passage in the outer reef, dancing along like a racing craft.

Pat grunted. "There's a sailor handling that wheel!"

Kelly shrugged. "Stallheim has to be a sailor to stay alive, I guess."

Pat turned to Tao with a swift flow of Kanaka. Tao grinned, wet his lips, spat overside and went below. Several minutes later, Tom noticed that the crew were all armed with heavy Webley service revolvers and cartridge belts.

"He's coming in," said Pat, and Kelly turned to open the schooner dance through the opening in the reef and curtsey

gently in the long swell. She flew no flag. Pat could see that her rail was lined with a large crew, watching them.

"Big crew," he said, "for a schooner that size, eh? Wonder what the next move will be. He's going to drop his hook."

"Wonder what he's up to?" said Kelly.

Pat absently scratched a ponderous forearm and watched.

The slim, gray-painted



Satan

ship slipped up to her anchorage like a ghost. There was speed crafted in every line of her. Pat made out the name on the side to be *Maori*. The hook slid into the water with scarcely a splash, and Pat's grin widened. The *Maori* was being handled like a crack racing craft.

No wonder, he thought, the obsolete British and Dutch gunboats, patrolling the area, using slow-burning Japanese coal, could never catch up with this swift scourge of the Shallow Seas. Their clanking, wornout engines were capable of ten knots at most, and the *Maori* could dance along, he judged, at twelve or more, in a light breeze.

The *Maori* had a sinister history. Stallheim was almost a legend in the Archipelago. There were many tales of the robbery of lonely trading posts, of native villages looted and inhabitants mercilessly shot down; it was said that Stallheim manipulated channel lights to wreck unsuspecting ships for the loot. He was the last of the followers of the pirates and buccaneers of the South Pacific. And here he was in person, at anchor in a British lagoon, as cool as brass!

Stallheim had escaped arrest for a decade, having the whole of the South Pacific to use as a hideout. The masters of half the small trading ships in the Shallow Seas had talked of combining to wipe him

out; but nothing was ever done about it, and here he was, showing no apprehension!

"Stand by for trouble!" said Kelly. "He's coming this way!"

Pat saw the smaller of two whaleboats go overside, to be manned by four natives. Into the back went the huge figure of a man in whites. The oars snapped back with precision and the whaleboat danced toward the *Hawk*. Pat called a soft command to Tao, and the mate relayed it to the crew. There was no more talk. Pat's crew was very well trained. They took stations with swift orderliness and waited.

"What in hell does he want?" said Kelly. "Looks like he's heading for us!"

Pat didn't answer. He watched the approach of the wholeboat, his eyes on the white man in the stern. A huge hulk of a man, with blond hair, he wore white slacks and a white shirt, open at his brawny throat. He had on a sun-helmet and pipe-clayed shoes; and he was smoking a cigarette in a long holder, his eyes on the two men at the rail of the *Hawk*.

"That's Stallheim, all right," said Kelly swiftly. His fingers drummed nervously on the rail. "I wonder what he wants. He's a devil, I tell you, Pat! Maybe it would be a good idea if I put a slug in him right now, before he starts anything. Might save us a lot of trouble!"

"No," drawled Pat. "No. He's not that dumb. He wouldn't expose himself this way unless he had an ace in the hole somewhere. Let's hear what he has to say, if anything."

A moment later, the big man in the whaleboat pushed back his sun-helmet and shouted, "*Hawk*, ahoy!"

"Ahoy!" answered Pat.

"I want to talk to the master of the *Hawk*."

"Come aboard," called Pat. "Alone!"

STALLHEIM swung aboard with the slitherness of a jungle cat, despite his enormous bulk, and Kelly, although he knew it, was freshly surprised to see that the great blond half-breed towered inches above the six-feet-plus of Pat Shannon.

The eyes of the two big men locked with intentness, almost with a physical violence, and held for a long moment; then Stallheim smiled.

"I want to talk to you," he repeated, eying them both.

"I'm Pat Shannon. My friend here can hear anything you have to say. Come down to my cabin."

Once in the cabin, the tawny-headed giant sat down. His seemingly hunched shoulders looked fully a yard wide, and he took the measure of his two companions out of curiously squinting light blue eyes, which, to Pat, seemed to hold a badly concealed hostility. It was easy to see that he recognized Kelly, though he said nothing about it. Kelly sat back, his face taut, and smoked his cigarette, watching the yellow-maned man through slitted eyes.

Pat waited patiently, an odd glow in his icy eyes, the muscles of his jaw taut. Stallheim seemed to be weighing a problem. The fingers of one enormous hand drummed on the table noiselessly.

"Captain Shannon," he said finally, "I have business ashore here. I didn't expect to find anyone, and I hope we shall not interfere with each other's business."

"We're in charge of the mine," said Pat. "What's your business here?"

"Ah!" rumbled the giant. "Then you will have no objection, I hope, to our work in the Chinese cemetery. We are removing the bodies."

"The bodies, eh?" drawled Pat. "Why?"

The big man swiveled around, his uncompromising stare seeming to take the measure of Pat's bulk, his wedge-shaped shoulders.

"We are taking them back to China—to Kowloon," he shrugged. "The Chinese, as you know, venerate their ancestors. Many are buried here. Their relatives have formed a company in China, and have agreed to pay me to bring them all back for sacred burial in consecrated soil." He grinned. "Not pleasant work, perhaps, but the Island trading isn't what it used to be."

"We have no objection," said Pat, pay-

ing no attention to the explanation, "if you want to remove bodies," Stallheim; but you'll do it under our supervision. Half a dozen men ashore at one time will be enough. My men will watch all operations."

THERE was a wide scar on Stallheim's cheek, running from his temple to his mouth. It grew an angry red now, and the curiously colorless eyes grew hooded.

"Six men," he said, "are not enough. We have had trouble with the natives here, and if they returned, six men could hardly drive them off—"

"I'll look after the natives," interposed Pat.

"But you haven't enough men!" exploded Stallheim. "There are hundreds of the Karakaras—"

Pat smiled bleakly. "Don't let it worry you, Stallheim," he advised. "I triggered a Browning for many years."

The big man's eyes blinked, then he seemed to quake, inwardly, with some secret mirth. He arose.

"Well," he said, "I'm glad we came to an understanding, Captain. I'll detail six men to go ashore. You're the man who is called 'The Parson,' aren't you?"

"Some people call me that."

"I've heard of you. Does the name refer to your saintliness? I've often wondered!"

"Quite the reverse, Stallheim—as some people have found out." Pat's eyes were frosty. "As a parson, I conduct a very fine funeral service," he added.

Stallheim laughed. "I've heard!" he commented. "Well, glad we can work together, Captain."

He left in the whaleboat immediately, and Kelly watched him go, uneasiness twisting his volatile features. Pat watched, too; and finally he chuckled.

"Damn liar!" he said. His face sobered. "There's a dangerous man, Tom, if I ever saw one. Getting any gold out will take plenty of doing—between that outfit and the Karakaras!"

Kelly snapped, "Sure he's lying! He recognized me. He and his crew raided my hut and got my four nuggets, Pat!

They suspect there's more of 'em here. They'll stall around with the body-removing business, and when we get the gold up, they'll jump us—"

"They just *think* they will."

Kelly frowned. "Yet they *were* digging up those old Chinese bodies, Pat—I watched 'em! It was horrible! Do you think there's any truth in what he said about them?"

"Not a word. He digs the bodies up for another reason."

"What?" asked Kelly, puzzled.

Pat's eyes followed the distant whaleboat, lazily. "I've talked to pearl dealers," he rumbled, "all over the South Pacific. There's a big clan of Chinese, working on the Islands, who like to be buried with something valuable. Has something to do with their religion, I guess. When they get old, or sick, or figure they're going to die, they buy two pearls from the nearest dealer, and keep them handy. Their friends see to it that they're buried with one pearl in the mouth and one laid on the eye. There are probably two pearls, of good quality, in every grave up there in the Chinese cemetery, Tom. That's what he's after!"

"The damned grave-robber!" Kelly shuddered. "I'll bet he'd have gotten all of them, too, if the Karakaras hadn't chased him out!"

"And now he's back," said Pat, "and he must figure that he can handle the Karakaras this time. I wonder how—unless he figures he has enough man-power. I wonder what's in that cold-blooded devil's mind!"

"Nothing honest!" snapped Kelly. "He got my gold, too, and—"

"Yes—and he probably came back to look into that, too."

"What'll we do, Pat? We can't sit here idle and wait until he digs up a thousand dead—"

"We won't. We'll set a guard over his men, and you'll get the gold. I'll watch, topside, and see that nothing unexpected happens. My men are well-trained, Tom."

"But he has two or three to your one, Pat! I don't like this—"

Pat didn't seem to be listening. His frosty eyes were on the trim *Maori*; and when he spoke, it was with a softness that gave no venom to his words:

"Tom, the law has failed to get Stallheim. He's got to be removed. Let him play around. We'll finish our business here, then I'm taking that big hulk back with me to Port Moresby—dead or alive—to stand trial for a little job I believe he did on an island I know about. Yes, sir—I think I'll take that big boy back with me!"

Tom Kelly stared.

SIX of Stallheim's evil-looking Murats came ashore; quick-moving, brown devils, with pointed, betel-stained teeth. They brought shovels. Stallheim came with them.

Pat and Kelly, plus six of the Kanakas from the *Hawk*, met them on the beach. The *Hawk*, under the command of Tao and the rest of the crew, all heavily armed, danced quietly in the south side of the lagoon. Pat had changed her position during the night, further away from the lean *Maori*.

Stallheim looked at the armed reception committee in silence. He eyed Pat, and for a moment, it seemed to Kelly, violence trembled in the air.

"All right!" barked Pat. "This is the way you'll work here, Stallheim. All my men are armed and have their orders. Leave your gun and have your Murats drop their knives."

Stallheim stared venomously, and then shrugged. He unbuckled his cartridge belt and let it and his gun drop to the sand. After a swift glance at their leader, the Murats dropped several knives.

"So far, so good," grunted Pat. "Turn out your pockets, Stallheim."

"What makes you so damn suspicious?" snarled the 'breed.

"Turn out your pockets!" repeated Pat evenly.

Stallheim's lips tightened, but he did it. His pockets revealed another, a smaller gun, a box of shells, a knife, and several harmless objects.

"Okay," nodded Pat. "Now you can set your men to work."

"You have no right to treat me like this!" snapped the giant. "It's bad business—in front of natives—to treat a white man—"

"You're not white, Stallheim," said Pat grimly. "You're as black as the deepest hole in hell, and this is the way it has got to be. Let's quit pretending."

The big man trembled and he tensed rigidly, a choleric tide staining his face; then he shrugged and accepted Pat's terms.

ALL that day, the Murats, under the armed guard of three Kanakas, dug in the old Chinese graveyard. Pat noted that they made little progress, and a grim smile twisted his tight lips.

Tom Kelly had gone into the mine, and Pat dominated the situation from the roof of a central mine shed, his sub-machine-gun clasped in his arms. There was no rain that day, and the vertical heat poured down like a furnace breath. Pat watched the Murats at work, the men who lounged on the deck of the *Maori*, the blond giant who bossed the labor in the cemetery; and he also eyed the forest behind him, for some sixth sense told him that the thick, Papuan jungle held malign eyes, unseen, but clamily felt.

In the sunlit clearings, silver-crested Guara pigeons, with eyes like garnets, dipped and danced to their mates; Pat's eyes fell upon palms, forty feet high, with foliage like maidenhair fern; flowers like flaming yellow candles. In the nearby estuary of the small river that ran out of the jungle, the scaled sago palms stood huddled together in the black slime; and great nipa palms, like huge ostrich plumes, sprang from the surface of the green water. It was a fierce, breathtaking country, primitive, savage; with a deep sense of enormous leisure, of limitless and timeless days and nights. Pat thought of the great civilized world, so remote, thousands of slow miles away; so far distant that it cast not even a shadow here.

As the sun slanted down, Tom Kelly appeared, a grimy scarecrow, caked with

earth and sweat; and Pat could see that he was vastly excited. He came toward Pat, pale and wary-eyed.

"Pat!" he called, in a hoarse whisper. "We've struck it! I found a nugget as big as a bucket! Can't lift it out by myself—you'll have to send down a couple of your Kanakas with me to haul it out."

Pat's eyes glinted, but his face was sober. "No—Kanakas are like children. They'd get excited and talk among themselves, and the news would soon get around.



Pat had a gun in each fist, and every bullet took its toll with mechanical precision

I'll go down with you tonight, once Stallheim and his gang are safely back aboard the *Maori*. How big is the nugget?"

"I can't budge it!" said Tom, hoarse with excitement. "If it doesn't weigh four hundred pounds, I'll eat it!"

"What?" asked Pat, incredulously. "Do they come *that* big?"

"Seldom. The biggest one ever found was six hundred pounds—but this one is damn near a world's record!"

"What's it worth?" asked Pat, wetting his dry lips.

"Roughly, Pat, about a hundred thousand dollars."

"We can't lift that up the shaft, Tom.

Any chance of cutting it up and removing it in pieces?"

"Yes, but it'll take two men—"

"Shut up!" warned Pat. "Here comes Stallheim!"

THE big man came up, glanced with surly appraisal at Kelly, his clothes; then he looked at Pat, his cold, insolent eyes taking in the sub-machine-gun.

"You've got plenty of nerve!" he barked, to Pat, his lips snarling "We don't bother you—why should you bother us? I can see you're working the mine—"

"Listen, Stallheim!" broke in Pat savagely. "You'll stay here only according to the rules I put down. If they don't suit you, you can always up anchor and get out!"

Their eyes locked in a silent combat of wills. The thwarted spasm of desperation that twisted the features of the big man came and went before the breathless moment sped; but Pat answered it with the steel of determination in the somber depths of his gray eyes.

An icy fury in his face, Stallheim turned away. "Oh, well," he growled, "you have all the aces just now, Shannon."

"You'll stay aboard," instructed Pat, "all night; and when you come ashore in the morning, you'll come unarmed. Is that clear? There's a reward on your empty head, Stallheim. I'm no policeman—but don't push your luck too far!"

Stallheim paused, turned, and shot a swift glance of hatred at Pat; then he laughed, harshly.

"Your stake here is worth more than a thousand pounds reward, Parson!" he grated. "And you're no pretty altruist! I've heard of some of the things you've done—and I'm not a fool. You make your own laws—so do I. You wouldn't leave this place for ten thousand pounds, and I know it!" He turned and strode away toward his whaleboat, where his six men were waiting to row him back to the *Maori*.

Pat's jaws had tightened, and Tom stared after the retreating figure with narrowed eyes, his hand on his belt, near his revolver.

"Trouble!" he announced tersely. "We're going to have trouble with that bird, Pat. He guessed, from my appearance, that I was down in the mine; and he has those four big nuggets to tell him why!"

Pat shrugged. "Maybe I'll leave the sub-gun with Tao tonight, when we come back to go into the mine, and I'm going to instruct him to shoot to kill if anyone tries to leave Stallheim's schooner!"

THE night came on, with dusky batwings of impending storm blotting out the jewels of the Southern Cross. All aboard the *Maori* seemed quiet, and Tao had his orders.

Quietly, Pat and Kelly stole ashore in the small dinghy, hugging the shadows. They were both armed, and Kelly carried a few tools he would need for the work in the mine. Pat, besides his big revolvers, carried a short carbine and a box of shells.

They made their way as quietly as possible into the shaft, and only then Kelly flashed on an electric torch to show the way. Pat followed him, stooping frequently. Far into the bowels of the earth Kelly led the way, snaking and twisting along, following the old workings that had paralleled the once-rich vein.

At last Kelly exclaimed, "There it is, Pat!"

Pat looked. Under the electric torch, the big object didn't look very valuable. A stone, that was all, rough and unprepossessing. He grunted.

"Doesn't look like anything valuable to me," he said. "Are you sure this is gold, Tom?"

Kelly was quivering with excitement. "Damn sure! It's one of the biggest nuggets ever found. This alone will make us rich! And I have a hunch there's more where this came from. Let's cut this one up right away. It's soft, and almost pure. You'll be able to see the color."

They fell to work, jamming the torch into a crevice, so they could work by its light. After an hour of hard labor in the close, airless chamber, the sweat caking their bodies, Pat got off his knees.

"We'll earn this," he grinned, "working

underground in this hell-hole! Let's cart the pieces to the shaft—"

Pat halted abruptly. They both whirled and faced the entrance of the tunnel. There had been a distinct sound, like the rapid scurrying of feet!

Kelly turned his wet, tense face to Pat, his eyes wide with unasked questions, and shadowed, suddenly, by an unspoken fear.

"Some stones dislodged?" asked Pat, in a whisper.

"Possibly—but the tunnel is shored up pretty well—"

A dull explosion, followed by a muffled boom, shattered the eerie gloom of the tunnel. A gust of air billowed over them with a physical violence. Pat was facing the tunnel, each fist holding a gun, his teeth bared in a fierce grin. Kelly's face was white with dread.

"Somebody followed us!" he said. "Someone's blown up the tunnel behind us, Pat!"

"Come on—let's see!" snapped Pat. He grabbed the torch and strode into the tunnel, Kelly following.

TWENTY-FIVE feet back, a solid wall of earth met their eyes, completely shutting off the tunnel from the shaft. The acrid sting of powder fumes told them the story. They had been trapped in the mine!

"Stallheim!" Pat growled. "They must have seen us go ashore and followed—swam from the *Maori*, I'll bet, so Tao wouldn't see anyone leaving for shore! Stallheim or some of his crew did this. What happens now, Tom? You know this hole in the ground better than I do."

Tom's bleak face was screwed tight as he viewed the barricade that blocked them off from egress. "We couldn't dig out of that in a year, Pat! I guess that snake figured that, with you and me out of the way, he could take over—"

"Not too much chance. Tao's on the *Hawk*. If he heard that blast let go, he'll be suspicious. He'll investigate—"

"Trouble is," broke in Tom, sweating profusely, "that he might not hear it! That was just enough powder to block the tunnel long enough for us to die here like rats

—but not enough blast to be heard on the surface. And Tao might think it was thunder. There was some, in the north, when we came down. Maybe it's raining again topside."

"Give me that pick!" snarled Pat. "We'll try, anyway!"

"Wait!" shouted Tom suddenly, his eyes gleaming with excitement. "Wait! It was either this north—or the south—tunnel that had an opening into the bush—I don't recall which. It ran into a cavern made by an underground stream, and came out the other side of the hill. Come on!"

He snatched the torch from Pat and raced back the way they had just come. He paused where the cut-up pieces of the big nugget lay, but Pat shoved him on.

"Go ahead, Tom! If we get out of this, we can always come back for it. If we don't, it won't do us any good! Go ahead, mister!"

Tom went. The tunnel had been roughly driven here; it was narrow and jagged; but suddenly they heard the musical sound of running water.

"Boy!" shouted Tom. "This is it, Pat! Look there! It's an underground cavern, and the stream runs on the bottom—about a six-foot drop into the water. It'll carry us into the brush, near the river." He flashed the torch around, and Pat, after a glance around, nodded.

"Any crocks?" he asked succinctly. "I smell 'em!"

"Never saw any here, as I remember," said Kelly. "They may be at the mouth of the cave, where this thing runs out into the flats. Well, do we try? When the mine was operating, no one ever tried it—white, yellow or black—so I don't know what this river'll do to us, where it goes, or what'll happen—"

Pat laid down his carbine and the box of shells for it. He took off his shoes and shirt and tied them around his neck.

"Let's go!" he rasped. "Give me the light—we'll hang on to it as long as it works. This seems to be our only chance, so we're taking it!"

He lowered himself into the water. Kelly followed without another word.

PAT swam powerfully with one hand, holding the electric torch aloft. The water was swift and cold, chilling them after the humid closeness of the mine tunnel. Weird shadows leaped and gibbered, crouched and sprang from the far reaches as they were swept along with the current. The sound of the water filled the tunnel with a rushing murmur, a gleeful, malicious chuckling; it seemed to be laughing with some ghoulish glee.

"How far to the exit?" shouted Pat, righting his powerful body as they swept around a bend.

Tom spluttered, "Near as I can figure, several hundred yards. Save your breath—there may be sink holes and whirlpools—"

Endlessly, they seemed to be flung along with the swift current; then a breath of warm, perfumed air came to them, and suddenly, to one side, a green glimmer of moonlight. Kelly yelled, and Pat blew water like a walrus and struck out for it.

"Must have quit raining out there," yelled Kelly gleefully.

It had. The moon was on the horizon, hugely theatrical, immense as some gibbous floating lamp, spilling a green veneer on the jungles and the sea. With one last burst of speed, the underground stream widened its banks and spewed them over a short falls into a deep, time-worn basin.

It knocked the breath out of them for the moment, but the cold water made them strike for the shore, spluttering and gasping for breath. The basin of the pool was a coralline limestone formation, but the avid jungle ran down to the edge, thick, almost impenetrable. Rank growths and trailing lianas interlaced to stop their progress; but Pat forced his way through to a clearing and slumped down, winded.

"I'd give five dollars," he gasped, "for a cigarette and a dry match!"

Tom didn't answer. He simply dropped, breathing hard. He wrung water from his trousers and then made sure his gun still hung at his hip. Pat noted the gesture.

"Catch our wind, Tom," he whispered, "and then we'll make our way back and raise a little hell of our own! I don't think the ammunition is wet."

For several seconds they sat in silence, the only sound heard being their deep breathing; then Pat put his hand lightly on Tom's arm. Some feeling beyond reason plucked at his sharpened senses. They heard the giant drum of a cassowarie; then the blue-helmeted head of the giant bird looked out of the jungle, fully eight feet above the ground, and silently vanished again.

Tom motioned for silence. Pat nodded. He knew the cassowaries were shy in the daytime, but fierce at night; that they had legs as powerful as any horse, and one kick would mean the end of a man—and so would one blow from the creature's steam-hammer beak. The night drowsed in the jungle. They caught the curious sweetness of orchids and the rank stain of musk and carrion, which spelled the presence of crocodiles in the river flats below.

"Okay!" whispered Tom, "he's gone. I know this bush—I lived in it, hunted day and night by the Karakaras and Stallheim's crew. Steer clear of the cassowaries—they're ill-tempered at night, and powerful as bulls—"

Pat cautioned him to silence again.

"Back into the shadows!" he whispered. "Karakaras!"

They edged backward into the deeper growths together and sat, immovable.

Pat whispered, "Don't shoot if you can help it. Don't want gun-shots heard. Let me handle them—if there aren't too many."

SENSES keyed high, they waited. Pat heard the creak of an unseen bow, the scratch of the tortoise-shell gantlet against the string, and a six-foot arrow whispered past them, to one side. Silence lowered again. The unseen marksman rustled faintly in his hidden position, then glided to the edge of the clearing to get a better shot. Then Pat saw him.

He was a Karakara, probably the worst and most savage of the West Papuan tribes. His face looked demoniac in the weird moonlight, painted black and red; a gleaming boar tusk was thrust through his nostrils, giving the savage, cruel face

a hideous leer. A tall savage, with the muscles of his naked shoulders tensed for attack.

Pat crouched with the noiseless liteness of some great jungle tiger. He crossed the glade with lightning-like rapidity. As the savage's pineapple club came hurtling through the air, Pat avoided it only by a fraction; then he was on the man.

They locked together a moment, then the big black sank limply to the ground without a sound, his head queerly twisted to one side.

Kelly, aware of a movement behind him, whirled, saw another Karakara, and sprang and pistol-whipped the astonished savage, sending him asprawl to twitch and finally lie quiet. Pat was at his side.

"Back to the lagoon!" he snarled. "The jungle is full of them—I think they're about to stage an attack on the ships!"

Kelly nodded and swung cautiously into the jungle, blue-black with light and shadow. For some time they inched forward, tensed for any eventuality. Then, from the direction of the mine, they suddenly heard rifle-fire—the thin crack of high-powered cartridges. This was suddenly drowned out by the steady drumming of a machine-gun. Pat swore under his breath.

"That's Tao," he whispered fiercely. "Stallheim must have made an attempt to get aboard the *Hawk*!"

"Damn!" snapped Kelly. "If he gets control of the *Hawk*—"

"Not much chance," rasped Pat, "with Tao on deck handling that machine-gun—but there'll be dead men, sure as hell!"

"Let's climb the hill and have a look," Kelly snapped.

TEN minutes later, they topped the rise and looked down on the deserted settlement, the crumbling mine buildings. The *Maori* lay where she had been before; the *Hawk* seemed peaceful—but several small boats, black spiders on the amber-varnished lagoon, drew away from the *Hawk*. The faint winking flashes from the sub-machine-gun in Tao's hands blinked rapidly, sounding like a giant woodpecker. Dim with

distance, in the north, thunder rolled faintly and lightning flickered. Kelly pointed.

"Our dinghy's gone!" he whispered. "Stallheim must have tended to that when he blew the tunnel. How'll we get back on board?"

The machine-gun stuttered briefly before Pat could answer. He chuckled, his rock-like face softening.

"We'll swim, if we have to," he clipped, "but it would be a good idea to stay here just now. Stallheim doesn't know we're out of the tunnel. Tao can defend the *Hawk* all right. If Stallheim comes ashore, as he will, to get the rest of those pearls, we can hop him and have the advantage of surprise on our side."

Kelly said, pointing, "Not much chance, Pat! That jungle, down there, is full of Karakaras, waiting for the same opportunity. The savages are bound to know sooner or later that we're in the bush, because they'll find those two men. They're like hunting dogs for following a trail. The two of us can't fight them and Stallheim both! We're certainly between the devil and the deep blue sea!"

"Just the same, we're staying here to see what develops. If we went down there now, we'd run into the main body of savages."

With careful and guarded movements, they changed their position to a more advantageous one, commanding a view of the entire settlement, as well as the lagoon.

The small boats, they saw, had reached the *Maori* and were tied alongside, and the men climbed aboard. No sounds reached the two watching men. They experienced, however, the uncanny chill of unseen eyes and the mysterious movements of bodiless phantoms in the jungle below, for the rustling and the queerly moving shadows told them that the forest was full of Karakaras.

The moon rose higher, and they were conscious of the hidden tightening of nerves. Pat felt every tendon and muscle crawl within him.

Slowly the night dragged on. They sat in silence and watched. With dawn, there

was activity aboard both ships. Tao evidently was on watch but the men on the *Maori* paid no heed to the crew of the *Hawk*. When the sun was above the horizon, the *Maori's* boats filled with Murats and they came ashore, keeping wide of the *Hawk* and her dreaded machine-gun.

Stallheim's big figure was easily distinguishable. There was some sort of a confab amongst them; then the boats were herded close together, at the water's edge. All the men were heavily armed, belted with cartridges. A sentry was established at the boats. He seated himself in one of them and smoked a cigarette.

Stallheim, tall, dynamic, restless, roved everywhere, watching, giving orders, grouping his men. Pat grunted. Stallheim evidently had had military training. He acted like a soldier, a man accustomed to command.

"Making ready to do something," spat Kelly. "Ten to one, he's going into the mine! And telling off part of the crew for pearl salvage in the cemetery! That guy's got organization!"

Pat grunted assent—and leaned forward suddenly with a startled exclamation.

"Look!" he snapped.

SOMETHING had happened on the beach. Several men had suddenly sprawled on the sand, others were staggering; still others were staring at those who had gone down. The jungle had spewed a silent flight of arrows. And again a thick flight of shafted death struck in their midst, and other men fell and cried out. Some shouted and reeled away, others sank slowly to their knees, plucking desperately at the yard-long yellow shafts piercing their bodies. A cry of confusion arose, dominated, however, by the bull roar of Stallheim.

The third volley from the jungle was met with a scattering fire. Under the hoarse commands of Stallheim, the men had dropped flat and were firing at the blank jungle, the heavy slugs whistling and whining; but they did not stop the incessant streaking of the long shafts, of the blow-gun needles, tipped with poison

that killed inevitably when they bit into human bodies.

The tough Murats held their ground. They did not retreat. They inched forward to catch sight of their invisible enemies. Under the shouted commands of Stallheim, they spread, fanwise, to control three points of the compass, and the firing became steady. The arrows and darts still came, but now they were flying over the prone bodies, dropping harmlessly into the sand beyond.

Pat licked his dry lips. "Too bad this is a private scrap—it looks terribly inviting!"

"Hell!" Kelly muttered. "Watch Stallheim!"

Under his command, his men were now retreating toward the whaleboats. They were leaving five men behind, dead. Stallheim seemed immune. He was everywhere, the splitting crack of his high-powered rifle whanging above the sharp roar of the other guns.

A detail of men launched the boats, while the rest fought a rear-guard defensive action, prone, shooting deliberately now, finding marks, as sudden, erratic movements and shouts in the jungle testified.

Then, quickly, the Murats were aboard and away, the firing keeping up, covering their retreat. A flight of harmless arrows followed them, to fall short and hiss into the water. As yet, not a savage was visible.

Pat snapped, "Chalk up one for the Karakas! After chasing that gang aboard, they'll be cocky and will need plenty of trimming to teach them to behave!"

Then the beach was full of Karakas: fully a hundred of the naked savages, yelling and shouting, waving bows and pineapple stone clubs at the fast retreating Stallheim and his crew. A short burst of rifle-fire failed to drive them back, although several were wounded.

All this time, the crew of the *Hawk*, Pat could see, were hanging over the rail, watching the fight. When the savages impartially threatened them, Tao, sub-machine-gun poised, poured a stuttering

burst toward the beach. It came so fast, so accurately, that the savages yelled in terror and vanished into the screening wall of jungle, leaving behind them a scattering of dead or wounded men.

"Good!" snapped Pat. "That little gun is worth a hundred men, Tom. They don't sabe it—think it's *mana*. They're used to armed white men, with hand arms, but the machine-gun's beyond them. Never saw the savages yet who didn't yell and run when *that* thing began to talk!"

"The Karakaras can't seem to get Stallheim," Kelly muttered. "That guy seems immune!"

"I'm glad they didn't get him!" barked Pat. "That killer's hide belongs to me. He'd cheerfully have buried us alive in the mine, Tom, and I owe him something for that! I might respect an enemy who fights square, but when a man tries that kind of trick—I finish the deal for him."

Tom Kelly, watching the tigerish snarl on the big man's face, felt a chill ripple along his spine. "He may sail away," he said. "He may leave right now."

"From now on," retorted Pat, "it makes no difference where he goes. I'm going after him!"

Tom, watching his companion, saw the swift wave of resolve that moved across Pat's tense face like heat across metal. There was a frown on Pat's brow, and his face was tight.

"We're going aboard the *Hawk* to-night," he announced; "and to hell with the Karakaras, and Stallheim, too!"

BEFORE the moon came up, the lagoon was wrapped in a pall of black. Chancing the sharks that might be hunting in shallower waters, they both swam out to the *Hawk*, keeping her bulk between them and any observing eyes aboard the *Maori*.

The phosphorescent glimmerings of their wake must have been seen aboard the *Hawk*, for a sharp challenge caused Pat to call, cautiously, across the distance. Tao loomed, machine-gun in hand, at the rail.

Ten minutes later, exhausted, worn,

Pat glanced at Kelly across the remains of a hasty meal on the little table in the cabin and said, "Better turn in. You can use a little sleep."

"How about you?"

"I'll set the watches, then I'll try it too."

Kelly yawned and stretched out in a bunk. "I could sleep for a week," he said. "Any plans, Skipper?"

"We'll talk about them in the morning."

Pat called Tao and issued orders. The old, careless habit of leaving a Pacific ship untended while at anchor, in pleasant weather, was dropped. The Kanakas were fully armed and cautioned to be watchful. A keen-eyed Islander was perched on top of the little galley house and told to shoot at anything that moved in the water near the ship.

Tao was ordered to take a well-earned rest, and the crew was told off in watches. The moon would not come up until later. Eight bells sounded from the cabin. Pat went below and flung himself down for a brief rest.

SOMEWHERE near morning, the alertness of the watch must have relaxed, because nothing had happened. Out of the shadows slipped a dim figure, dripping seawater. Even that slight noise must have been heard by the Kanaka watching atop the galley midship. He leaned forward to see what it was and a belaying pin caught him blindly. He collapsed and slid over to the main deck without a sound.

Strong hands caught him. He was bound and gagged with his own loin cloth, and rolled into the lee scuppers. Another of the watch called out, hearing the blow, and came forward from the stern. He, too, sagged from a merciless blow and was gagged and bound. The rail suddenly swarmed with dark, dripping shadows. The third man on watch came out of a reverie when a greenheart belaying pin laid open his skull. He didn't have time to shout any warning. Swift hands tied and gagged him, rolled him to one side.

Then swift forms converged toward the main cabin scuttle and leaped below, like some hideous, bodiless phantoms out of a nightmare. Thereafter, for a few minutes, the *Hawk* was bedlam.

Pat, wakened by the sound of soft footsteps, came swimming up from a deep well of sleep. He heard a shot—another—a scream. Before he could move, something exploded inside his skull and he sank into an illimitable darkness, shot with flashes of red fire.

Kelly sprang up with his revolver in his hand. He fired with a nervous reaction and heard a man scream in agony. Something struck his forehead with an agonizing crunch, and he fell back, consciousness driven out of him.

There were furious sounds elsewhere throughout the *Hawk*, but here a light sprang up to reveal Stallheim, naked but for a loin cloth, dripping, and four of his ratty Murats, similarly clad, and armed with belaying pins and knives.

"Tie them up, fast!" snapped the blond giant; and the Murats sprang to obey. The rest of Pat's Kanaka crew, suddenly jerked from sleep to be confronted and outnumbered by shadowy demons who struck with clubs and knives, put up what fight they could. They were soon subdued, bound and gagged, unable to cope with the sheer weight of greatly superior numbers.

Silence settled again on the quiet lagoon, broken only by the gentle lap of the waters against the side of the *Hawk*. There was a cautious call or two across the black deck; then a big voice boomed in gloating laughter as Stallheim came topside; a fit of raucous guffaws that didn't sound quite sane.

PAT came back to consciousness through a curious blackness that snapped suddenly with sight and comprehension, as if someone had thrown on a switch to sensate life.

Stallheim was sitting at his table, watching him, and Kelly, trussed like a pig ready for market, lay in the opposite bunk, his face streaked with dried blood.

Sheer rage welled first in Pat's being—rage that swelled his chest and constricted his throat. His furious efforts to free his hands and feet gained him nothing. He was securely tied, and even his immense strength could not tear loose the cunning knots the Murats had fastened.

Kelly's eyes, too, were open, and his lips were taut.

"You dirty 'breed!" rasped Pat. "I'll skin you alive for this!"

There was an amused derision in Stallheim's cold, skim-milk eyes as he stared back. Slowly, the veins of his temples stood out and wrath burned his cheeks.

"I should slit your throat for that," he spat. "You know what the Karakas do with prisoners? Well, I've got even prettier ways! Keep a civil tongue in your head, or I'll—"

"Damn you!" choked Pat, livid with fury.

Kelly was shaking his head warningly at Pat, unseen by Stallheim. They were in no position to antagonize him; but Pat's courage was reckless and counted no costs. He flashed a glance at Kelly, crushed his lips together and subsided.

"That's better!" approved Stallheim. "Now, you two act sensibly, and you won't get hurt. But if you don't—I'll prepare you for a Karakara 'long-pig' feast and leave you ashore where those cannibals can find you! Is that clear?" His coarse face was demoniac with hatred. "I mean I'll have my Murats strip the hide off you!"

There was a vicious cruelty in the big man's voice; the little, piglike eyes didn't look quite sane, with the heat of fury igniting them. It was no empty threat. He would do just that, and laugh at their agony. Stallheim stared at Pat.

"And, as for you—" He paused.

An icy, snarling grin flitted across Pat's face. He glared at Stallheim, wordless, but there was something in the green-gray fury of his eyes that warned Stallheim not to go too far. Stallheim sneered.

"You'll do as I say, or neither of you will ever worry about anything this side of hell!" he said.

"What do you expect us to do?" clicked off Pat metallically. His eyes were bleak as arctic ice now.

"Ah! That's better!" said Stallheim. "Sensible! You will show me exactly where that gold is in the mine—when we're through with our business in the Chinese cemetery."

"You bottled up the tunnel," said Kelly coolly. "We can't get in there. It would take weeks to clear it out."

"I'll have some of my crew clear it out again." Stallheim's laughter boomed again, snaggy yellow teeth showing, his pale eyes stabbing at Kelly. "So you knew another way out of the tunnel, eh? Well, we were going to dig it out anyway—later."

"What makes you think there's more gold in the mine?" said Kelly.

"Why did you come back—bringing Shannon, here, to help you? Bah! You think a little cockroach like you can fool me? We found the four nuggets, don't forget, and your notes. And you'd better find gold, when my men clear away the blast! Once we finish with the pearls—"

"Pearls out of dead Chinese eyes and mouths!" rasped Pat. "You abominable ghoul! You're just a graveyard rat!"

"Shut up!" bellowed Stallheim, purple with rage. "Pearls are pearls, wherever you find them! I suppose you'd pass up hundreds of fine pearls! If you had happened to know what I know about Chinese cemeteries, you'd pass them up, huh?"

"Rat!" said Pat.

The piglike eyes were venomous. Stallheim reached out one enormous foot and kicked Pat, hard. Pat flinched, but no word left his grim lips. Instead, the snarling smile contorted his face again and his frosty eyes were steady, unflinching.

"I've heard that you use your feet a lot," he said. "You stamped a couple of natives to death, on Aowla Island, about a year ago, didn't you?"

Stallheim scowled warily. "You're a liar! There isn't a living soul on Aowla. I was there a few months ago. It's abandoned."

"That's right," agreed Pat bitterly. "There wasn't a living thing left—not

after you got through! I had a hunch it was you, right along. But one native did get away, into the bush. He came out when I put into the lagoon and told me what had happened to the Waldeen family. The girl had to knife herself to get away from you, didn't she?"

STALLHEIM'S face was volcanic with S a bleak anger more dangerous than any he had heretofore exhibited. His eyes snaked over Pat with a lethal calculation.

"Friends of yours?" he sneered.

"The Waldeens were friends of mine, yes," said Pat.

"And I suppose you wanted that girl for yourself, eh?" asked Stallheim craftily. "Well—sorry I spoiled it—too bad she didn't have sense enough to prefer a *man*!" He spat contemptuously on the floor and turned to Kelly. "Did you see any of my men in Madang?" he barked.

Kelly raised his black eyebrows. "Your men? Did you send any of your men after me—to Madang?"

Stallheim cursed. "Answer me," he roared, "or I'll bash in your dumb head! If you know anything about them, you'd better spit it out fast!"

"What would I know?" shrugged Tom. "Who were they?"

"My mate and three men," snapped Stallheim. "I sent them after you—to make you a proposition about you and me working the mine together."

Tom grinned. "Yes, you did!" he scoffed. "Never saw them! Maybe they got drowned."

Stallheim cursed, sensing Tom's sly baiting. His hamlike arm swung and caught Tom a whacking blow in the face, knocking him back into the bunk like a toy.

"Stop that!" gritted Pat. "Pick on someone your size, you white-livered rat! Untie me for five minutes and, man to man, I'll tie you in knots with your own legs!"

Stallheim spat with amused contempt. "You?" he asked, and laughed. "I've broken better men in half with my two hands!"

Tom picked himself up and sat straight

again. He was bound and helpless, and fresh blood streaked his impish face. He was grinning one-sidedly, and although his eyes were dazed with the blow, they were dancing with a cool courage.

"It's an idea!" he said, through his bloody lips. "Make you a sporting proposition, skunk: give the Parson a chance, man to man. If he wins, we go free, and if he loses, we'll give up the mine to you. If you can understand anything fair like that—"

"Shut up!" bellowed Stallheim. "You'll do what I say, when I say it, and nothing else!" He arose, stretched his mighty frame, and left the cabin.

"Don't bait him any more, Pat," said Tom. "He'll kill you sure, if you keep it up. Maybe I can figure a way out, once we get below ground, in the tunnel."

Pat didn't answer. His eyes were fixed upon the ceiling, with their focus on far distant horizons.

THEREAFTER, for a week, while Stallheim and his crew were busy looting the Chinese cemetery, Pat and Tom stayed in the cabin, tied up and guarded vigilantly. Their hands were freed only when they ate, and Stallheim sat and watched them, gun drawn, until the meal was finished and they were securely tied up again. There was never a minute in which they could try to escape—to break the heavy cords that held them. It was doubtful if they could, even if they had the chance, for Stallheim examined the knots frequently, leaving nothing to chance.

They waited and watched, and talked, when they had a chance, and slept. Pat, with a simmering hatred growing in his big body, occasionally flared up in hot rebellion, only to be laughed at by the triumphant Stallheim.

Several men, they learned, were clearing the obstruction in the tunnel, while the rest of them worked in the cemetery. Even Pat's Kanakas were forced into this labor. He found out that one of his crew had been killed in the attack, several hurt, and his mate, Tao, was missing.

"For that alone," he grumbled to Tom,

"I'll break that rat's back, if I ever get half a chance!"

"You haven't got a Chinaman's chance," said Tom, "while you're tied up and under guard. Take your time. We may get a break later. While there's life, there's hope."

"You know damn well," growled Pat, "that Stallheim doesn't intend that we should get out of this alive. He wants us to show him where the gold is, and once he has what he wants, his Murats will slit our throats and use us for shark bait!"

"That's just why I'm playing close to my chest and waiting—and hoping," said Tom. "I've never been dead, and I don't think I'd like it. We'll take the first chance that offers."

One day, they heard a lot of shouting on the beach, and recognized the rapid drumming of the machine-gun. Later Stallheim came aboard the *Hawk*, fondling the gun.

"Karakaras tried it again," he grinned, "but they don't linger when this thing tunes up. Much obliged, Parson. This sure is a fine little gun!"

"Go to hell!" said Pat. "I hope it backfires and rips your guts out!"

Stallheim's little eyes gleamed dangerously. "No chance," he said. "I know these little weapons." He turned to Tom, scowling. "How big is that mine, underground, cockroach?"

Tom flushed. "If you mean the tunnels, lunkhead," he answered coolly, "they stretch for long distances in all directions."

"Is there anything funny down there?"

"Funny? What d'ye mean?"

"Something damn queer down there," grumbled Stallheim. "Sounds, whisperings. We've searched, but found nothing. Still—two of my men are missing. Know any reason why?"

Tom shrugged, his brown eyes hard and bright. "The place is haunted," he told Stallheim. "The ghosts of those hundreds of Chinamen, in the cemetery. They're after you for disturbing their last sleep, Stallheim, and robbing them—"

Stallheim snarled, "Is that funny? You think you're talking to a child? Careful

how you swing your tongue, cockroach!" He stalked out.

Pat asked immediately, "What did he mean, Tom? Is there anything down there?"

"Not that I know of."

"He said two of his men were missing."

"Yeah. But I know no reason. I was just kidding him."

Stallheim made free with the *Hawk* and its stores. The crew was of a dozen tints and shades, all vicious and brutal, all misbegotten, waterfront mongrels. There was a natural antipathy between them and the larger, gentler Kanakas of Pat's crew, whom they now ruled mercilessly.

The rainy season was tapering off and the heat increased daily. Near the end of the second week of Pat's imprisonment, Stallheim came into the Hawk's cabin and announced that the work in the cemetery was finished. He chuckled gleefully.

"Nearly four hundred pearls!" he boasted. "And all good ones. What a clean-up! The Chinese buy the best they can afford to be buried with, Shannon. Now, with what we'll get out of the mine—" He stopped, triumphantly, with a large grin of delight.

"Is the tunnel open?" asked Tom.

"Almost. Now, with the pearls safe, I'll be able to put more of my men on the tunnel, and we'll have it open in a day or two. About ready to act sensibly and go to work, you two?"

"Sure," replied Tom calmly.

Pat Shannon said nothing.

STALLHEIM looked his two prisoners over with satisfaction. They had been quiet for a week, sunk, apparently, into utter dejection, into complete acquiescence with his will. He grunted approval.

"Tomorrow," he announced, "we go aboard the *Maori*, so we don't divide our forces. This tub of yours is old anyway, Shannon, so we'll soak her in oil and burn her. But first we'll make a trap of her for the Karakas, and get them on board before we touch her off. Those savages have been too troublesome."

Pat did not answer, although the pained

red of a fierce wrath, too great for words, stained his gaunt cheeks. Burn the *Hawk*? The thought fanned an undying rebellion in his heart.

That night Stallheim's crew looted the stores of the *Hawk* and moved to the *Maori*. Stallheim remained on board, cradling Pat's sub-machine-gun in his hands. They hardly ever saw him without it now. It had become his constant companion.

Hope had leaped into Pat's eyes when the watchful crew departed. If he and Tom were to spend the night alone on the *Hawk*, perhaps something could be managed. Now, when he saw Stallheim seat himself in the cabin, the machine-gun in his lap, a berserk rage ran through him. It seemed that his last vague hopes were to go glimmering. Tom lay in the shadows of his bunk, silent.

Pat listened to the men row away and cursed. Tonight was their last chance, with only the three of them aboard. Once they showed Stallheim the source of the gold, their usefulness to him would be ended, and they could expect nothing but a bullet between the eyes. Stallheim would burn the *Hawk* and leave no trace; he would kill the remainder of Pat's crew, Tom and Pat himself. They would all disappear from the face of the earth. There would be no connection linking the murders to the merciless outlaw.

All this flashed through Pat's mind. He thought of a tall, slim, golden girl on Aowla Island, a mere child of seventeen, who had killed herself, rather than fall into the big paws of this same Stallheim, who knew neither decency nor mercy. He thought of her parents, peaceful, kindly people, wiped ruthlessly out of existence by this same killer.

Stallheim was blandly smoking a cigarette now, exuding confidence, well-being, supremely satisfied. He would be a very rich man when this Ronga venture was over. Pat watched him with a deep fire hidden in his frosty eyes.

The sounds of oarlocks died away, and the lassitude of the tropical night settled down, vocal with the faint sounds of in-

sects, coming from the nearby jungles.

It was now, decided Pat—or never!

THERE was one chance in a thousand and Pat suddenly decided to take it. It was desperate, but he was a desperate man, and his hold on life was slipping with every passing moment. Better to die fighting than be slaughtered. He doubled up suddenly with a sharp cry. Stallheim looked at him curiously.

"I'm burning up!" moaned Pat. "Give me a drink of water, will you, Stallheim? I suppose you put one of your damn blacks up to poison me! Well, just remember this—I'm the only one that knows where that gold is, and if I die, you'll never get it!"

Stallheim denied the charge. He got up, machine-gun cradled, and approached Pat's bunk. He eyed the huddled prisoner and frowned. Tom swung his feet out of his bunk, eyes wide, instinctively scenting in the wind.

"Hell's bells!" moaned Pat, wriggling violently, hunched double. "Do something, will you? I'm dying—"

Then it happened. Stallheim approached the side of the bunk and leaned over. With the speed of a bullet, Pat straightened up and let drive with both his monumental legs. Tied together as they were, they drove into Stallheim's middle with the force of a pile-driver. It knocked the wind out of the big man and sent him flying back. He struck his head on the edge of Kelly's bunk and slumped to the floor, consciousness driven out of him by the truck-horse blow. The machine-gun slid out of his hands and went across the floor.

Pat was sitting up now, feet dangling, jaw tense. His hands were tied securely behind him. He cast one glance at the still form on the floor, then he whirled to Tom.

"Jump to it!" he snapped. "Get over here—hop or fall or roll—but get over here and turn your back to me! I'll try my teeth on those cords around your wrists. We have a few minutes at most, and if we don't get loose in that time, we're sunk!"

Tom jumped, bumped his head severely, and hopped across the gently swaying

cabin. His knees and hands and ankles were all tightly fastened together, and it wasn't easy for him to move, but he made it, falling against the larger man. Pat lay down, and Tom worked his body around so that his hands, behind him, were near Pat's face; then the big man went to work. Furiously, Pat's strong teeth bit into the cords, yanked and tore with the ferocity of a tiger worrying prey. He pulled and bit, his bull neck having strength enough to shake the lighter Tom like a kitten.

Seconds ticked by, and he had made no impression. The big outlaw on the floor moaned. Pat swore and resumed his work feverishly. Suddenly the cords slackened around Tom's wrists. One had come loose!

Tom worked his raw, bleeding wrists back and forth, and a moment later his hands were free!

"Quick!" snapped Pat. "In that drawer—over my desk—an old razor. Get the blade!"

Tom fell over the desk, grappling and fumbling in his eagerness. He found the razor, snapped out the blade and wobbled back to the bunk. Pat had turned around again, so as to expose his hands.

Tom slashed at the cords frantically, cutting himself as well as Pat. Once Pat's hands were free, he whirled and flung his feet out of the bunk.

"Let's have it!" he demanded of the trembling Tom, who was incoherent with a vast excitement. Tom handed over the blade.

Swiftly, Pat released himself, then Tom; then he dived on the floor and retrieved his machine-gun, fondling it as a miser would finger his hoard of gold.

"Now," he exulted, "we'll see what's what!"

STALLHEIM stirred, moaned, then came to his feet like a lurching lion, his huge bulk dwarfing the two, his big hands outstretched. Curses poured from his lips.

Pat disdained the gun in his hands. He shifted it to his left hand. His right fist arced in a slashing uppercut that

connected with the point of Stallheim's chin. It made a noise like a butcher slamming down a cut of meat on a wooden counter. Stallheim slumped and sank to his knees, fell on his face, twitched, and then lay silent.

"I've been waiting to do that for a long time," grated Pat. "Tie him up, Tom! And tie him up so he can't even move!"

Tom fell on the big man like a fury. Under Pat's directions, Stallheim was trussed up so he would be safe when he came to and found himself a prisoner. Tom emptied his pockets and found the chamois bag of pearls Stallheim and his men had taken from the graveyard.

"How about these?" he asked.

"Loot. We keep 'em!"

"Robbed out of Chinese graves, Pat?"

"I don't know that that's any worse than robbing live widows and orphans—and they do that pretty well in civilized countries!"

"You think we *can* keep 'em, Pat?"

"The spoils belong to the victor, in the South Seas," snapped Pat. "There isn't a chance in the world that you could trace any of the heirs of those dead Chinamen, even if you knew which was which and what their names were. Fifty-Fifty, Tom. Half is yours and half mine. I'll share with the crew. Take the gun. I'm dragging this carrion up on deck—the moon's up and I have an idea that will interest his crew!"

Once on deck—Pat slung the unconscious hulk of Stallheim over his shoulders as one would carry a deer—he propped him against the galley. The moon flooded the lagoon with a green luminescence almost as bright as day. Pat motioned for his gun and Tom handed it over. Then Pat went to the rail and sent a derisive hail across the waters, to the *Maori*.

Instant excitement was evident aboard the other ship. The Murats could see the two men, the slumped figure, and they knew that Stallheim had elected to stay on board to guard the prisoners. This meant that the two prisoners had managed to escape and overpower Stallheim.

Pat heard commands being issued. Two

whaleboats were manned and several shots were fired which whistled harmlessly through the *Hawk's* rigging. Pat motioned Kelly back into the shadows and joined him.

"Once I get those two boats out into the open, I'll clean house!" he snarled. His face was set and he looked pallid; his finger was laced around the trigger of the gun.

One boat outstripped the other, and Pat cut loose a hail of bullets that brought cries and an answering fire from the boat: then both of them turned tail and went back to the *Maori*. Pat stepped forward, leveled the gun and poured lead.

Wild excitement could be seen on the *Maori*. Suddenly, her hook came up, her sails were frantically hoisted, and she caught the breeze and made for the opening in the reef.

Pat swore. "No guts for a little of their own medicine!" he complained disgustedly. "Rats! They'll desert Stallheim to save their own hides! How I wish I had enough men to sail this ship so I could get close enough to clean house!"

The *Maori* gained speed, heeled over and went through the channel into the open sea. Pat and Tom watched, impotent to stop them. Then they saw several bobbing heads, with tiny, phosphorescent wakes, heading toward the *Hawk*.

"Hello!" said Pat. "What's this?"

HE SOON found out. It was six members of his own Kanaka crew, who had leaped overboard from the *Maori*, chancing the sharks in the lagoon, when they knew that Pat was once more in command of the *Hawk*.

They came aboard, shouting, excited, prostrating themselves to Pat, as happy as children; and he sent them below, after they had all taken a silent look at the unconscious Stallheim.

Three of his crew were missing, Pat found. One man had been killed in the raid on the *Hawk* and tossed overboard; Tao was missing since the evening of the raid, and was probably in a watery grave; the third member was wounded and was

still aboard the *Maori*, below decks, unable to help himself.

Twenty minutes later, sitting on deck, Pat looked at the quiet night and rumbled, "They've taken most of our stores and ammunition, damn them! And about all our guns. We'll have to stock up again, Tom."

"If we could manage to get that big nugget on board," answered Tom, "we could go back to Madang or Port Moresby and sell part of it. That would give us plenty of money to restock and come back to finish the job. Can't we stay and try it anyhow?"

"Without sufficient guns and ammunition, Tom, the Karakaras will be troublesome. Stallheim stirred them up pretty well, and you know them well enough to know they'll never quit now until they're avenged. I need bullets for this machine-gun, if we're to stop 'em."

"I suppose we ought to take Stallheim into Port Moresby, anyhow, and turn him over to the authorities. I'll never sleep again with that guy on board! Not even if he's tied up!"

"I'll tend to him," said Pat grimly. "We have the pearls. They'll be worth plenty, and ought to give us enough, between us, even if we never took a dollar's worth of gold out of the mine."

Tom chuckled. "You've got this twisted, mister! I was supposed to share *my* find with you—not you with me. We can't leave that much gold behind, when all it will take to get will be a few days' cleaning up of the tunnel and a little lifting. And I wouldn't be surprised if there was as much more left as we've already found. It's a pocket, Pat—and no one can tell how much is in it."

"Okay—how'll get it," said Pat. "I'll tend to the Karakaras, too. I think I've got enough ammunition for this gun, and I'm damned if I'm going back until we get what we came for. I guess it's time I cleaned house around here!"

Tom nodded. "I'm going below to make sure that guy is tied the way I'd like to see him tied—or I'll never sleep a wink."

Pat chuckled. "You're nervous!"

"You're damn right I am!" acknowledged Tom. "I know that guy. He isn't human. And we were tied, too, weren't we, but we managed to get loose!"

BUT the night passed without any mishaps. With the crew armed again with what weapons they could find, under the command of Pat, Tom went down into the mine shaft, in the morning, to examine the tunnel entrance and see how much work was necessary for entrance.

The jungle was still, with the tranquillity of primitive Papua; the flaming D'Alberti creepers were like raw wounds against the too-green foliage; an orange sun painted a green-gold on leaf and trunk, an eerie light that was like a witch's curse on the sinister wilderness. Pat watched with canny eyes, alert, knowing that any moment a flight of yard-long arrows might hiss death at them.

Tom came topside presently, dirty, enthusiastic, babbling like a schoolboy.

"It's almost through," he grinned. "A day's work, for two men, and we're in the tunnel; then we can haul up that nugget." His brows clouded abruptly. "I'm almost inclined," he went on, "to agree with Stallheim. There *is* something doggone funny going on down there, Pat! Rustlings—whisperings—something I never heard before. It prickles the hair on the back of your neck! I felt as if someone—*something*—was watching me!"

"All you Swedes," scoffed Pat, grinning, "have too much imagination! We'll stand guard while two of the Kanakas clear the opening, then we'll haul the nugget up—"

He stopped. From the mine shaft came a faint mumble, unintelligible, booming queerly. The sound seemed to come from far below, where the shaft ended and the diverging tunnels spread fanwise into the earth.

"See?" snapped Tom. "There *is* something down there!"

PAT'S grin vanished, to be replaced by a scowl. He stalked to the shaft and bellowed down: "Hey, you! Whoever you

are, come up here, or I'm coming down after you!"

Silence. A sound welled up from the depths, still unintelligible, but it was a human voice. Ten minutes later Tao, armed to the teeth, came out of the shaft and stood grinning and blinking before them!

Pat's face spread in a delighted smile. "Tao!" he exclaimed. "I thought you were dead! What are you doing down there?"

Tao explained. When the attack had come on the *Hawk*, he had been clipped over the head from behind and thrown overboard. The shock of the cold water had revived him, and he had struck out for the shore. The next day, seeing how matters stood, with Stallheim in control and the *Hawk* captured, he had taken to the mine as the best hiding place available.

"Plenty fine place for hide," he grinned. "Bime-by, men come down for look-see, then they dig. Tao, he kill two, because he need guns. They never go back. Hide in hole."

Tom went to look.

The enterprising Tao had slain two of the mongrel Murats, taken their arms and hidden the bodies in far recesses. He had two rifles and ammunition, two knives and a revolver and cartridges. He explained that he had planned to deplete Stallheim's forces, one at a time, until he had whittled down the Murat crew to smaller numbers; then he intended to attack and recapture the *Hawk*.

Pat laughed heartily. He said to Tom: "This Chinese-Papuan combination is all right. He meant it, too, Tom. How did you eat, Tao? Where did you get food?"

"Me come out by night," said Tao. "Find plenty eat in jungle. Find one, two-piece Karakara man, watching mine." He motioned significantly to his knife. "Make house clean," he explained, grinning at Pat and using his phrase.

"I'll be damned!" muttered Tom softly.

Two-men shifts were told off to clear the entrance to the tunnel, while an armed watch stayed above, on guard. Toward evening, just before the swooping shadows

engulfed the wild country, a native staggered out of the jungle, called faintly, then fell into the sand like a dead man.

Pat barked swift orders and the Kanakas deployed like a crack detachment of scouts. The man proved to be the remaining member of his Kanaka crew, who had been forced to stay aboard the *Maori* because of his wound.

The *Maori*, he explained, had sailed north, intending to put into some sheltered cove. The mate, in charge, then planned to return overland to the mine, staging a surprise attack upon the *Hawk* and rescuing Stallheim. However, in going into a small lagoon, the *Maori* had struck the jagged teeth of the reef and was high and dry, only a few miles away. In the confusion, the Kanaka explained, he had gone overboard and made his way back through the jungle, unseen.

"We'll have a look," said Pat swiftly, "the first thing in the morning. Maybe we can get our guns and stores back."

WITH the dawn, the *Hawk* lifted her hook and sailed north. Barely three miles away, they found the *Maori*. In the darkness, commanded by an inexperienced mate, she had driven right over the outer reef and struck a small outcrop of coral. A heavy swell was pounding her, smothering the gray hull in spray. The bottom had been ripped out of her.

Her lee side faced the shore, not over a hundred yards away. Some curious note in the picture disturbed Pat. A cloud of sea birds arose and quarreled peevishly above the schooner. He frowned deeply, his keen eyes on the wreck. It was Tom who voiced his thought:

"Damn quiet!" he said. "Where's her crew?"

"Maybe we ought to have a look aboard," said Pat somberly.

The *Hawk* hove to, a whaleboat went overside, and Tao was left in charge, while Pat and Tom went to investigate.

The *Maori* was a dead ship. No voice challenged from her broken rail; no sound came, save the slap of the tide against her gutted hull. They tied up and went

aboard cautiously, but their caution was needless. The deck was a shambles. Again a flock of voracious birds, larger and more courageous than the first, flapped away, shrieking.

"Hell!" whispered Tom, aghast at the sight that met his eyes.

Every man on board had been beheaded, mutilated. Feathered shafts, in some of the bodies, told the story: Karakaras! They had caught up with Stallheim's crew. They had attacked in force while the ship was helpless in her death agony. Pat compressed his lips.

"Well," he gritted, "there's nothing we can do about this. We'll take back our stores and open her sea-cocks. She's gone."

He gave orders to the two waiting oarsmen. Each man on the *Maori* was to have a canvas shroud, and the remains committed to the depths. They would go down into the teeth of the coral fangs that had wrecked them. While this gruesome work was in progress, Tom said:

"Why didn't the savages take them along, Pat? They want heads, I know—but they're also fiends, with an insatiable appetite for 'long-pig' roast."

Pat shrugged. His eyes went to the white beach, the green jungle that started not twenty feet from it, passed on to the mighty, mysterious mountain ranges that towered in the interior, ten thousand feet into the air. This great, insular continent of New Guinea was one of the world's last frontiers, the home of the world's last unregenerate savages, who worshiped strange and terrible gods. The lightly explored terrain was, for the most part, just as it had been the day it was created.

"I don't know," he answered finally. "Maybe they thought it *taboo*. Maybe there was some strange curse attached to these men, in the eyes of the Karakaras. Take the glasses and look over there. You can see the blood on the sand—where they took the heads ashore."

Tom took the glasses, looked, turned away, while an icy finger touched his spine. He went to Stallheim's cabin and rummaged around. Pat was directing operations on deck. He stayed in the stern,

machine-gun cradled, where he could command a sweeping view. Presently he saw Tom come out, with an armful of papers and bags. The volatile Tom's eyes were dancing again.

"Look here!" he called. "Loot! Found my four nuggets again—the ones Stallheim stole out of my shack in the jungle! And all the personal stuff I brought out here when I first came from 'Frisco. And here's another bag of pearls. Must be the crews' share from the loot of the Chinese cemetery!"

Pat looked at the treasures, nodded, smiled at Tom's delight in regaining them; but his interest did not really sharpen until Tom thrust a small object into his hand.

"I brought that too, when I first came down under," he said. "My only living relative—my sister."

Pat looked at the photo, framed in a moldy leather container. A girl looked out of it, directly into his eyes—the kind of eyes that the Irish say were put in with a dirty finger. She was pretty, but that wasn't what sharpened Pat's scrutiny. It was the spiritual beauty, the humorous mouth, the faint smile that tugged, queerly, at his insides. Something vital began to pour along his bloodstream.

"Your sister?" he asked. "What's her name?"

"Nora," answered Tom. "And she's the sweetest kid you ever saw in your life. Once I get back, heeled, she'll never work again."

"What does she do, Tom?"

"Teach school."

"Hm!" said Pat. "Might be an idea if I went back to 'Frisco with you. Always wanted to see the place."

Tom gave him a swift, quizzical glance. He said slyly, "I'm sure Nora'd be glad to show you the town."

"It's a deal," said Pat.

BEFORE they put back for Ronga and the mine, Pat brought Stallheim out on deck to view the wreck of his ship. The big man came sullenly, vicious as a caged cobra. He listened while Pat told him

what had happened to his ship and his crew.

"Just so you'll have no further delusions of grandeur," finished Pat. "This spells exit for you, Stallheim. You're going back to take what's coming to you."

Hatred so tense that it chilled Tom's blood glinted in Stallheim's hooded eyes. His great face was tense, with nerves twitching under the skin, and his muscles swelled, ominously, under his clothes, like a boa constrictor's; but he was helpless.

"I'll never go back," he spat, with an oath. "Never! I'll get another ship—I'll hunt you down, Parson, if it's the last thing I do!"

"It will be," Pat told him.

Stallheim was taken below by two of the men, and the *Hawk* put back for the mine.

Tom shuddered. "I'd watch that guy, Pat. He's not human!"

Pat touched the sub-machine gun. "This is an anti-toxin for most poisons around here," he said drily.

But toward evening, that same day, when the men had come from shore, after clearing the obstruction in the tunnel, a great commotion arose below decks on the *Hawk*. There were hoarse shouts, the thud and clatter of falling things, followed by a shot—and Stallheim burst on deck, free!

He was unarmed, and his clothes were almost all torn from his great body. His little, blood-shot eyes fixed themselves on Pat, and he crouched like a wounded tiger before the attack. The men had backed away from his death-dealing hands, but they formed an armed circle around him, guns pointed. Like beaters cornering a wild beast, thought Pat. Kelly was on his feet, gun drawn. Stallheim swept one glance around and knew he couldn't break through without stopping a dozen bullets.

"Damn you!" he screamed to Pat. "It's all your doing! I'll kill you for that!" His eyes flared like a maniac's.

Tom's gun shifted a fraction, but Pat waved it down. He handed Tom his sub-machine-gun and turned to the crouching Stallheim.

"Will you go back peaceably, or do I

have to hammer all hell out of you?"

"No, Pat!" snapped Tom swiftly. "Don't try it! The guy's poison—a killer! He's too big for any civilized man—"

"Shut up!" snapped Pat, and turned again to the crouching Stallheim. It was true. There was something jungle-bred, something cat-like about the huge Stallheim; one felt the terrible strength that was in him. He straightened up, towering inches above Pat. Stallheim had killed men with his bare hands before, and his chest swelled with a dray-horse power now.

He rushed, but Pat met him halfway with a stabbing left to the nose that brought a spurt of blood; then he danced away.

"No one interfere!" he shouted to the circle of his watching men. "He asked for it and he's going to get it. It's time—"

"To clean house!" finished Tom grimly, anticipating Pat's favorite phrase. He was fascinated by the battle that opened before him. It was at once evident that these two mammoths were no barroom brawlers. They both knew something about the science of boxing. They circled warily for a moment, then Stallheim rushed the slighter man like a tank going into action. Pat tied up his hands so he couldn't hit, but he could feel the great weight of Stallheim, the surging power in the steel of his muscles. A hard left broke through and tipped Pat's head back, splitting his lip, but he whipped up a steaming right uppercut that sent Stallheim back on his heels.

STALLHEIM was back like a streak, and they stood toe to toe and slugged for a second. Neither man backed up, hitting bitterly, desperately, faces streaked with sweat and blood, breath rasping.

Stallheim, overanxious, rushed into a torrid smash that caused him to spit teeth and blood. A bull roar broke from his thick throat. He rushed again and hurled a vicious right to Pat's head, Pat caught it on his shoulder, but it whirled him half-way around. He gave way, and Stallheim cursed and followed, to be met by a hard left smash and a right cross that opened

a long cut over his eye. It stopped him a moment, and the watching men caught their breaths and a murmur went up from them.

A short right hook from Stallheim's big fist crashed Pat down to the deck, and a cry went up from the men; but he rolled clear before Stallheim could reach him and was on his feet, feinting, circling, crouching. A hoarse, frenzied cry came from the crew. Tom sucked in his breath and thought what a world's heavyweight champion was lost in either man.

Blood dripped from Stallheim's mouth and cut eye. He muttered oaths with the pain; but he looked the killer he was, unbeatable, unstoppable. He lunged.

A hard fist smacked on his jaw, and another further opened the cut above his eye. Blood drooled down the gutters of his face and the corners of his mouth. He swung a hamlike fist at the elusive Pat, catching him on the shoulder, putting him down for the second time.

A bedlam of cries arose from the crew, for there was no quarter here and no rules but those of teeth and claw and fist. But Pat was up again. He weaved away from a steam-shovel uppercut, let fly a left fist that further aggravated the cut above Stallheim's eye.

His brain was on fire, and only the terrific stamina he had acquired in his years of soldiering and adventuring was carrying him through now. He weathered a whirlwind of knockout-blows, slipping aside, catching them on his arms, riding terrific blows.

Stallheim sank back into his crouch, advancing, trying to suck in more air. Pat straightened, mouth open, a grin on his battered face. He was breathing more easily now, for he had his second wind.

Stallheim rushed him again, throwing both hands to Pat's head, and missing narrowly with both, while Pat whipped a left hook to the head and a sizzling right to the solar plexus that straightened Stallheim up, gasping, his skim-milk eyes watering and blinking.

He came back again, firing a thunderbolt left that landed with a smack like

an open slap in the face. Encouraged, Stallheim rushed like an infuriated rhino, throwing punches so fast that they could not be seen. For a full minute he followed the crafty Pat with a tireless energy, a strength that seemed inexhaustible. Both men were bleeding, but now something happened that caused a relieved grin to replace the white, strained look on Tom's tense features.

Suddenly Pat backed away three steps and spoke:

"All right, tough guy!" he rasped icily. "I know what you've got now—but here's something for you to remember!"

He ripped into Stallheim with a new fury, battering the big man almost across the deck. Stallheim couldn't get set, and Pat tore in, punching furiously. Science was out. They snarled and went at each other like two insane killers. A smashing right flattened Stallheim's nose further and sprayed his torn shirt with blood. Another steaming right cut his lips to a pulp. For a breathless second they slugged it out, two deadly fighting machines with a hellish hate for one another.

Stallheim tried to get his hands on the shifty Pat and come to closer quarters, where his superior weight and size would be to his advantage, but Pat wiggled and ducked, and sent home blow after blow that cut ribbons of flesh from Stallheim's face, wobbling the big, beetle-browed head.

Stallheim backed a moment. His style was that of the trained slugger. Then he rushed recklessly. Pat sidestepped, met him with a sudden insane rush of his own that carried Stallheim backward. Suddenly the bigger man seemed futile before this mad fury of a man who punched viciously, swelling his ears, cutting his eyes. For the first time in his life, Stallheim went to his knees, beaten down by a superior force, something he had never before encountered.

BREATH rasping in his throat, Pat stepped back. "Get up!" he commanded hoarsely. "Get up! You're not through, Stallheim. Get up, you overgrown hulk! 'Satan' Stallheim! You're good when

you're murdering puny natives or young girls—let's see how much you can take from a man your own size. Get up, damn you—or I'll tear you loose from your spine!"

Stallheim got up. He was a weird-looking fury, and he shouted curses with an impotent rage through the bloody smear of his face; curses that were induced not only by the pain of his fearful punishment, but also by animal rage. He rushed into Pat, swinging madly.

Pat uncoiled like a steel spring. An inside right cross jerked Stallheim's head back abruptly and set him on his heels; another lethal left, started at Pat's knee, cracked against his jaw. Stallheim sagged as if he had been pole-axed. He swung around, glassy-eyed, and went down, a bloody, beaten, misshapen mass, marked for life. He lay as one dead, completely out.

Pat, breathing like a steam engine, stood and looked down at him. Pat was bloody, and his body ached with the punishment he had absorbed. He said nothing. A whispering murmur ran the length of the watching crew, awed by this Homeric contest between two Titans.

"Lord!" whispered Tom. "What a fight!"

Pat blinked. "Toughest nut I ever tackled," he acknowledged, gasping. "Too bad his skin is white, instead of his insides. Take him below and patch him up, then tie him up so he can't get away. He's going to Port Moresby!"

But Stallheim didn't go to Port Moresby. Late that night, another cry went through the sleeping *Hawk*, and a bloody and battered Kanaka rushed into Pat's cabin.

Stallheim had escaped! With what remained of his gigantic strength, he had, in desperation, broken the cords that held him and gone overboard. He disappeared in the water. When Pat and Tom came on deck, they saw that Stallheim had made the beach. He had a revolver, for he had knocked a Kanaka silly and taken the weapon from him. They saw the hulking figure drag itself out of the water, stand a moment to hurl hoarse de-

fiance at the watching men, and then he disappeared into the bush.

Pat grinned crookedly.

"He won't go far," he said. "I've got a couple of boys who can track him down. Stallheim's going back to Moresby—and I'll bring him in, if I have to follow him across New Guinea!"

IN THE morning they left Tao to guard the *Hawk*, with a number of picked men, while Pat and Tom and three men took the trail. They had not far to go.

One of the Kanakas paused and looked at the sign on the ground, just off the beach, in the jungle. The Kanaka read the story in the sand as white men read the pages of books. Tom could see the signs of a struggle in the torn foliage, the trampled lalong grass; but he understood not a word of what was being said. Pat soon explained.

"Stallheim's in the hands of the Karakas," he said. "The signs show that he made for the jungle, but there must have been a bunch of savages watching us. They got him immediately."

Tom shuddered. A man dared not think what the Karakas did to their prisoners. "Well," he said bleakly, "that's that!"

"That doesn't happen to be that at all," said Pat grimly. "No wild bunch of savages can take my prisoner away from me. If we don't stop them, we'll never be able to work that mine, Tom. They grow too confident to suit me. With the killing of the *Maori* crew—and now a white prisoner in their hands—there'll be no holding them. They'll have to be taught a lesson—and I'm taking Stallheim back to Port Moresby!"

"What are you going to do?" asked Tom.

"I'm going to get him back and teach those savages a lesson they'll never forget. It's time—"

"Yeah, I know!" interrupted Tom. "Time to clean house!"

"You took the words right out of my mouth. Coming along?"

"There may be hundreds of them, you crazy Swede—!"

"I've got three hundred rounds for this

thing," Pat answered, fondling the sub-machine-gun. "The Karakas don't like it—they're afraid of it. Let's go. I'm in a hurry!"

They went.

After half an hour's progress in the jungle, Pat turned.

"Any idea where that Karakara village is, Tom?"

Tom shrugged. "As near as I can guess, it's a few miles back, on the river bank. I've never seen it. While I was here, working on the mine, I never prowled far; and when Stallheim and the Karakas prowled, I stayed hidden."

Pat nodded. "I don't see any game trails," he observed, "or any path the savages take in getting to the beach. Curious! Well, we'll hit the village sooner or later."

They saw it presently. The Karakas evidently thought their jungle-sheltered village immune to any attack, for they encountered no savage sentries.

From a small hill, they saw the village, the men and women and children, engaged in ordinary activities.

"Range is too great," decided Pat. "We'll get nearer. We'll first give them a round or two from our revolvers. Aim only at the men. Unless I miss my guess, the women and children will run for the jungle at the first shots."

And that was exactly what happened. As Pat and Tom opened fire from the screening wall of jungle, a shrill and savage shout arose. Instantly they saw the women and children rushing for the opposite side of the jungle, howling.

The men grasped bows and began to stalk the jungle, but Pat walked out and laid down a drumming barrage that dropped the Karakas as a scythe cuts down wheat. It demoralized them; it smacked of magic. They ran. Pat continued his shooting, calmly, coldly, belt high, sending slugs through the wattle houses, cutting down the fleeing savages.

The machine-gun was too much for them. They didn't understand it. They abandoned the village, disappearing into the far side.

"All right!" snapped Pat. "Burn it down! Kill all the cats and pigs and dogs, and burn the crops! It's the only argument these savages understand—that's why the Government does it that way. Let's go! Let's see if there's any trace of Stallheim."

But there was no trace of the big white man. They searched the houses, setting them on fire; they shot pigs and cats—which the cannibals ate—they even searched the *ravis*—the temple—but there was no sign of Stallheim.

THEY dragged several creatures like dragons, made of basket work, out into the open light of day, from the *ravis*—most holy of holies. The images had enormous, gaping throats, into which the Karakas thrust their freshly dead victims during cannibal festivities. This was supposed to feed the demon who lived inside the dragon. The dragon had red eyes, and the interior was blood-stained, to match.

Pat set the entire *ravis* and the sacred images ablaze, his mouth taut with nauseous distaste. One of the prowling Kanakas called excitedly, and they joined him.

He was standing at the edge of the cannibal feasting place—a ring of flat stones grouped around a cooking pit. The place was clean and significantly full of ashes. Pat touched them. They were still hot. To one side was a ghastly funeral pile of bones, evidently both human and animal.

The keen-eyed Kanaka who had tracked Stallheim cried out and pointed. They all looked. To one side was part of the huge canvas and rope shoe Stallheim had worn when they had last seen him. The five silent men, two white and three brown, stood and looked at one another with knowledgeable silence. Their quest was at an end. They knew what had happened.

"All right, let's go back," exclaimed Pat, seeing the green tinge that crept over Tom's face. "I guess they won't bother us again for a long time to come. We'll have plenty of time to clean out that

pocket, Tom, and then we'll sail home."

"Let's get out of here!" gulped Tom, shocked. His gorge arose and nausea swept him. "I thought I could take it, but I can't. Ugh! How horrible!"

"A Karakara doesn't think so," shrugged Pat.

"It won't take but a few days to clean out that pocket," said Tom; "then let's get back to God's country, Pat. I'm fed up with this. We can sail down to Port Moresby, catch a steamer to Manila and then go home on a liner—"

"Suits me," nodded Pat.

They marched in silence for a time, still watchful, still suspicious of a possible ambush; then Pat said:

"Your sister, Tom—she's not married, is she?"

"Nope. Not even engaged—last I heard. About six months ago."

Pat nodded. "I think I'd like to trail along up home with you, Tom," he said.

Tom flicked him a sidelong glance and grinned. He reached out and tapped the big man's arm.

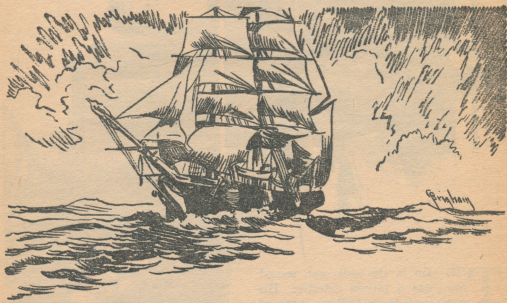
"Luck, brother!" he said. "Nothing could suit me better."

Dusky blood flowed under Pat's skin. Their eyes met in perfect understanding.

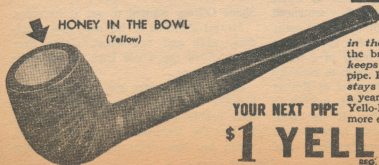
"Nor me," said Pat quietly.

Then they both marched on through the jungle, in silence, each busy with his own thoughts.

(The End.)



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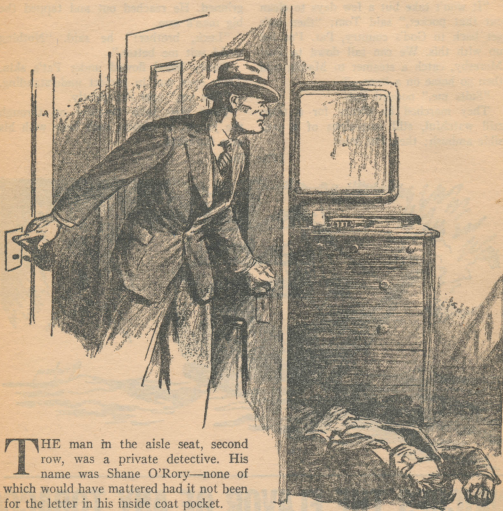
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Murder's Stooge

By
Edward S. Williams



THE man in the aisle seat, second row, was a private detective. His name was Shane O'Rory—none of which would have mattered had it not been for the letter in his inside coat pocket.

He had come, like the rest of them, to hear a seventeen-year-old boy sentenced to die for the killing of another youth; to witness the final act of a drama that had caught the morbid fancy of a whole city, and jammed a courtroom to capacity day after day during the trial of Robert Holm. But there was nothing morbid in Shane O'Rory's curiosity. If he could credit the letter, there was a force at work here that was incomprehensible, and

Shane O'Rory wanted to get at its roots.

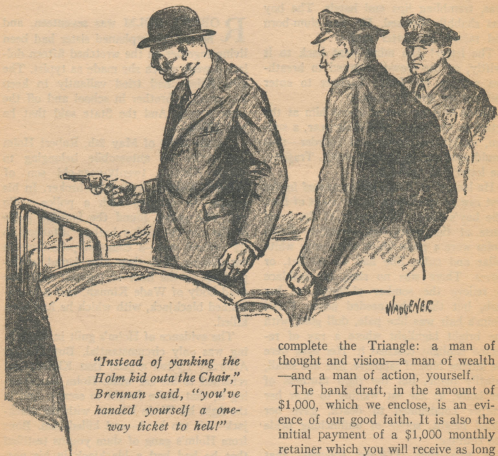
He sat slouched in his seat. His shoulders, wide and raw-boned, rather than beefy, filled the whole back of the chair to overflowing.

Shane O'Rory was big, but it was not his size that drew a second glance from most people—from men and women alike. It was the tremendous, rugged strength, which his face more than his physique

was eloquent of. His eyes were a piercing blue that could be ice-cold or flame-hot. His nose was a jutting beak. His mouth, over a craglike chin, was the mobile barometer of his emotion: easily curved in a smile, readily compressed into a thin, ruthless slit. His mouth now was straight; his eyes were restless, puzzled. And his mind was full of that curious letter that had come to him in the morning's mail.

no subscriptions. If you accept, you will be the third—and last—member to be included in the Society.

Perhaps you are skeptical. Let us assure you that this invitation is serious. You have been thoroughly investigated. Your activities and accomplishments—your whole life, in fact—have been rigidly examined. And this offer is a result of that investigation. Your acceptance will



"Instead of yanking the Holm kid outa the Chair," Brennan said, "you've handed yourself a one-way ticket to hell!"

"Mr. Shane O'Rory," it began, and his address followed. There was no date, no heading on the expensive parchment-like sheet. There was nothing but the engraved red triangle at the top: an equilateral triangle a half an inch in height. It said:

The Society of the Red Triangle invites you to become a member. There are no dues, no assessments,

complete the Triangle: a man of thought and vision—a man of wealth—and a man of action, yourself.

The bank draft, in the amount of \$1,000, which we enclose, is an evidence of our good faith. It is also the initial payment of a \$1,000 monthly retainer which you will receive as long as you remain a member. For it is your services that we want, your loyalty, unhampered by any financial considerations—your readiness to undertake, at any time, such assignments as may be given you.

A wave of sound, a rush of whispered exclamations, swept the crowded room. They were bringing in the convicted boy

to hear the doom that he already knew: death in the electric chair. O'Rory looked closely at the pale, frightened face, the thin, shrinking figure of Robert Holm.

They seated him at the defense table beside his attorney—who'd had to be appointed by the court. That man had done the best anybody could, the papers said, with a hopeless case. But it was not the young lawyer who held O'Rory's gaze. It was Robert Holm, with his shock of unkempt blond hair, his blood-shot blue eyes, trembling lips and hands. The boy was shabbily dressed. He was slum-born and raised, the letter said.

The letter! His mind went back to it swiftly, as the crowd returned to breathless waiting for Judge Larimer to enter and put an end to waiting.

Shane O'Rory looked about him at the actors in the drama of a stolen car, a sudden, unthinking blow—and murder—that would soon end in another death. Tragedy, the letter had called it.

He looked at Kristi Holm, seated in the first row of spectators, to the right of him. The boy's sister. Not pretty in the usual sense of the word, but arresting. Kristi Holm wore a plain black dress with white collar and cuffs. She had on no hat, or gloves. There was no ring, no necklace to relieve the somber plainness of her garb, but then she needed none: Kristi Holm's hair was like pale, dull gold, with one bright highlight where a ray of reflected sunlight touched it. Her eyes were the intense blue of sapphire. She was small, daintily made, but the rigid tautness of her body, as she sat waiting to hear her brother condemned to death, gave her added height, spoke of unflinching pride and courage.

It was that, O'Rory thought, that marked her. Spirit! The desperate, last-ditch sort of courage that only death can make an end to. Throughout his trial she had fought for her brother, and this was not the end, O'Rory felt, of Kristi Holm's battle. Her eyes made that thought plain.

He looked across to the other side of the room—to William Kinnan, whose son

Robert Holm had killed. He saw raw grief in the man's eyes—a fanatical determination that someone should pay for his son's death. He saw vengeance personified, vengeance that included even Kristi in its baleful, blind hatred.

William Kinnan, the papers said, was a millionaire. Wade Kinnan had been his only son. And Robert Holm, the jury had decided, had murdered Wade Kinnan.

In his mind, O'Rory once more reviewed the facts in the case.

ROBERT HOLM was seventeen, and he and his orphaned sister had been living together on the wretched fifteen dollars a week which she made as typist. The girl, Kristi, had tried valiantly to keep her younger brother in school and off the slum streets. And the State said that he had killed—

On the night of May 5th, Robert Holm had stolen an automobile belonging to Wade Kinnan, twenty-year-old son of William Kinnan, a wealthy broker. In his escape, he collided with a police radio car. The police found the ignition cable of the car cut and a battery attached to its severed end—a common procedure in car-stealing. But they also found, crumpled up on the floor of the rear seat, the dead body of Wade Kinnan, and a blood-stained blackjack, with which he had been killed.

The evidence of Holm's guilt in the killing was only circumstantial. But District Attorney Lytton argued that Kinnan had returned to his car while Holm was stealing it, that Holm fought to escape, and in the fight hit Wade Kinnan with the blackjack—hit too hard—and killed him. Boys from Holm's gang of slum youths testified that he had had a blackjack in his possession the week before. And so, in that way, the prosecution had built up their first-degree murder charge—for even if the killing was not premeditated, it occurred while Robert Holm was in the commission of another felony. And now, since Robert Holm had been found guilty, Judge Larimer had no alternative but to sentence him to death.

A sudden, clamoring murmur in that packed courtroom roused O'Rory from his thoughts. A tall man—white-haired, black-robed, commanding—came from a door on the left of the Bench, and the clerk's sharp, "His Honor, Judge Larimer—everybody stand!" brought O'Rory to his feet. Then, with the crowd, he sat down again.

There was utter silence now. Robert Holm seemed to shrink further down into his chair. He stared up at Judge Larimer with the terror of fascination in his eyes and sweat beading his face. O'Rory's mind returned to the facts in the case of the State vs. Robert Holm.

Holm had testified that a man named Wilson—Big Red Wilson—a cab driver employed by the Metro Taxi Company, invited him into a saloon, treated him to drinks, and proposed the car-stealing. Wilson, he said, explained how to steal the car, supplied the "hot-shot" battery, took him, in his cab, to within a block of Wade Kinnan's parked car, and then stood guard at the corner while Holm fixed the ignition and drove the car away.

Robert Holm claimed that no fight had occurred, and that the only time he had ever seen Wade Kinnan was when the police found his body. He said that Wilson had told him to drive the car to the corner of Fifth and Kensington Streets, where another man would meet him and give him twenty dollars.

Those were the facts for and against Robert Holm. They were the only ones allowed in the record and given to the jury for consideration. Other facts—if allowed—might have swayed the jury—but the prosecution struck them out, inexorable in its objection to so-called irrelevant details. Those facts pointed to the guilt of Big Red Wilson. But once Wilson's alibi was accepted, those facts—which might have meant life instead of death for Robert Holm—had been thrown out of the record.

Wilson's alibi had hinged on Marcia Overton, a woman of twenty-eight, who had no visible means of support. She swore she had hired and used Wilson's cab from

nine until eleven on the night of May 5th. Wade Kinnan's death occurred, according to medical testimony, at about ten o'clock, and Holm was caught at 10:55. Further, the records of the Metro Taxi Company showed that Wilson was sent, at 8:45, to answer Miss Overton's call for a cab.

Another curious fact: The corner of Fifth and Kensington Streets was within a stone's throw of the Metro Taxi Company's garage—owned by Paul Riggan, an ex-rum-runner. And the Metro's garage had been suspected before of harboring stolen cars, though that suspicion had never been verified.

And there was one other strange fact, one the defense had made much of and the prosecution had derided. On the night he was killed, Wade Kinnan left home alone to go to the Cavalier Theater. But Robert Holm swore that, when he stole Kinnan's car, it was parked in the 500 block of Western Avenue, a run-down, third-rate residential street miles from the theater district. Queer!

THE Society of the Red Triangle believed Robert Holm guilty of car-stealing, but innocent of murder. They did not believe he had been alone and unaided in his attempt to steal a car—they believed he had been the tool of men who were hardened criminals, long-practiced in crime. Holm was their victim, and he was being sent to the electric chair for a crime he had never committed. Car-stealing, yes—there was no doubt of that. But murder—? Facts pointed, not to Robert Holm, but elsewhere. The Red Triangle wanted the instigators of that crime, and the real killer. They wanted to get at the roots, not merely lop off a small branch. They wanted those criminals who plotted and schemed, who took the profit, and left the risk to unfortunate youths like Robert Holm.

A pretty large order!

"If you are in sympathy with us," the letter read, "attend court today. Wear the enclosed badge on your left lapel, as token of your being with us. Your first

assignment is *The Case of Robert Holm.*"

There was no signature.

The Case of Robert Holm, . . . Shane O'Rory was taking that case.

He did not pin that tiny badge on his lapel—but, though he was not quite ready to become a member of the Red Triangle, he *was* ready to step into Holm's case and fight. He'd dig down to the bottom of this affair and uncover the criminals who had framed Robert Holm for murder. Uncover them, and turn them over to the law.

AS HIS eyes darted from Kristi Holm to her brother; to Lytton, the prosecutor, and William Kinnan, the slain boy's father, and on to Judge Larimer, whose hard duty it was to condemn a seventeen-year-old boy to death, the colorless voice of the Court Clerk uttered the preliminary words of Robert Holm's doom:

"The prisoner will stand."

Silence was complete, unbroken. There was but one focal point of all eyes, and young Robert Holm sat frozen, motionless. After his first stiffening at the summons to stand, the boy remained in his seat as though paralyzed, until his attorney's hand on his shoulder broke the spell and the silence. Robert Holm's gasp was audible throughout the courtroom; the pushing back of his chair was like a sudden, raucous groan. He stood swaying, his face paper-white.

"Robert Holm"—Judge Larimer's voice was sonorous, kind—"you have been duly tried and convicted, according to the laws of this State, of the wilful and felonious murder of Wade Kinnan. Have you anything to say, any reason to give why sentence should not be pronounced upon you?"

The boy tried to say something; his dry lips moved, but he made no sound. His lawyer spoke jerkily:

"No, your Honor, there is—nothing more."

But Shane O'Rory thought there was. He knew, somehow, seconds before she rose, that Kristi Holm was going to pro-

test. And then she was on her feet, her voice a ringing challenge.

"Oh, but there is!" she cried. "There *is*, Judge Larimer and William Kinnan, and I'll say it, and you can't stop me! My brother's innocent. He *didn't* kill Wade Kinnan!"

Her breath caught and the room seemed full of frantic echoes. Lytton, the prosecutor, was half out of his chair, looking to Larimer to stop her, and William Kinnan turned to glare at Kristi Holm. At the press table, flying pencils caught her words and the writers looked eagerly for more. Shane O'Rory sat with folded arms and clenched fists. Judge Larimer withheld the words that would have silenced her.

"He stole that car." She flung the words out recklessly. "He's admitted it—told you how and why. He's told you that Red Wilson offered him twenty dollars to steal it, and yet you've listened to the lying testimony of a woman who's admitted—"

"Your Honor!" Lytton found his voice at last. "This is most irregular. This is an affront to the dignity of—"

"Affront!" Kristi Holm flamed. "Dignity! What was it, Mister Prosecutor, when that woman perjured herself? When she swore Red Wilson was with her when Wade Kinnan was being killed and his car stolen? My brother told you where Wilson was—with *him*! Showing him how to steal a car—watching him do it! Why won't you believe *his* testimony?"

"Judge Larimer," Lytton protested again, "I object to—"

"Miss Holm—" Larimer began gently, but she cut him short.

"I'll tell you why!" she choked. "Because Wade Kinnan's father has money and power and influence. Because he's determined to make somebody suffer as he's suffered—and he doesn't care who. He wants revenge, not justice—he'd like to kill me too! And your prosecutor wants convictions, so he can be re-elected. And the law wants a goat, so it can call its case solved!"

"Miss Holm," Larimer's voice overbore hers now, "unless you have further evidence to offer, I must ask—"

"Oh, don't you—*won't* you see," she pleaded, "that Bob couldn't kill anybody? Won't you let me try to prove he didn't? Doesn't it mean anything that Bob was supposed to take that car to within a block of the Metro Taxi Company's garage? And that Red Wilson is a Metro driver? Or that the owner of that company, Paul Riggan, was once a rum-runner? They're behind it! They're letting my brother go to his death when they *know* he didn't kill Wade Kinnan! I'll prove it if you'll only—"

"Judge Larimer—" William Kinnan spoke, with tight lips and hard eyes—"I demand that this woman be removed and that you proceed with the sentencing of a murderer. Your duty, at least, is clear."

And Malcolm Larimer nodded at last, reluctantly, to a waiting sergeant-at-arms.

For a moment longer Kristi Holm stood gripping the rail in front of her, her eyes still flaming with the passion of her appeal. Her lower lip was between her teeth and O'Rory saw a bright, gleaming drop of blood form slowly. A uniformed court attendant had a hand on her arm, but he made no move to take her out. Judge Larimer caught up the severed thread swiftly with those stilted, terrifying words of legal formality:

"Robert Holm, it is the sentence of this Court that you be removed at once to the State's Prison, there to be delivered to the Warden of said prison; and that during the week of June the twenty-sixth, Nineteen Hundred and Thirty-eight, you be executed in the manner prescribed by Law.

"And may God have mercy on your soul!"

THAT was all. It was over. Suspense ended in a clamoring din as the crowd rose and streamed toward the exits, but Shane O'Rory stood motionless, his eyes on the girl, his hands fumbling at his left lapel. When they dropped to his sides again, a badge—a triangular bit of gold, edged with red enamel—was in his button-hole. The Society of the Red Triangle

was complete, but he didn't look about to see who, if anyone, might be interested in that. His gaze never left the girl as she stood watching her brother. Not until they took the boy out, and the door closed behind him, did she turn. Then O'Rory moved in her direction through the thinning crowd. He touched her shoulder and she stopped.

"Miss Holm," he said, "my name's Shane O'Rory."

"Is it—?" Kristi Holm's eyes came to the level of the V of his vest. She looked up at his tie, his chin, his eyes. She asked bitterly, "What tabloid are *you* from, Mister O'Rory? I thought I knew them all, but you're a new one."

"I'm a private detective," he explained.

She turned away from him, toward the aisle and the door, but O'Rory walked beside her. Kristi Holm said wearily, "Yes—I've met some detectives too. You're a little late, aren't you? But how much money do *you* want to prove my brother's innocence?"



Kristi Holm

"Thanks," he smiled, "but I'm not a crook, Miss Holm. I don't want money—"

"Well, what do you want?"

"Simply to talk to you about your brother, that's all."

She stopped again. Her

breath caught and her eyes lighted. The flat, bitter tone of defeat left her voice. "Why?" she breathed. "Do you—that is, are you—?"

"Let's get out of here," O'Rory said.

He took her hand, plowed a way for her through the jam at the court-room doors and reached the broad steps leading to the street. O'Rory seemed oblivious to the bombardment of eyes, the battery of cameras and the barking, peremptory requests

of news-cameramen. He strode on down the steps, all but dragging the girl after him, flung open the door of a waiting cab and pushed her in. With a sharp, "Anywhere—it doesn't matter," to the driver, he got in himself and slammed the door.

Kristi Holm lurched back into the seat as the cab started, but her eyes never left O'Rory's face. The gleam of hope in them burned hotter, was reflected in her voice.

"Why?" she demanded again. "Who are you, and why should you care what—"

O'Rory cut in brusquely, "Does that matter? Are you more interested in why I'm going to help you, or in the last, hundred-to-one shot at saving your brother?"

"No—" she whispered. "No, I don't care why. You—you *are* going to help me?"

"Yes."

"How?"

"That's better!" O'Rory's mouth tilted at the corners in a smile. He said, "I don't know how—yet—but I do know that others beside yourself believe that your brother was working for somebody higher up. They believe it enough to pay me to find out. And—"

"Oh, he was!" she flung at him. "What could a boy like Bob do with a stolen car—alone? How could he sell it?"

"That's one angle," O'Rory nodded. "Another is that he may have stolen it for a joy-ride. Kids do that, you know. But let it go. If we can prove that your brother told the truth when he accused Big Red Wilson, then we're a step nearer to the brains behind him—and we can get a stay of execution, maybe a new trial. Anyway, we gain time, and that's what we need now. This Marcia Overton—the woman who alibi'd Wilson. What's she like? Where does she live? Have you seen her?"

THE girl's lips curled. She said, "Yes, I went to see her after she'd testified in court. She was a surprise witness, you know. The lawyer—our lawyer—wasn't prepared for her. She's tall and dark, and she'd be pretty if she were not so hard. Maybe the jury *did* think she was pretty. Maybe—" her voice grew bitter again—"that's why they believed her. Anyway, I

begged her to tell the truth and she—she laughed and told me to get out."

"How," O'Rory shot the question, "are you so sure she wasn't telling the truth?"

"Because Bob wouldn't lie. Not to me!"

"And he told you the same story he told the Court?"

"Yes. The very same."

"All right." O'Rory's eyes were cold. "I'll see Marcia Overton. Now what d'you know about Paul Riggan, the owner of the Metro Taxi fleet?"

"I went to see him too," she said. "I don't know anything about him except that he's an ex-rum-runner. He's been in jail for that. He's short and dark. He reminds me of an ape. There was a man with him named Sam Burnett—"

"A lawyer?" O'Rory queried sharply.

"Yes." Her eyes jumped to his. "Do you know him?"

"I know him. Go ahead."

"And one named Dan Donovan." Kristi paused, and shivered. Revulsion clouded her eyes. She said, "He's the only man I ever saw that I'm afraid of. He's tall, and—and handsome, I guess—but he's hideous. He's like a snake! He has black eyes that look as though they have no lids—he stares at you and doesn't blink. Just stares and smiles, without opening his lips. He has a scar on his chin that looks like a knife slash. That man would do anything!"

"And that's *all* you know?"

"That's all," she faltered. "But you'll still help me, won't you? You said you would. You—"

"Yes," O'Rory said. "Where d'you live?"

She gave him the address and he relayed it to the driver. And for the first time he noted that they had left the crowded heart of the city. They were traveling fast on one of the new elevated speedways; the driver was earning all he could. He grunted:

"Sorry, mister, we gotta go on to the next approach ramp. It's five blocks further on."

O'Rory said, "Right." In the same instant Kristi Holm's muffled scream rang in his ears.

O'Rory hadn't heard the soft drone of the sixteen-cylinder motor behind them. The thing was upon them so swiftly that he saw nothing clearly. It was all blurred together in a grinding crash of torn metal, of shattering glass and smashed concrete. The cab was on the right, next to the guard rail. The car behind hit their left rear fender with terrific impact—skidded with a shriek of tortured rubber—recovered, and hit again as the cab crashed helplessly into the rail, out of control. It went through—over—down. There was a rending final crash, and after that O'Rory fought against wave after wave of swirling, sickening darkness that threatened to engulf him.

He was conscious of a struggle to lift some awful weight and hold it up, but he couldn't see, or tell what it was. He was aware of voices—of one bleating, shrill voice that kept parroting over and over again: "He hit an' run, but I got his number. I got his number—number—I got his num—"

Slowly the darkness receded: became gray, like a fog through which he could see vague, moving figures. And then the fog itself lifted and he saw the wrecked cab. He was standing beside it. The whole front of it was bashed in; it must, he thought, have landed on its hood. The driver was still inside. O'Rory saw him, with the motor jammed back through the floor-boards, crushing his legs, and the steering shaft driven through his chest. The wave of nausea returned, to vanish swiftly as he looked down at the limp, inert figure of Kristi Holm, in his arms. Hers was the weight he was holding. He must have lifted her out of the cab himself, instinctively. But she wasn't dead. Her eyelids fluttered as he watched. He felt her move in his arms and sob shiveringly.

The gong of an ambulance, the macabre wail of a police siren, were a fitting finale to this symphony of sudden death.

O'RORY bought a paper at the subway newsstand, went through the turnstile and into the train that roared to a halt in the station. He stood on the rear

platform, leaning against the brake-wheel, and stared grimly at his own picture on the front page. The caption said:

SHANE O'RORY, PRIVATE DETECTIVE,
LEAVING COURT TODAY WITH SISTER
OF CONDEMNED BOY
(Story on Page 2)

But O'Rory didn't turn to page two. He folded the paper and stood with it gripped



Shane O'Rory

in his fist, his eyes distant, narrowed.

That had been a mistake, he thought, coming out with the girl. With cameramen excluded from the courtroom, he should have known that they'd be waiting at the

door, and that anybody who was with Kristi Holm would be news. At the very start of things he'd tipped his hand. But then he shrugged, his mouth tightening. Somebody else had tipped theirs, too!

That seeming accident—hit-and-run in broad daylight—with a cab wrecked and its driver killed, had been no real accident. The license number had been checked, had revealed that the car that hit them belonged to a bishop. It had been stolen, and found again, abandoned, half an hour ago.

Another stolen car, he thought, another murder, but the fact that it was the driver and not Kristi or O'Rory himself who'd been killed was luck, or fate, or whatever you wanted to call it. The point was that somebody must be worried—must be anxious that the case of Robert Holm remained closed.

Why?

The train thundered into another station and O'Rory got off. He went up to the street and after a glance at a house number, he strode rapidly east for two

blocks. He slowed in front of a lighted doorway with tarnished gilt numerals—237—on the transom, darted a keen glance up and down the street and went into a bare, dingy lobby. Brass mail-boxes on the wall opposite the stairs held his eyes until he found one with a card that said *Miss Marcia Overton—Apt. 26*. There were seven flats to a floor, he noted, numbered consecutively. That put the Overton woman on the 4th. O'Rory went up the stairs.

A radio spilled tinny music from a half-open door on the second floor hallway. Somebody laughed raucously. Above him a door slammed and a small dog barked querulously. He met the dog at the top of the next flight and it flung itself, yammering, at O'Rory's ankles. His foot repulsed it with a sweeping push—not a kick—and it fled, wailing, to a fat, slovenly woman who stood in the hall and shrilled hysterical maledictions at him. O'Rory grinned mirthlessly, drawled, "Oh! So it's a dog! Pardon me, I thought it was a bug!" He spun and went on up the stairs. The woman mouthed, "Pig!" O'Rory thought, "Nice neighbors Marcia's got," and found her door.

He didn't knock or ring. He stood listening a moment, heard nothing but the radio downstairs, the fat woman's heavy, slow tread on the steps, the dog's thin, quarrelsome yapping. But as he reached for the knob finally, he snatched his hand back as though he'd seen a snake. Slowly, as if whoever were turning it didn't want even the click of a latch, the knob moved. O'Rory sidestepped silently. There was no card under the bell at the next apartment door. He hoped it was vacant, unlocked. It was. He slid through the door without noise and stood watching, through a half-inch crack, the door of Marcia Overton's apartment.

A WOMAN came out—a girl, rather, hardly out of her teens. She was thin, poorly dressed, nondescript. She wasn't pretty. On the street she wouldn't have drawn a second glance; she was the kind that you could see a dozen times and

not remember. But there was something appealing, now, in the stark fear that was in her eyes, in the trembling of her lips as she glanced furtively about that deserted hallway. She came out and closed the door silently behind her, tiptoed to the steps and down.

For a moment O'Rory stood at the stair head, scowling, undecided. But that girl couldn't be Marcia Overton—not according to Kristi's description. And he whirled to the door of Number 26 again, opened it and went in.

He saw about what he'd expected: cheap, gaudy furniture—gouts of lurid color flung together tastelessly. But nobody was home; there was no sound. He crossed the living room to the open door on the right and touched the light-switch inside it. Blue light half-illuminated a deserted bedroom. O'Rory turned to the bath on the left, looked in—and lunged for the hall door with a sharp oath.

He raced down the stairs, flight after flight, to the street door. He burst out, looked both ways, but the girl was gone. He came back, swearing tonelessly, softly, to retrace his steps up the stairs.

Marcia Overton lay on her bathroom floor. She was in Nile-green silk pajamas, and the cloying stuff outlined her figure starkly. She was tall—almost statuesque—but the hardness that Kristi Holm had noted was gone now. In its place had come the vague, impersonal blankness of death. Her face was waxlike, drained, devoid of all expression. Her eyes, slate-gray and glazed, stared with a rigid, incurious fixedness at the ceiling light. O'Rory knelt over her, studying the handle of the knife that protruded from the dark crimson circle over her heart.

He rose finally, came out and closed the bathroom door. The smooth, red enameled handle of the knife advertised it as an ordinary, ten-cent store kitchen implement. If it could be traced at all, the cops'd find that it came from Marcia Overton's own kitchen cabinet. He found other utensils like it: a cooking fork, a big spoon, both with the same dime-store characteristics.

O'Rory searched carefully, methodically.

He used his handkerchief when he touched smooth surfaces. He worked swiftly through the living room, found nothing useful, and turned his attention to the bedroom.

This was too crude, he told himself irritably, to be true. Even if the woman had perjured herself in her alibi of Red Wilson, they wouldn't murder her simply because they knew that Shane O'Rory was interested. His lips curved in a sardonic, fleeting smile. Hell, he wasn't *that* good! They'd get her out of town, maybe hide her somewhere. But until the heat was really on, they wouldn't kill her. Then he remembered the girl in the shabby dress who'd come so fearfully out of Marcia Overton's apartment.

Again his mind revolted. That child? No! Even if she'd wanted to, that girl couldn't have driven a carving knife so deeply. It wasn't possible—or was it? Sometimes women are stronger than they look!

O'Rory swore again, under his breath. He'd let her get away, and even if she were not the actual murderer of Marcia Overton, she might know— Suddenly he stopped thinking. A photograph that he'd found in the bottom of a bureau drawer held all his mind and eyes. It was a snapshot, about two-and-a-half inches by five. It was a clear, well-developed picture. The woman in it was undoubtedly Marcia Overton. And the man—

WHAT was it Kristi Holm had said? “—the only man I ever saw that I'm afraid of. He's tall and handsome—and hideous. He's like a snake—black eyes that look as though they have no lids. He stares at you and doesn't blink—a scar on his chin that looks like a knife slash—”

Dan Donovan, she'd called him. She'd seen him when she went to call on Paul Riggan. O'Rory's eyes leaped back to the photograph, and suddenly he pocketed it and snapped out the light. And he froze—rigid—his right hand hovering over the gun under his left arm.

Footsteps, hard heels hurrying, sounded in the tiled hallway. The knock on the

door was peremptory, loud, followed by the rattle of the knob as the door was flung open. He saw them as they entered: two men. He recognized Brennan—a Lieutenant of the City Homicide squad, with a reputation as the toughest cop in town—a man he'd tangled with before and didn't like. The other was a patrolman, in uniform.

O'Rory crouched inside the bedroom door, his eyes glinting dangerously, his mouth a straight line across his face. He saw another angle now, clearly; an angle that he hadn't considered before—a frame! If that were it, then they'd outgeneraled him completely. But it had been easy enough to do. They knew he'd work on Marcia Overton. Had they killed her for the purpose of trapping him on a murder rap that he could undoubtedly beat, but which would take him out of circulation for weeks? Had someone been outside, watching, waiting for him to show up before tipping the cops?

BRENNAN, the headquarters dick, spoke brusquely. “Take the bedroom, Stokes. I'll look in the kitchen.” And the patrolman said, “Yeah. Sure, Lieutenant.”

He walked in, gun in hand, groping for the light button. O'Rory watched Brennan, saw him disappear into the kitchen just as Stokes' hand hit the switch. But he didn't turn it on. O'Rory's fist arced upward, swung terrifically from his knees. The impact was a dull, slogging crack. The cop slumped forward into O'Rory's arms with a soft, sighing grunt. Brennan reappeared. He called out, “Nothin' here. You find anything, Stokes?”

There was no answer.

“Stokes!” Brennan's voice was sharp. The gun in his hand jerked upward, his jaw muscles bulged visibly. He came striding, reached the door and hesitated, and O'Rory's clenched teeth grated. Brennan wasn't coming in blindly—he was too cagy for that. With a silent oath, O'Rory shot out the light at Brennan's back.

Flame slashed at him. Blades of counterfire from Brennan's gun reached for him, probing in the dark. He counted three

shots, and then silence returned, full of thunderous echoes. His eyes were still dazzled by the flash of gunfire, but then he saw Brennan move. He placed him, gathered all his immense strength for one final effort to escape unidentified.

O'Rory leaped through the door. Again the gun blasted in his face. He felt the heat of it against his cheek as he lunged forward. His sweeping left hand missed the gun-arm, caught Brennan's shoulder instead. He pulled him down savagely, straight into the right uppercut that he lifted from the floor. And he felt it land! Pain shot to his shoulder, but Brennan went down with a thud that shook the room—and stayed down. And O'Rory plunged back into the bedroom to the oblong of lesser darkness that marked the window.

He jerked up the sash, kicked the screen out and stepped through to the fire-escape. All the way down excited yelling, running feet, slamming doors from inside the house urged him to greater speed. At the last platform, he swung over and dropped maybe twelve feet to a pitch-black, concrete court.

On the subway again, O'Rory licked a skinned knuckle as he gazed narrowly at the photograph of the man with Marcia Overton. Maybe it wasn't Dan Donovan, but the pictured eyes had a black, basilisk intensity. The pictured face was almost diabolically handsome, and there was a scar on the chin—or maybe it was just a shadow. Maybe it was a bad hunch, but anyway it was something, and Shane O'Rory believed in following his hunches.

THE man ahead of him on the steps of Police Headquarters was Sam Burnett. He didn't notice O'Rory until he heard footsteps behind him, and then he turned and smiled.

Burnett was thin, small, his eyes distorted behind thick lenses, his lips curled back over yellowish teeth in a perpetual, veiled sneer. When he saw O'Rory, he held the door open for him with elaborate, ironic courtesy. O'Rory said, "Thanks, Counselor." He went in, and whatever he

may have thought was not visible in his rugged face.

Burnett followed him in, his voice harsh when he said, "The papers have it that you're interested in the Holm case, O'Rory. Making progress, I suppose?"

O'Rory said, "The papers have it that it'll rain tomorrow, Counselor, but the papers may be wrong."

"That's right," Sam Burnett chuckled. "Funny things, papers. Well—see you again sometime," and he showed more bad teeth in his snarling smile.

O'Rory said softly, "I think maybe you will, Burnett!"

Burnett turned in through the first door on the right, into a big room with a raised desk at one end, with a man in the uniform of a captain behind it. In a small room that opened off the big one, a half-dozen bored reporters looked up from a card game when Burnett came in. O'Rory watched him from the door as he approached the desk and blared in his harsh, peremptory voice:

"Captain Kearns, I represent the Metro Taxi Company—"

O'Rory's eyes glinted. Sam Burnett, expert in all the technical dodges that mark the clever criminal lawyer, mouthpiece for half a dozen well-known hoodlums in the past—was Paul Riggan's lawyer now. O'Rory wasn't surprised. He'd thought as much when Kristi Holm told him that she'd seen Burnett with Riggan. He stood in the hallway, listening, while Kearns, the copper at the desk, grated heavily, "All right. What about it?"

"One of my client's drivers—Andrews—" Burnett rasped, "is being held on an assault charge in connection with some traffic accident. I want bail."

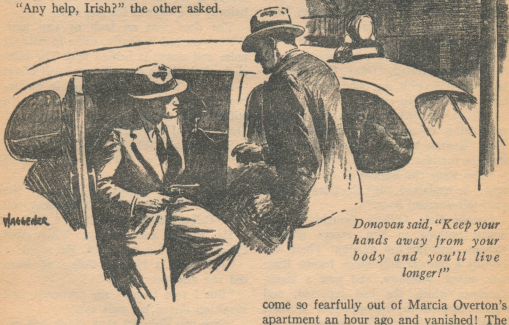
"Okay," the Captain said. "It'll be two thousand bucks."

O'Rory went on. A Metro cab driver in a jam didn't interest him. If it were important, if it had any bearing on the case of Robert Holm, Sam Burnett would never have gone about it so openly. He jogged rapidly up a flight of stairs to a door marked "Criminal Identification," and walked in without knocking.

Minutes later O'Rory knew that his hunch was good. He stood beneath a strong light with the snapshot in one hand and a police photo in the other—and Donovan was the man in both pictures. The man with Marcia Overton and the one Kristi had seen at the Metro office were the same! Dan Donovan!

O'Rory glanced at the record on the back of the photo; a record that included eight arrests, on charges ranging from a liquor violation to manslaughter. There were two convictions: one suspended sentence and a two-year prison term. With a muttered, "Thanks, Jim," O'Rory returned the picture to the uniformed man who stood beside him.

"Any help, Irish?" the other asked.



Donovan said, "Keep your hands away from your body and you'll live longer!"

"Maybe," he grunted.

"You think the Holm kid didn't kill young Kinnan?"

"Damned if I know," O'Rory said, "just what I do think! But I will soon. See you later!" And he strode out.

He went down the steps again, but halfway down he stopped, gripping the banister, staring fixedly at the girl who came in from the street and stood hesitantly in the hall. She looked up at him, and O'Rory's mind was a blaze of recognition. It was the same girl—the girl who had

come so fearfully out of Marcia Overton's apartment an hour ago and vanished! The girl who might have stabbed Marcia Overton—who at least might know why she had been stabbed. O'Rory surged on down the steps as she turned into that door below.

BURNETT was still there. O'Rory stood outside the door and heard Kearns' exasperated, "Listen, Burnett! I said two thousand bucks, and arguing all night won't make it a cent less! Either put up or shut up!" and the captain turned to the girl who stood waiting behind Burnett.

"What is it, miss?" Kearns asked.

Her voice was like the rest of her: thin, colorless, hesitant. She said, "My name is Jeanne Blair. I want to report—that is, my roommate's missing. She's been gone for weeks. Her name—"

"Kearns," Burnett cut in, "I demand that you finish with me before—"

Kearns' face went fury-red. He blasted, "I've finished with you, shyster! Either post a bond or get out! That's final! All right, miss, what's her name?"

"Her name's Natalie Cole," Jeanne Blair said.

It meant nothing to O'Rory. But Burnett started as though he'd been cut with a whip. His head jerked toward the girl. His eyes, behind heavy, convex lenses, were still unreadable, but his sneering mouth sagged—and then snapped shut. As if he realized he'd betrayed too much interest, Sam Burnett grated, "Okay, Cossack! I'll be back later with the bond broker!" He turned and hurried out.

O'Rory watched him from the concealment of a phone booth across the hall. Then Kearns brought Jeanne Blair out into the corridor and pointed up the stairs.

"You want the Bureau of Missing Persons," he explained. "It's the third door on your left—second floor."

Natalie Cole, O'Rory thought. It still meant nothing to him, except another woman—and this one missing! There was already a murder into which Jeanne Blair was mixed, somehow, and now a disappearance which she had reported, and which seemed to interest Sam Burnett keenly. But why hadn't Jeanne Blair reported finding the Overton woman's body? Or had she? Was it she who'd brought Brennan to investigate?

The case of Robert Holm, O'Rory decided, wasn't lacking in angles. Every move he made unearthed more of them, but each one served only to draw the veil of mystery closer.

He stood in the shadow of an office-building entrance across the street, waiting. But he hadn't long to wait. The girl reappeared, all but running down the steps. She walked uptown hurriedly, still with

that furtive, fearful manner that O'Rory had observed before. He paralleled her course on the opposite side of the street.

TEN blocks further on she turned west on a quiet, dark side street. From the corner O'Rory saw her enter the ground floor entrance of an old, narrow, brown-stone house halfway down the block, and he followed when she went in. The outer door was open; the first one of a row of cards beside the door had "Jeanne Blair and Natalie Cole" on it in a neat, woman's handwriting. O'Rory tried the inner door. It was locked, but a key from the ring of master-keys he took from his pocket unlocked it for him. He went down a long hallway to a door at the end of it.

The door was an inch or two ajar. O'Rory pushed it gently, came in without noise and closed it behind him. The faint click of the latch spun Jeanne Blair about—sent her hand to her mouth in an unconscious gesture of fear—brought a stifled gasp. O'Rory said, "Easy, sister! Don't yell—I'm harmless!"

She choked, "Who are you? What—"

"I'm a detective," O'Rory explained. "I want to—"

"You came—about Natalie?" she breathed. "Natalie Cole? They sent you from Police Headquarters?"

He smiled and nodded. That fixed things, made it a lot easier. He asked:

"Just who is Natalie Cole, and when did she disappear?"

"But I told them!" she protested, and suspicion tinged her pale eyes.

"Sure you did, but they didn't tell me. Just sent me to check up and try to find her. You want her found—or do you?"

"Yes," she faltered, "of—of course. It was Thursday night s-six weeks ago last Thursday. She—"

"Wait!" O'Rory stopped her. He strode to the small desk calendar on a table across the room. Swiftly he counted back and his eyes gleamed suddenly as his finger came to rest on a date six weeks ago. His mouth was thin and straight.

"May fifth!" he rapped. "She disappeared on May fifth, you mean?"

"That's right. That's the last time I ever saw her. She—Natalie had a date with a man."

"Who? What's his name?"

"I don't know!" The girl's tongue moistened colorless lips. Her eyes fell; she seemed to shrink away from him.

"Go on," O'Rory said grimly.

"That's—all."

He studied her silently, his voice uninflected when he said, "Miss Blair, why did you go to Marcia Overton's apartment earlier tonight?"

Her lips parted. All color left her face. "I didn't!" she gasped. "I—I don't know what you mean!"

"Were you looking for Natalie Cole there?" He was inexorable. "Did you kill Marcia Overton because you thought she was responsible for your friend's disappearance?"

"No!" she cried, "I didn't do it! She was dead when I—" She stopped, her eyes dilated in sudden terror.

"So you were there, after all!" O'Rory smiled. "Will you tell me now what happened to Natalie Cole, or shall I—"

Her thin shoulders shook in a gust of tearless sobbing. She whispered, "I swear I didn't kill her! It was that man—it was Dan Donovan—"

"Donovan!" he barked. "You know that? You saw him kill her?"

"Oh, no—no! But he did. Marcia Overton was his—his girl until he met Natalie, and w-wanted her. He threw that other woman over. Natalie went out with him three or four times. Then she didn't want to any more, because she'd met this other man she liked. But she was afraid of Donovan—afraid he'd kill her! And I'm afraid he has. Dan Donovan's like something cold and heartless—not human. He's like—like a snake!"

SHE stopped, panting, her eyes pleading with him. Like a snake, O'Rory thought. That's what Kristi Holm had said. He asked:

"How do you know all this? Did Natalie Cole tell you?"

"No, but I was here the night that

Overton woman came to see Natalie. I was in the other room and she didn't know I was here. She told Natalie that if she didn't stop going around with Donovan she'd kill her. And—and when Natalie disappeared, I thought—I went to see Marcia Overton."

"Then why," O'Rory took a chance on it, "didn't you tell all that when you reported her disappearance? Why'd you wait so long to report it?"

"I was afraid—of him. Of Donovan."

"I see," O'Rory droned; and then: "Did Natalie have a date with Dan Donovan on the night she disappeared? On the night—" his eyes glowed hotly—"of May fifth?"

"I don't—" Jeanne Blair began—and gunfire drowned her voice, ended it. The gun roared from the window—again—again, and the girl's eyes went wide, her mouth drooped. With a choking cough she staggered forward and a look of agonized fear froze her pinched, plain face. As she collapsed silently, O'Rory's .45 spoke in thunderous answer over her crumpled body.

He surged toward the window, shooting. He went straight toward the unseen gunman, heard the slap of lead in the wall behind him, saw only the orange bursts of flame ahead and shot at them, spacing his shots right, left, center. It seemed to take him forever to reach the window, but when he did, he knew he'd scored. The running figure in the small courtyard weaved drunkenly, staggered toward an open door in the eight-foot wall at the rear. O'Rory dived through the screen, picked himself up and lunged forward—tripped, sprawled.

The door in the wall slammed. He heard the whine of gears in the alley beyond, the roar of a motor. He reached the gate in the wall and emptied his gun at the fleeing tail-light, but the car kept on going away. It swerved out of the alley, vanished.

He climbed back through the window into Jeanne Blair's rooms.

O'RORY rolled down his sleeve and sat on the white-sheeted hospital cot. A wave of dizziness gripped him, the room

swam for a moment—then it passed and he felt all right. The doctor who'd performed the blood transfusion bent over the death-pale figure of Jeanne Blair, watching her keenly. O'Rory stood up and watched too, saw faint color creep back into the girl's face. Her eyelids fluttered. The doctor relaxed and wiped beads of sweat from his face.

"Y'know," he said, "that was a close thing. Lucky your blood matched hers, O'Rory. She wouldn't have lasted until we got a regular blood donor here."

"You mean she'll live, Doc?" The homicide dick who stood watching from the door came over, and the doctor shrugged.

"Can't tell yet," he said, "but she's stronger since she got some blood in her. I'd give her an even chance."

The cop looked at O'Rory and said grudgingly, "There's something phony here, O'Rory. I can't quite see you callin' on a kid like this one for the fun of it, but I just heard from the lab. They say the slug didn't come from your gun. And we found bloodstains in that backyard, like you said, so maybe you did get the gink who shot the dame. But if I were you, mug, I wouldn't leave town on any vacations. Stick around until the lady verifies your story. See? Here's your heater."

O'Rory said thanks, mockingly, and took the empty .45.

"This girl," he said to the doctor, "is to have all you can give her. Special nursing—private room—flowers. The whole American Medical Association, if she needs it! And if this isn't enough to pay for it, there's more where it came from."

He took a bank draft from his wallet—the draft for a thousand dollars—and tossed it on the cot. The cop looked at it and his mouth sagged. He looked up sharply, but O'Rory was gone, striding rapidly down a long, clean-smelling corridor. He'd have to go home, he decided, for more slugs for the .45. He thought he'd need more soon, and there was no chance of buying them at this hour. It was three a.m.

At three-fifteen he put his key in the

door of the top floor suite in the two-family house he lived in. He went in, snapped on the light—and stopped. For a long moment O'Rory stood frozen, staring into the menacing muzzle of Brennan's gun. At first all he could see was the gun, the hard gray eyes, and the hot triumph in Brennan's smile, the swollen, purplish lump on his jaw that O'Rory himself must have put there. Then he tore his eyes away and saw the other two men who were on their feet, and the one who wasn't.

The man on the floor was tall, broad—almost as big as O'Rory. He had red hair and a glistening stubble of beard on his ugly face. His nose was flat, lips twisted over locked teeth. He was dead. The crimson blot on his dirty white shirt was already darkening. The glazed look in his small reddish eyes told of death. O'Rory had a clamoring premonition of disaster, but he rapped:

"Brennan, what kind of gag is this? Who's your friend?" He pointed to the man on the floor.

"You wouldn't know, would you, O'Rory?" Brennan laughed explosively. "That"—and he pointed, too—"is Big Red Wilson!"

O'RORY'S face remained icily unemotional. "All right," he said, "spring it. Did I kill him?" But he experienced the sudden chilling thought that he *had* killed Red Wilson, that Wilson was the man who'd shot Jeanne Blair and stopped one of O'Rory's return slugs.

He remembered Sam Burnett's hurried departure from Police Headquarters after he'd heard Jeanne report Natalie Cole's disappearance. Did that fit in? Had Wilson been sent to silence Jeanne and then left here afterward, with a slug from O'Rory's gun in his carcass—to trap him? It was possible. The family downstairs was away at some beach for a month—

Brennan said nastily, "Sure you killed him, O'Rory—and who cares? You can claim self-defense and never even go to trial. You sap, you won't even be charged with rubbing out this second-grade punk!" He stopped, grinning.

O'Rory knew there was more to come, but he drawled sardonically, "Going to hide Red in your hip-pocket and cover for me, eh, Brennan? What a pal!"

Brennan's face flamed. Involuntarily he raised his left hand to caress the lump on his jaw, and his eyes cut savagely down to O'Rory's skinned knuckles. "Yeah—" he spat, "and burn you for the murder o' the Overton dame, see? Instead of yanking the Holm kid outa the Chair, you've handed yourself a one-way ticket to hell. You're next on the waiting list, wise guy. You killed the ginch, planning to rig up some kind of frame to break down Overton's alibi for Wilson—but I got there too fast for you. And when her boy friend Wilson came here to even things, you got him too!"

"Wonderful!" O'Rory jeered. "And then I went out and called you to come and get me! Who tipped you off, Brennan—Sam Burnett?"

"Take his gun, Pratt!" Brennan ordered.

One of the men jerked O'Rory's empty gun out of its shoulder clip, but he made no protest. His mind flashed back over the whole course of his visit to Marcia Overton's apartment. Where had he slipped? What identifying evidence could he have left?

Brennan must have read his thought, for the cop grinned, said, "You shouldn't go 'round kicking dogs, O'Rory. People remember things like that. The fat babe gave a description that couldn't fit anybody but you. She identified your picture. And don't I owe you something for this?" Again Brennan touched his jaw, and his eyes glittered. "Come on, tough guy, you're going to get it!"

O'RORY didn't go in at the front door this time. The car whirled into the back courtyard of the headquarters building, and O'Rory got out when Brennan told him to. He walked through a corridor walled and ceiled with stone, into a big bare room that had no windows within six feet of the floor. There was a stout wooden chair in the middle of the room,

under a reflector with a huge bulb in it. There were straps on the arms and front legs of the chair.

O'Rory knew where he was and what he had to face, but he couldn't think of anything he could do about it. Brennan nodded to the chair and said, "Sit down, O'Rory. Make yourself comfortable!" but he didn't wait for him to do it. He swung the gun in his hand. The barrel caught O'Rory's chin. Lights flashed and rocketed before his eyes. He knew he was reeling back, trying instinctively to stay on his feet, but the chair took him behind the knees. He flopped into it, all but out, limp. When the fireworks died down, he was strapped and helpless, and the big bulb over his head was glaring hotly down on him. He felt the heat of it already, and closed his eyes against the intolerable, blinding light. Brennan's voice sounded as though it came from the room above.

"That makes us even, you cheap four-flush!" Brennan said. "Now we can start from scratch! Why'd you kill the dame?"

"You've got it all figured, smart boy," O'Rory said thickly. "What more d'you want—a diagram?"

"You'll sign a confession?" Brennan was eager.

O'Rory laughed—and the hose hit him on the neck, under his ear.

It kept on hitting him—in the face, the head, his throat. O'Rory closed his eyes tightly, locked his teeth against the futile, raging anger that was like a bitter taste in his mouth. He found himself counting the blows as Brennan swung them, until he lost count of them in the hazy blur of near unconsciousness. He lost the power to distinguish between the blows and Brennan's hammering voice. Brennan snarled, "Want to talk now?" and hit him. "You'll talk before we're through, O'Rory! I can keep this up longer than you can!" and he hit him. "You killed the broad. You knifed her. Why?" and the hose slammed down again. "Why!" Another blow. "Why!"

The blur ended in a choking, gasping return to consciousness. Icy water drenched him, bulged his iron muscles in a spasmodic, reflex convulsion. The strap that

held his right arm broke. O'Rory flung himself and the chair both forward blindly, reaching for Brennan with a sweeping, terrific blow. It caught Brennan in the belly, low, hard, and it floored him. Brennan didn't get up at once. He rolled, holding himself with both arms, his knees drawn up, cursing. When he did get up, sweat beaded his sick white face, but there was murder in his eyes. Brennan panted hoarsely,

"Hold the dirty—"

The heavy door through which they'd entered burst open. Brennan spun around, his teeth bared. O'Rory's lunge had swung him out from under the light. He saw Captain Kearns, and Goldstein, and behind them the whole eager crew of card-playing police beat reporters. Goldstein recovered first and broke away from Kearns' restraining hand.

Goldstein was O'Rory's lawyer, when he needed one. He had a folded piece of paper in his fist.

Kearns said grimly, "Brennan, for Lord's sake, are you a cop or a butcher? When'll you learn that you can't—"

But Harry Goldstein didn't let him finish. He snarled, "He's an ex-cop after this, Kearns!" Then he came over and jerked at the buckles of O'Rory's straps.

BRENNAN found his voice at last. He roared, "Lay off that chair, you! We've got this guy placed at the scene of a murder. We found another stiff in his rooms. And if he won't talk, we're going to—"

"You're going to turn him loose, or you're going to charge him with something and put him in a cell! Anyway, you're not going to beat him to a pulp!" Goldstein stopped yelling and got up to stick his fist under Brennan's nose, shaking the paper he held in it. "I've got a court order that says so," he finished; "signed by Judge Larimer. And that ought to mean something—even to you, you gorilla!"

Brennan grabbed at it, but Goldstein laughed and tossed it to Kearns. The captain unfolded it, said hurriedly, "All right. The charge is material witness. Bail,

twenty grand." And all of them, even O'Rory, seemed not to be able to believe it when Goldstein didn't argue, when he ripped twenty one-thousand-dollar bills out of his wallet and still had some left.

He shoved the wad of them at Kearns, rapped, "No, I don't want a receipt. I've got plenty of witnesses. You able to walk, O'Rory?"

"Yeah." O'Rory stood up, weaving. "I want a drink."

"Come on," Goldstein said. "There's liquor in my car."

And in the car he watched O'Rory pour half a pint of Old Grandad down his throat, while he said, "None o' my business, Shane, but whoever you're sleuthing for now has got money to burn! He sent his chauffeur—his chauffeur, for Pete's sake—with thirty thousand in cash, and a note to come bail you out. And—oh, and here's a note for you."

O'Rory took it and broke open the heavy parchmentlike envelope, pulled out the folded sheet. It bore a single line of type, and Goldstein read it over O'Rory's shoulder.

"One for All," the note said, "All for One!" and it was signed with a red triangle.

Goldstein said, "What is this, *The Three Musketeers*? Well, maybe I'm crazy! Drop you anywhere, Irish?"

"Yes," O'Rory said. He gave him Kristi Holm's address.

O'RORY sat down on the edge of the bed and held his head in both hands. The whiskey was swirling around in it, deadening the ache, clouding his sight a little, but steadying him. He rubbed his eyes with the tips of his fingers, shook his head savagely, and looked at Kristi again. There was only one of her now.

She stood backed up against a bureau, her hands gripping the top of it, and stared at him as though he were a ghost. Her pallor and the white bandage covering the bruise on her forehead—the bruise she'd got in the wreck of the cab—accentuated the intense blue of her eyes as she said again, "Please tell me—where have you

been? Haven't you found anything yet?"

O'Rory grinned faintly. He'd come lurching into her flat, still half out on his feet, and she could think of nothing but whether he'd found out anything! Well, that was natural.

He told her. Swiftly he sketched Marcia Overton's death, the shooting of Jeanne Blair, his own probable killing of Wilson. He told of finding the photograph of Dan Donovan. When he finished, Kristi's eyes blazed, words burst from her lips as though she could no longer contain them.

"Donovan!" she cried. "Oh, I knew it! It's Donovan and Riggan and—and that lawyer! But how can we prove it, with Marcia Overton and Red Wilson both dead? Who *did* kill Wade Kinnan? And why?"

O'Rory said, "I think I know. I think we're on the right track. Listen, Kristi. At the trial, your brother said he found Kinnan's car parked in the five-hundred block of Western Avenue. Do you know exactly where? What number?"

She stared at him blankly, silent. "No," she faltered, then cried tensely: "Yes! I don't mean the number, but Bob said the house where the car was parked had red and blue glass in the transom over the front door. He said he noticed it because there was a light in the vestibule behind it, and he kept watching it for fear somebody would come out and catch him. Does that—could you find it from *that*?"

"I can try," O'Rory said. He got up and moved toward the door. Kristi paced him, caught his arm.

"Let me go with you," she pleaded.

"No, you're to stay here."

"But I can't!" she flamed. "I'll go crazy if I can't *do* something. I won't stay here!"

O'Rory shook her off gently. "Listen, lady," he said, "in court this afternoon you made charges and named names. You've had one hint already that somebody doesn't like it—or have you forgotten that cab wreck? You're going to stay here until—"

"You're not afraid," she cut in. "Neither am I!"

He said, "That's just the trouble!" and

went out. The door slammed behind him.

Red and blue panes in the transom. . . .

O'RORY found it! The house number was 513—about halfway up the block—and there was a light in the vestibule behind that colored glass. It stood out like a beacon as soon as he'd turned the corner, the only house on that side that had a light in the front. The one to the right of it was vacant, its doors and windows boarded up. The house on the left had an iron-grilled front door and no transom at all. O'Rory went up stone steps into the vestibule.

It was a rooming house. There was a row of bell buttons beside the door, but only about half of them had cards below them. He noted the names: Keene—Liebowitz—Hansen—Di Lucca. They meant nothing. He pressed the button labeled "Superintendent," and waited—put his finger on it again and held it down until he heard a door slam somewhere inside.

The man who snapped open the front door had angry, sleep-clouded eyes. He had on pants, but no shirt, with his suspenders dangling down behind. He was barefooted, with an amazing crop of corns and bunions. He blocked the doorway, mouthing wrathfully, "Who the hell're you? What d'you want—at *this* hour!"

O'Rory put a hand out and pushed. The man reeled back; his heels hit the first step of the stairway behind him and he sat down. It jarred all the fight out of him. He said, "Are—are you a cop?"

O'Rory thought of Brennan and grinned. "You catch on quick! Now will you talk, or would you like a trip to Centre Street?"

The man swallowed, wiped his lips with his tongue. He said, "Sure. Why'n't you say so at first? Wha—what d'you want to know?"

"I want," O'Rory clipped, "to know who your tenants are—what they do—where they were on the night of May fifth."

"May fifth!" The man's jaw fell. "Cripes, you don't want much, do you, mister! That's more'n a month ago! I dunno. I—"

"All right. Who are they? Tell me what you *do* know."

The super rasped a big, work-calloused hand over his stubbled chin. He said, "Well, Sam Liebowitz is a tailor. He's got a shop in Twenty-eighth Street. Mister Keene's a salesman for some wholesale grocery outfit. Bill Hansen and Joe Di Lucca, they're typesetters. They work for a big printing house on Eighth Avenue. And Miss Seymour—well, that's funny! Now I think of it, I—I dunno nothin' about her."

He looked up like a big whipped dog that hopes he's pleased somebody at last and the whipping is all over. O'Rory's eyes were distant, narrow. He breathed, "Miss Seymour! What's she look like? Why hasn't she got a card under her bell?"

"I dunno," he said. "She just ain't never put a card in it."

"Anybody else here," O'Rory demanded, "who doesn't like to advertise his name?"

"No."

"How long has she been here?"

"Let's see." The super rubbed his hairless head thoughtfully. "She rented number fourteen in February—four months ago. Paid six months rent in advance, too. Cash!"

And O'Rory felt a vague suspicion grow into a howling certainty. He said, "What's she look like, fella? Tall or short? Dark? Blond?"

The other shook his head. "'Fraid I can't help you there, mister. It was mama who rented the rooms to her, furnished. I ain't ever seen her, then or since. Y'see, we live in back, downstairs, and it seems like this lady wasn't home often. I remember mama wondering about it."

"Get Mama," O'Rory ordered.

"She ain't home," the super blurted worriedly. "She's gone upstate to visit her sister in—"

O'Rory said, "Hell!" and then, "Okay. Get your keys. We're going up to number fourteen."

"I've got 'em," the super said, eager again. He fished a ring of keys out of his hip pocket and O'Rory followed him up the stairs.

THE steps creaked under their weight. They went up three flights, and at the top the super unlocked a door and pushed it open. He went in first and pushed a light button, revealing a living room furnished cheaply but in moderately good taste. On the left a door opened into a bedroom, a bath adjoining it.

For a moment O'Rory stood scanning what he saw. Everything was in order; the rooms were neat and clean, except for the film of dust on the table-top, the radio. He drew his finger across the radio, looked at it narrowly, then turned toward the bedroom. It was the same: neat, orderly, but dusty. And the bath. Nobody, he thought—certainly no woman—had occupied these rooms for a long time.

He pulled out bureau drawers, looked in the closet. There were no clothes, no accessories, nothing. O'Rory went down on his knees. Using his pocket flash, he went over the floor inch by inch. And suddenly he picked up something and sat back on his heels with a tight smile. The thing in his hand was a bobby pin, with a long strand of dark hair—almost black—caught in it. He wound the hair around the pin carefully, placed it in his vest pocket, and went on searching. He stopped again over a dark, irregular stain, barely discernible on the background of the worn maroon rug.

For perhaps ten seconds O'Rory bent over it, hot-eyed, scarcely breathing. Then he snapped at the superintendent, "Got a knife?"

The man brought one. O'Rory opened the blade with his teeth, cut out a piece of rug from the center of the stain, and rose.

"Okay," he said. "Let's go!"

The other gulped, "Mind telling me, mister, what you're looking for? What's wrong?"

"No, I don't mind," O'Rory answered briefly. "And if I were you, I'd get mama back from her sisters, I'd tell her to brush up her memory on this Miss Seymour, because she's going to be asked a lot of questions—and so are you. This is murder!"

He strode to the door and out. Behind him the super's bare feet padded heavily

on the stairs. His voice was awed, anxious, as they reached the front door.

"You mean Miss Seymour's been—murdered?"

"Maybe," O'Rory said.

He went out under the transom with the red and blue panes. And all he could think of, as he walked rapidly toward the nearest subway entrance, was that Miss Seymour's name wasn't Seymour, and that she had black hair. And that if Robert Holm had killed Wade Kinnan, then all his reasoning was wrong.

He was thinking so hard that he didn't see the taxi that was parked near the corner when he came out of 513. He turned the other way, and his mind was so full of the grim thought that there might be another killing yet to be discovered that he didn't hear the cab sliding up behind him. It drew to the curb. The driver called, "Taxi, Chief?" and O'Rory walked into the trap blindly. He jerked open the door—to stare full into the small, blue hole that was a pistol-muzzle. He snapped his eyes up to the face of the man who held the gun—a coldly handsome face with black unwinking eyes and a scarred chin.

He heard Donovan's toneless drawl through the drumming of his own inner self-denunciation. Dan Donovan said:

"Get in, O'Rory, and sit down. Keep your hands away from your body and you'll live longer than otherwise!" And he added, smiling frozenly after O'Rory stepped in and sank into the seat between Donovan and the other man, "Not that you're going to live very long anyway. You're too nosey, and detectives who can't keep their noses clean die young. Take his gun, José!"

O'Rory laughed bleakly. He'd gone home to get bullets, and walked into a trap there. Now he'd stepped, sheeplike, into another trap, without either slugs or gun. Brennan still had his .45; he'd forgotten to get it.

José, a small, swarthy Mexican—Spaniard—maybe Filipino—patted him all over and grunted, "Got no gun, Dan!"

"Well, what," Donovan laughed, "d'you know about that! The great O'Rory not

heeled! He must think he scares everybody." And to the driver, with sudden savagery, "All right, frog-face, what're you waiting for—tomorrow? Get going!"

THE taxi—it was one of the Metro fleet, O'Rory noted without surprise—slid away from the curb, gathering speed. He sat motionless, breathing hard, his lips tight, thinking that being a detective was one part brains to N parts gun and battle and sudden death. He thought how nice things would be if you could sit in an office and deduce. What a pleasant job it would be if the hoods would let you alone while you juggled clues and added columns, then called a cop and said, "Arrest that man!" Because O'Rory knew, now, the who and why and how of Wade Kinnan's death. But it didn't work out that way. You had to kill a hoodlum to convince him he was caught—or be killed yourself!

Then the cab whirled around a corner that he recognized with sardonic satisfaction. He knew where they were taking him before they got there, for that corner was the intersection of Fifth and Kensington Streets. The cab crossed the pavement and went through the open doors of the Metro Taxi Company's garage.

It kept right on going, rolled past a line of a dozen or more other Metro hacks, and stopped with its front bumper against the concrete rear wall of the building. The driver touched his horn-button—and O'Rory knew why the cops had never found any stolen cars in the Metro garage. An eight-foot section of what looked like solid wall split in two and folded back noiselessly, as smoothly as well-oiled clock-work. The cab went on through, turned sharply, and rolled down a steep, narrow ramp. The masked doors behind them closed silently.

They went down, O'Rory reckoned, the equivalent of two floors. It puzzled him until the cab drifted through an opening into an arched, well-lighted underground chamber lined with huge, old hewn-stone blocks. And suddenly he knew where he was—where he *must* be!

This room was a section of the old B. N. & T. railroad tunnel. The tunnel had been abandoned years ago, filled in for most of its length by the foundations for new construction. But O'Rory had read somewhere that there were pockets left still unfilled. This must be one of them.

It made a room perhaps a hundred feet long by twenty wide, a completely equipped machine-shop. It was lined with cars. He counted nineteen of them—all recent models, all expensive—in various stages of change. Stolen cars, all of them, waiting to be disguised and sold. He knew that this clinched his case, but he knew too that that knowledge wasn't likely to do him any good, as things stood now!

The cab stopped beside a small wooden structure built against the tunnel wall. Donovan's gun prodded O'Rory's ribs and he said in his frigidly amused drawl, "Okay, detective—this is your address for a while, but not for long. Out!" And O'Rory obeyed.

José opened the door and O'Rory entered a bare, officelike room, furnished with a big desk, a few chairs. The man behind the desk was short, thick, dark. He had heavy lips and jowls, small eyes under jutting, hairy brows. Paul Riggan, no doubt. But it was the girl who held O'Rory's eyes.

Kristi Holm sat in a chair beside Riggan's desk with her hands bound behind her, ankles lashed. Her dress was all but torn from her lithe body, her hair dishevelled. And her eyes, as she met O'Rory's grim glance, were bitter pools of defeat, but not of fear.

Kristi said thinly, "You were right—I should have stayed home. But I thought I might find *something* that would help. I found—this place. They caught me."

Paul Riggan said, "Shut up, you!" with savage ferocity. Then to Donovan, in the same tone, "Okay, wise guy, you've got 'em both. Now what're you gonna do with 'em—keep 'em for souvenirs, like the one you've got up at the lake?"

Donovan smiled faintly, contemptuously. "No," he said, and drew his finger across his throat.

O'RORY observed them all with no change of expression. Besides Riggan, Donovan and José, there were two other men. The room seemed full of them; it was charged with a high-explosive quality, like imminent lightning. And there was a tense air of uncertainty, too, that O'Rory sensed, as though all of them were waiting for the lightning to strike and none of them knew from which quarter it would come. Only Dan Donovan seemed untouched by it.

Abruptly, Riggan snarled, "Donovan, there's got to be a stop to this! You can't rub out the whole town to cover up one kill! You and your damned women!" He made a gesture of disgust. His small eyes glittered in the half-light, darted from Donovan to José.

Donovan purred dangerously. "What about my damned women, Paul?"

"Women," Riggan exploded, "are going to spill your beans all over the lot one o' these days—that's what about it! And my beans, too. We're in this racket together, Dan, but I'm telling you that we're not going to be together much longer unless you leave the skirts alone. Hot cars are one thing—murder's something else, and there've already been too many. Now you walk in here with this dick and tell me him and the girl are next. Not here, they ain't! You're gonna get 'em outa here—tonight! After that, what you do with 'em is your business."

"So?" Donovan drawled.

O'Rory stood poised, tense, ready for the slightest break between the two. He saw now the reason for that pall of uncertainty that hung over the room like a brooding storm. The conflict between the two leaders of this gang of thieves was no passing quarrel. It was a dispute of long standing—a clash of wills between two fundamentally different men. Riggan was a crook who wouldn't stop at murder when he saw the need for it, but Dan Donovan was a true killer—a man to whom murder gave fiendish pleasure, who could kill and enjoy it. Paul Riggan was worried; Donovan was not. He was the sort whose contempt for law and decency would

continue to the brink of death. His tigerish smile curved his lips again as he spoke.

"Okay, Paul," he said smoothly, "I'll get 'em out. I'll turn 'em loose and let 'em sing their heads off. That what you want?"

"You dirty, doublecrossing—"

Donovan moved like a leaping cat. He stood over Riggan, and the gun in his hand trembled with the force of his grip. His eyes were slits through which the fire of bestial savagery burned.

"Don't say it, Riggan!" he raged. "I'll kill you if you do!"

And from behind him O'Rory heard the soft, sibilant voice of José, breathing on his neck, "Stand still, detective! I have a sharp knife. I am delight' to use it!"

O'Rory felt the point of it break through his coat and shirt. It was needlelike against his skin. He stood rigid, frozen, while Donovan flamed up in fury.

"Riggan, you know as well as I do that Red Wilson was the punk who started all this. If he'd kept his clumsy hands off Kinnan's car, everything'd been all right. But he got ambitious all at once, thought he'd make a big hit by bringing in a new car all by himself, instead of just scouting it for the regular crew. And you know that as long as this detective lives—and the girl—you're no safer than I am. They know too much. But if it's a fight you want, you'll get it now! Which is it going to be?"

There was electric silence, until the man in the far corner of the room—a man with the beefy, sloping shoulders and thick neck of a wrestler—growled suddenly, menacingly, "Dan's right. It was Wilson's fault. We gotta get rid o' these two."

The other man echoed it.

And the moment for which O'Rory had waited—came!

RIGGAN relaxed in his chair with the throaty snarl of a subdued but still dangerous bear. Donovan straightened slowly; his gun slid back under his coat lapel, and even José's steely vigilance wavered. The point of the knife eased its pressure. O'Rory's heavy heel slammed

down on José's instep with lightning speed, crushing force. Simultaneously he whirled, caught the knife-blade in his left fist, clamped José's neck in the crook of his right arm.

He whirled again to face them. The gun that spoke first was Riggan's, and O'Rory felt the impact of slugs in José's back. The little Mexican screamed. His teeth bit through coat, shirt, and flesh, and locked over O'Rory's collar bone. But O'Rory held him, flung himself backward at the flimsy wooden door. His shoulders hit it and he burst through, and fell, with José's limp body across him. He twisted free, rolled, came to his feet running.

The cab that had brought them was still there, its driver standing thirty feet away, talking to another man in greasy overalls. They yelled, lunged toward him, but O'Rory made the cab first and dived into the driver's seat. The hot motor responded to his first kick at the starter. He slammed the gear lever into reverse, let the clutch out, and the cab jumped backward.

A shot starred the windshield in front of his eyes. Another punctured it—and another. They came running out of that boxlike office, following him, and that was exactly what he wanted. There wasn't room or time to turn the cab, and they knew he couldn't back it up that narrow ramp. But that all fitted in with O'Rory's desperate, suddenly conceived plan. If it worked, he had a chance. If not—he shrugged, and watched them converging in front of him from all angles, shooting. Suddenly he braked, shifted into second, and put the accelerator on the floor. Like a cornered bull, the cab charged that knot of men.

They saw his trick—too late for three of them. They scattered, guns forgotten, in a mad scramble for safety from that roaring juggernaut. But three of them didn't make it. There was a sickening impact, a crunching jolt of the cab, a scream. O'Rory didn't look back. He followed a fourth man—the ponderous, wrestlerlike hoodlum who'd confirmed his and Kristi Holm's death warrant. The man ran heavily, lumbering, looking back with frantic

fear in his face. He tried to dodge out of the way, ran headlong into another car, and with a shattering crash the cab pinned him there, turned over and lay with one rear wheel spinning furiously.

O'Rory was flung clear of the wreck. He came to his feet, face bloody, his eyes blue flame. The big man lay half under the cab and he wasn't pretty to look at, but O'Rory hardly saw him. He had eyes only for the gun that lay beside his limp, outstretched hand. He scooped it up, pressed the magazine release—and smiled. That gun hadn't been fired! He had seven shots, at least, between himself and death, and he had already cut down the odds against him by five. And one of the three who lay together where he'd first scattered them was Paul Riggan. O'Rory saw him lift his head, try to get up, and fall back motionless. Then a shot ripped through the overturned cab and ricocheted off a fender across the room.

The gunfire started all over again, redoubled in fury, from men who were invisible now, hidden behind other cars. It was to be a siege, and such a one-sided battle could have but one ending. But O'Rory had no intention of fighting them that way, of letting them snipe at him until a lucky shot ended it. Methodically, one after another, O'Rory shot out the four floodlights that illumined the huge room. The darkness that followed was appalling.

IT WAS oppressive, palpable—that total absence of all light. Night, by comparison, was a translucent gray. This blackness had body and substance that seemed to weigh down, to press in around one like some swirling, rushing flood. The silence that accompanied it was profound, broken finally by a harsh, fearful whisper—an oath—the noise of something run into and knocked down. O'Rory's sudden yell was clear, ringing.

"Hunt your holes, rats! I'm coming after you!"

There was a shot, a muffled, choking cry.

The darkness was having its effect, the

uncertainty of not knowing who was who, or where O'Rory was. They were shooting at whispers. Somebody had just shot one of his fellows in sudden, blind panic. O'Rory's shoes came off. Noiselessly, with distance and direction fixed in his mind before light had vanished, he moved toward the open door of that wooden office. And someone was there ahead of him. He heard Kristi's gasping, terrorized, "Who is it? Oh, who's *there*?" and a low, answering laugh that was unmistakable.

O'Rory's groping fingers touched the door-jamb, he slid in soundlessly, crouched low beside the door. He heard the girl's frantic, futile struggle, and uneven footsteps that neared the door and stopped. Then light, from the powerful flash that Donovan held in his left hand, stabbed the blackness, swept the chamber outside the room.

Donovan held Kristi as O'Rory had held José. His right arm was about her neck, strangling her into submission, a limp shield before his own body. Donovan's voice was whiplike, lashing, as he raged:

"All right, rats—you can come out of your holes now! Come out and get him before he gets you—or *I* do! Get him, damn you, or I'll—"

But he never finished it. Some animal sense of danger must have warned him. Donovan half-turned, swinging the girl's limp body, trying to cover himself with her. But her weight slowed him. And at the same moment O'Rory's gun-butt arced downward, struck with a dull crunching sound.

The light vanished. Donovan's fall was a heavy thud, and in the silence that followed, the metallic dial-sound of the telephone on Riggan's desk was loud, penetrating. O'Rory's voice snapped, "Operator, I want Police Headquarters—quick!" And that was enough.

The rush of feet outside told him that the rest of them were escaping, but O'Rory made no move to follow. With the light in his hand, he bent over the prone figure of Paul Riggan. His voice was harsh, merciless as he grated, "Riggan, maybe you've got a chance to live—I

don't know. But so help me, I'll squat here and laugh at you while you die, unless you talk. Where's the girl? Where did Donovan take Natalie Cole, after he killed Wade Kinnan?"

His voice a weak, gasping whisper, Riggan faltered, "Cabin. South shore of Loon Lake. Two miles from—village—"

O'Rory lurched back toward the phone.

"I DON'T believe it!" William Kinnan choked. His voice rose almost to a shout. "I *won't* believe it! Who is this man O'Rory? What right has he to interfere with the verdict of a court of law—*your* court, Larimer! Why should I believe—"

Malcolm Larimer said, "The law, Kinnan, the courts, are administered by human beings. They can be wrong. In this case it has been definitely proved—by Mister O'Rory, here—that Riggan and Donovan, under cover of a legitimate taxi business, engaged in the stealing of automobiles on a large scale. Their drivers were nothing but scouts who spotted high-priced cars that might be stolen easily. We have the admission of Paul Riggan that Red Wilson *was* such a scout, and that young Holm's story of Wilson's complicity in the stealing of your son's car was true. I understand your feeling, Kinnan. It's natural that you should want the murderer of your son to be punished. But we know now that Robert Holm is *not* the real killer. We have here—"

"How?" William Kinnan grated. "*How* do you know that?"

Larimer took a big manila envelope from his desk. He drew from it the ragged, six-inch circle of fabric that O'Rory had cut from the bedroom rug of the apartment at 513 Western Avenue. He unfolded a sheet of paper, and the bobby pin that O'Rory had found fell out. Judge Larimer said:

"Your son, Kinnan, was not killed on the street, nor in his car, as was previously believed. He was murdered in an apartment on Western Avenue. This bit of rug came from that apartment, and tests have proven that it is saturated with human

blood. This hairpin"—he held up the tiny strip of metal—"was found in the same room. A single hair was caught in it. And that hair—again science has come to our aid—came from the head of the girl who was with your son on the night he was killed, and who *saw him killed*. We have further proof from the wife of the janitor of the house. She has identified the girl."

Kinnan leaped to his feet as though burned. He raged, "Are you implying that my son kept a woman? That he—Larimer, this is too much!"

"Those," Judge Larimer said inexorably, "are the facts, Kinnan. But you draw the wrong conclusions. The girl was in love with your son, and he, I believe, with her. If you had been a little less stern with him, a little less snobbish—but no matter, it's too late for that. Christopher!"

"Yessuh, Judge?" the colored butler who stood impassively at the door of the room answered.

"Bring in Miss Cole, please."

"Yessuh."

He went out, to reappear with a girl who faltered on the threshold, glancing about almost fearfully at those already in the room. She was pale and drawn. Even after a full day of rest, the memory of six weeks of terror still burned in her violet eyes. But Natalie Cole was lovely, in spite of her pallor. Her soft, lustrous dark hair framed an oval face and perfect features. She was small, almost diminutive. She stood hesitant, until O'Rory led her in, gave her his seat beside Kristi Holm. And for another moment there was silence. The girl's eyes drifted from Judge Larimer to District Attorney Lytton, then to the burly face of Captain Kearns—and finally to Kinnan. She seemed to know who he was before Larimer told her.

"Miss Cole, this is Wade Kinnan's—"

"Yes," she said, "I know. You're his father. He was afraid of you, afraid to tell you about me—about us—and ask your advice and help. Because I was a waitress in a restaurant—" She stopped, her eyes bitter. Kinnan stared at her. Without being prompted, Natalie Cole went on:

"We wanted to be married—we were going to be, as soon as Wade was twenty-one. He said we'd have to wait because you wouldn't consent to his marrying a waitress. We had to wait, and be afraid all the time! Afraid you'd find out—afraid *he'd* find out. Dan Donovan—"

Again she stopped, and William Kinnan said hoarsely, all disbelief shattered, gone, "Who is Dan Donovan?"

"The man," she said, "who killed your son." Her voice broke. "Oh, I should have known! It was all *my* fault!"

KINNAN started to speak again, but Larimer held up a silencing hand and Natalie Cole went on:

"I met Donovan when I first came here to look for work. I thought I liked him at first. He was thrilling, I thought. And then—then I knew I didn't like him. That I hated him—was afraid of him! I found out he was a gangster. Another woman told me. She said she was engaged to him. She said she'd kill me if I went out with him again. Her name was Marcia Overton. And then I met Wade, in the restaurant where I worked."

She paused, to look at them all again, blindly, as though she saw nothing but the scene she was depicting. Her eyes came back to Kinnan. He was looking at the floor now; his hands were trembling. Natalie Cole said:

"That man, Donovan, saw us together one night, and from then on I was terrified. It wasn't anything he said or did that made me afraid—it was the way he looked at us. That's why we rented the apartment. We couldn't go to you or to the police; we couldn't be seen in any public place. Wade gave me the money and I rented rooms where we could meet—safely, we thought. But Donovan found us—that night.

"He killed Wade—I saw him do it! He hit him with a blackjack, and I fainted. That's all I know, until I woke up in that cabin on the lake. There was a man who lived there, and he kept me locked in one room all the time. Donovan came twice while I was there. He tried to make love

to me and I bit him—scratched him. He only laughed. He said that after—the heat was off, he and I would go places and do things. And that's all I lived for—to get out of there and kill him. But now—"

She made a small, hopeless gesture and sank back into her chair. And there was an audible drawing of breath. Kearns was the first to speak. He got up and took his uniform cap from the table beside him.

"Speaking," he said brusquely, "for the police department, I call this case solved. It's obvious what happened. Donovan put young Kinnan's body in his car and came back for Miss Cole. While he was gone, Wilson brought the Holm kid and stole the car—and Holm was so rattled he never noticed the body in the rear. I'm satisfied that Donovan knifed the Overton woman. Riggan says so. She was jealous of Miss Cole, and when she found out that Donovan had her in that cabin on Loon Lake she threatened to spill the whole thing, including her phony alibi for Wilson. The slug that killed Wilson undoubtedly came from O'Rory's gun, but we know how that happened—and O'Rory deserves a vote of thanks. The whole thing's open and shut. For heaven's sake let's not make this girl talk about it any more!"

The D.A. looked at Kristi Holm and said, "I thought your brother was guilty. I'm glad he wasn't. Good job, O'Rory!"

He went out with Kearns.

Larimer's eyes were significant as he glanced from Kinnan to Natalie Cole. Kristi Holm caught his meaning. She rose, and Larimer said, "Miss Holm, my car's waiting for you. The chauffeur has instructions to take you wherever you want to go—and if I'm not mistaken, that's going to be to see your brother. You tell him the good news. He doesn't know yet. Tell him he still has a stolen car to answer for, but if he thinks he can be worthy of his sister's faith in him, a suspended sentence might be all he has to fear."

And to O'Rory, "I think a drink is in order, O'Rory. Join me?"

CHRISTOPHER, the butler, opened the door for them and followed them into a dining room that was panelled in walnut, high-ceiled, deeply carpeted. And O'Rory smiled as he met the eyes of the man who who awaited them there.

The man seated in the massive, carved chair at the head of the table was small, gnomelike, twisted. He was a hunchback; his legs were crippled, useless. But if he had the body of a gargoyle, he had the eyes and smile of a saint. He was Julian

Harcourt, O'Rory knew—banker, philanthropist, multi-millionaire.

Christopher brought old brandy in cut crystal glasses, and Julian Harcourt raised his glass and smiled.

"Gentlemen," he said, "I give you Shane O'Rory, and the Society of the Red Triangle."

"One for all," O'Rory grinned, "All for one!"

They drank.

The Triangle was complete.

(The End.)

Speaking of Wild Horses

Russell Bankson Says—

DEAR ED:

Of course I saw the letter from R. A. of Beaumont, Texas, in the September Five-Novels and I'm glad he was interested enough to write in about my story, *Branded!* He questions the control which my hero had over the wild horse band. I have a friend who is a big cattle rancher in the Sun River brakes of Montana. He set out to see what he could do with a band of wild horses on his range.

By taking salt to them, he got them so tame that he could ride among them, and even get them to follow him. Yet let a stranger come within half a mile of them, and they were away like the wind. This was a small band, but with the knowledge that such a thing *could* be done, I used the fact on a larger scale, for the purpose of my hero.

As to driving the band across the desert—I once rode on a wild horse round-up, where half a dozen of us drove over three thousand wild horses for more than twenty miles—and we didn't have a sand-storm at their tails to keep them moving, either, as Rush Ahlin did.

Perhaps writer's license led me to exaggerate my hero's prowess somewhat, but that which has been done on a small scale is reasonably possible on a large one, with patience and gentleness—and a little bribery in the form of salt.

Incidentally, while I am neither a rancher nor a cowhand, I was born on a ranch in the Far West and have lived all my life in the Far West, and am a frequent visitor to and thoroughly acquainted with all the old cattle stands, from the Tongue River to the Sun River in Montana, and on through Idaho and Nevada to the John Day and Bend country in Oregon.

My sincere thanks to R. A. for liking my story, despite his doubts.

RUSSELL BANKSON

The Jeweled Throne

By
Victor Rousseau



"Come, drop that revolver on the ground!" Hauptmann ordered

THE sounds of a fracas, the shrill scream of a girl, cut off abruptly, as if a hand had been clamped down on her mouth, came to Colin Rayne's ears as he strolled homeward from the European Club to his hotel in Teheran, the capital of Persia.

Colin was taking a short cut through a road that seemed wholly deserted. On either

side were long walls of baked clay, painted mostly a brilliant blue. Behind these were gardens, iron gates, and latticed windows, showing blank and dark in the moonlight.

If it had not been for the girl's scream, Colin would have had more sense than to intervene in what was probably the hold-up of some rich merchant, on his way home, perhaps with a pocketful of jewels or jade,

or gold filigree. Colin was no stranger to Teheran.

But that scream drove him into action. He ran at full speed around that corner of the alley, drawing his revolver as he did so.

Immediately he came upon his objective. Three men were wrestling with the struggling form of a shrouded Persian woman, trying to force her into a *takht-i-rawan*, one of the wheelless wooden sedans used by women, with a mule in front and another mule behind.

The woman was completely enveloped in black. The men wore high black hats, black satin trousers, cotton coats, and riding boots.

Colin sprang as the woman was on the point of being forced into the sedan. The two men who were holding her turned, snarling, and plucked daggers from their belts. As the first of the pair launched himself upon him, Colin brought the muzzle of his revolver down upon the high black hat with all his might.

He knew he would have to strike hard, to crush that mass of felt and make some impression on the skull beneath. The hat lapped over the sides of the head in shapeless ruin, and with a groan, the Persian collapsed.

But now the second Persian was upon him. A vicious dagger-thrust ripped Colin's sleeve. Colin thrust his revolver into the man's face, catching him on the lips and sending him staggering backward. That fellow showed no indications of wanting to renew the fight. He took to his heels and disappeared around the corner.

The first man lay groaning feebly. There remained the third, who was standing by the rear mule, watching the affray.

As the light of the moon fell on his face, Colin recognized him, in spite of the false beard he wore. In spite of the black wig, too, for a wisp of blond hair straggled from beneath it over either temple. The man was Carl Hauptmann, whom Colin knew quite well at the European Club, though he had no idea how he had become involved in this nocturnal kidnaping.

Before Colin had more than recognized

him, Hauptmann had turned and fled in the wake of the second man, leaving Colin alone with the woman, the unconscious Persian in the roadway, the sedan, and the two mules.

Colin turned to the shrouded form. "*Hanum*—" he began respectfully.

She caught him by the arm. "Take me back! Take me back!" she urged, in Persian. "Be quick, for there are others waiting in the next street. This way!"

SHE began dragging Colin along the alley, which was narrow. But a dozen paces further the *hanum's* words came true. A group of six men came running around the corner, waving short swords and daggers.

The girl ran swiftly, but her movements were hampered by the voluminous draperies she wore, and it was evident that in a moment Colin would have to stand and fight again. Already the six were circling, attempting to surround the two of them in the narrow street. Two of them leaped forward, waving scimitars, one blow from which would mean decapitation.

There was no time for niceness. Colin fired into the face of the foremost, and saw the livid hole spring out between the eyebrows. The man dropped in his tracks, and his scimitar fell from his hand.

The second man made a wild sweep that missed Colin's throat by a couple of inches. Colin fired again. His hammer fell on a spent cartridge. He flung the revolver into the man's face, stooped, and picked up the scimitar.

Now the remainder of the band was upon him. Colin swung the scimitar and struck fire from another that clashed with it.

The five men drew back under the fury of his attack. They lurked, half-invisible, in the shadows of the houses. But a swift cry of warning from the girl made Colin swing swiftly around—just in time—as the daggerman who had been creeping up aimed a furious blow at his body.

By merciful good fortune it caught Colin's belt, ripping it in a long line. Colin swung his scimitar and caught the man in

the arm. With a shriek of pain, he scuttled away.

One against four. One against three now, for Colin's blade had caught another of his adversaries squarely across the hat, shearing the mass of black felt from his head, and inflicting a blinding scalp wound. But the three, goaded to desperation, came in with the intention of finishing their job. They were wielding daggers, not scimitars, and at such close quarters, Colin's long, curved blade was useless. He dropped it and leaped into the midst of the three, striking out with clenched fists.

A blow caught the nearest man squarely on the jaw and dropped him. A dagger grazed Colin's cheek. Another just pinked him in the shoulder. The two remaining men went circling round and round him, while Colin whirled like a dervish, keeping them at bay with fists alone.

Vaguely he was aware that the girl had disappeared. The moon had dropped. The street was all but black.

Another man had appeared from somewhere, a shadowy form, but Colin guessed that it was the German, Hauptmann. He sprang forward, and his revolver roared. The bullet grazed Colin's wounded cheek, and the powder stung his eyes.

Fists against knives! Again and again Colin struck home upon the faces of the daggermen. The point of a blade tore a gash along his arm. The German's revolver roared again. By the greatest miracle of the fight, at that precise moment one of the dagger-wielders had leaped forward, ready to give the final thrust. The bullet from Hauptmann's weapon caught him in the back of the head. The Persian toppled forward, bringing Colin down with him. Colin, struggling to disengage himself from the body of the dead man, saw Hauptmann aiming at him with cool deliberation.

He had just time to rise to his feet and heave the corpse in front of him, as a shield. The bullet struck the body with a thud that shook the still quivering muscles into spasms. Then Colin had closed with Hauptmann.

He felt the muzzle of the German's re-

volver drop upon his head. He felt no sense of pain, but the dark street began swaying up and down. Colin managed to back up against the mud wall.

Standing there, weaponless, save for his fists, bracing himself against the wall, Colin waited.

"Come on, you dogs! I'm ready for you!" he heard his own voice saying, in what sounded like a faint and far-away whisper. But he knew that his end was at hand.

How many more of them? The assassins seemed to be springing up like mushrooms. The narrow alley seemed to be full of them. Or was he seeing double? A strange silence seemed to have fallen. Why didn't they run in and finish the job?

Silence—then shouting. The two huge forms appeared as if by magic at Colin's side, gigantic men, with long swords in their hands. They leaped forward. Colin thought this was the end. But they had leaped past him, and he heard groans, clashing of steel, and then the scuttling feet along the alley.

Next moment one of the men had grasped Colin by the arm and swung him upon his back as lightly as if he had been a child. The moon appeared again between two houses. Colin could see now that the man who was carrying him, and the second, who trotted beside him, were giant Negroes, doubtless harem guardians for some Persian potentate.

Too weak from the head blow he had received to realize entirely what was happening, Colin let himself be borne along at a jog-trot, as if he was a bale of goods. In a few moments, it seemed, the two men stopped. There came the sound of a key being inserted into a lock. A gate swung open and closed again.

The man who was carrying Colin set him down. Now Colin could see that he was in the courtyard of one of the houses, with the unlighted lattice windows overhead. His feet trod upon a tiled walk. He staggered forward, the two men grasping his arms and supporting him.

Another gateway appeared, the gate ajar. And in the entrance was the shrouded

figure of the *hanum*. She came running forward.

"He is not badly hurt?" she cried, in Persian.

"I'm all right," Colin muttered.

And with that, consciousness seemed to diminish to a distant pin-point, and Colin was only vaguely aware of being carried inside the second gateway.

HE MUST have slept several hours, for when he opened his eyes he saw broad daylight streaming through the window of the room in which he was lying on a low divan covered with a long Persian rug. He sat up, his head still reeling from the blow he had received, and discovered that his face had been plastered, and that there was a roll of bandage around his injured arm.

At his movements, one of the huge black men came through a doorway, which was hung with tapestry, carrying a goblet in his hand. He handed it to Colin with a subservient grin upon his face.

Colin took a long draught. The aromatic wine that the goblet contained quenched his thirst and seemed to put new vigor into him. He handed back the goblet and rose, a little unsteadily.

"Her Highness awaits you, Excellency," said the black, addressing Colin by name.

Colin nodded, saw his revolver lying on the divan beside his belt, thrust it into its holster and strapped the belt about his waist. As he did so, he noticed that the dagger rip had been neatly mended, and a strip of new leather attached. It was evident that he was in friendly hands.

He followed the servant through the doorway and along a corridor, which ended in another room with a curtain at the door. The black man clapped his hands and called. A woman's voice replied.

Colin stepped into a large room furnished in the European manner—a little too European, for the furniture was gilt and gaudy, and at least five clocks were ticking away.

There were two people in the room. One was the Persian woman, who sat on a low divan, wearing a black robe and a thin

black veil, through which Colin could see that her features were those of a young and charming girl.

The other person was a man, a squat Armenian, mainly made up of fat, who lolled in a chair with a look of mingled insolence and obsequiousness.

He got up and came forward with outstretched hand. "Good morning, Mr. Rayne. I hope that you are feeling better," he said in English. "Her Highness, the Princess Fatima, will never forget how much she owes you for coming to her aid last night. My name is Issisarian, and I lived for many years in America."

Colin took the pudgy hand with a certain feeling of repulsion. Issisarian presented him to the Princess, who inclined her head. Colin could see her smiling through her veil.

"Please sit down. I am Her Highness' personal representative," Issisarian continued. "Naturally I know what brought you to Teheran. You are the representative of the Anglo-Armenian oil interests in Northern Persia, and you came to apply to the *Mejliss* for further concessions of a far-reaching character. The *Mejliss*, after a secret debate, voted against the project. A similar application from a rival oil company, controlled by a German syndicate, was likewise rejected by the National Assembly."

"I don't think many people in Teheran are ignorant of that," answered Colin.

He had, in fact, gone from one cabinet member to another, and, in accordance with the custom of the country, had offered inducements in the shape of shares, and of sums of money, for a favorable consideration. Of course Hauptmann, representing the rival company, had done the same. But some subtle force that Colin was unable to cope with had defeated his plans, and Hauptmann's too.

But why had Hauptmann, outwardly a respected member of the European Club, attempted to kidnap the little princess, and tried to murder him?

GLANCING at Issisarian, Colin saw that the fat little man was watch-

ing him keenly, trying to read his mind.

"Did you not understand, Mr. Rayne, that the action of the *Mejliss* was dictated by His Majesty the Shah-in-Shah?" asked Issisarian. "Her Highness wishes me to speak frankly to you. She is the daughter of the late sheik of the Beni-Islam, in the Tagatai Mountains, beyond the great Salt Desert. She has come to Teheran to intercede with His Majesty for the liberty of her lover, the young Sheik Ibrahim, who has been captured and imprisoned. His life and freedom depend upon the carrying out of a certain plan.

"You have seen the famous Peacock Throne, Mr. Rayne?" he asked, with apparent irrelevance.

"Yes, naturally," said Colin. The far-famed Peacock Throne of the Shahs, studded with jewels of inestimable value, was on exhibition every time the reception rooms of the palace were thrown open. A glittering mass of shining gems, one of the seven wonders of the modern world.

"At least, I have seen what is called the Peacock Throne," Colin continued. "It is generally known that it is only a replica. The real throne was concealed by the last of the Kajar dynasty."

"Ah, yes," smiled the Armenian. "The so-called Peacock Throne is a very creditable piece of work, and worth perhaps five thousand dollars."

"Come to the point!" said Colin.

Issisarian smiled. "Before His Majesty Reza Khan deposed the late Prince Mohammed," he said, "the real Peacock Throne had been removed by caravan to the territory of the Beni-Islam. There it remains, guarded night and day, until Prince Mohammed is restored to the throne of Persia."

"But Prince Mohammed died in Cannes three years ago!" said Colin.

"The Beni-Islam do not believe it. The possession of the real Peacock Throne is of the utmost importance to His Majesty Reza Khan, apart from the value of the gems, because tradition says that whoever owns the throne owns Persia.

"Yes, I will come to the point. His Majesty Reza Khan will release the

Sheik Ibrahim *in return* for the Peacock Throne. Her Highness, Princess Fatima, knows where the throne is hidden. She is willing to persuade her tribesmen to surrender it in return for her lover's liberty. Do you understand now why Herr Hauptmann was ready to stop at nothing in order to abduct her?"

"I think I do," said Colin.

"Whichever of you succeeds in obtaining the throne will obtain the oil concession."

"Which side does the Shah favor?"

Issisarian grinned. "He favors neither. What he wants is the throne."

He spoke to the Princess in Arabic, which Colin barely understood, and she replied, volubly, passionately. He turned to Colin again.

"Her Highness likes the American people," he said. "She was educated at the American Mission. She begs for your assistance, for she has seen that you are a man of courage. She begs that you will accompany us on our mission to her people, the Beni-Islam, to persuade them to restore the throne."

"An armed expedition?" asked Colin.

"Against her own people? No—a friendly one. She hopes to convince them that Prince Mohammed is dead. We shall start with a caravan, ostensibly for the Black Sea. At the edge of the Great Salt Desert we shall slip away and strike for the Tagatai Mountains. We have only Herr Hauptmann to fear. The Shah will not interfere. He only wants the throne, and the oil concession goes to whoever places him in possession of it. Do you understand now, Mr. Rayne?"

"I understand," said Colin. "And I accept."

Suddenly the Princess slipped down from the divan and knelt at Colin's feet. She raised her hand to his lips. "I thank you! I thank you!" she repeated incoherently. Then she was back in her place, impassive as before, watching Colin through her veil.

"The caravan starts from the Kasveen Gate tonight," said the Armenian. "Everything is arranged."

"Then I'd better go back to my hotel and get my baggage," Colin suggested.

Issisarian smiled. "Your baggage is all here, Mr. Rayne, in the room that you are to occupy," he answered. "To leave this house alone would be to court almost certain death. In fact, it will be necessary for you to assume a disguise. But let me thank you a thousand times in the name of the princess, and show you to your room, where your meal will be served. Then I would recommend a sleep during the heat of the afternoon, for the night journey will be a trying one."

COLIN had eaten an excellent meal in the spacious room that was placed at his disposal. He had slept afterward, so soundly that, when he started up as a tap came at the door, for a moment he could not realize where he was.

The sun had ceased to pierce the shuttered windows, and it was nearly dark. The squat form of Issisarian appeared in the room. Then Colin remembered.

"Ah, you have slept well, Mr. Rayne?" inquired the Armenian. "That is fine. The caravan is already assembling outside the Kasveen Gate. We have a dozen men of the Beni-Yussufs, who are blood-brothers of the Beni-Islam, and they will travel in the guise of merchants on their way to the Black Sea. The camels will carry paniers, supposed to be packed with goods, but actually containing only straw and rubbish, with rugs over them. Your rôle will be that of the *charvodar*, the caravan leader. It will be necessary for you to wear the Arab burnoose."

"We travel on camels?"

"No horse could cross the desert, except such as have been trained to endure the heat and thirst. But once beyond it, we shall hope to find riches almost beyond the dreams of avarice, for the Shah-in-Shah is generous to those who serve him well."

It was a half-hour later when Colin, wearing his white, hooded burnoose, stepped out of the rear entrance to the house following Issisarian, who wore the long cotton coat, black satin trousers, and tarbush of the Persian merchant.

Colin followed his guide through the market square, crowded with men and veiled women taking the evening air, and along the straight road toward the Kasveen Gate, packed with men leading mules and asses, with peasant women carrying enormous paniers of vegetables, tall desert Arabs with falcons on their wrists for sale, and beggars shrilling the name of Allah.

Outside the gate, in the twilight, the scene was even more confused. Caravans, horses, strings of asses and camels, were apparently jammed in complete disorder on the vast, stony plain. Campfires had sprung up, and the acrid stench of burning manure filled the air. *Gholams*, grooms, were hustling at their baggage beasts and yelling.

Following Issisarian, Colin suddenly found himself in the midst of a *chapar*, a caravan of some two dozen camels, slim riding beasts, and as many more of the heavier species, upon whose flanks the paniers were being hoisted. In the center of the group was a riding-camel with a wooden frame raised above the saddle, and drawn silk curtains.

At the Armenian's bellow, a man brought up two snorting camels.

"Mount, Mr. Rayne," said Issisarian. "Your rôle of *charvodar* lasts only till we get out into the desert. These men know who you are, and understand your mission."

"Have we rifles?" asked Colin.

"Packed in the paniers. But we are not likely to need them."

Colin swung himself into position, and slowly the camels threaded their way across the plain, until Teheran was only a galaxy of lights behind them.

THE night seemed endless. Riding under the brilliant stars, Colin felt that it was all like a dream. The story of the Peacock Throne appeared fantastic, and yet he knew that nothing is too fantastic for Persia.

It was well toward morning when the leading Arab turned and yelled to his companions, pointing eastward. They had left the northern road and entered the

Great Salt Desert, making for the Tagatai Mountains, whose serrated ridges were just discernible in the distance, standing up against the starlit sky.

The stony hardness of the track gave way to sand dunes. Hours went by. Colin started, as he saw Issisarian riding at his side, and realized that he had been asleep upon his mount.

"Before dawn we shall reach a little oasis," said the Armenian. "There we shall rest until the heat of the afternoon is ended. After that, the worst of the journey will be ended. There will be wealth beyond our dreams. Only, my friend, there is one point yet to be considered.

"Suppose Her Highness is unable to convince the tribesmen that it is to their interest to deliver up the throne in exchange for the life and liberty of the young sheik, Ibrahim—then what, my friend?"

"That will be too bad," said Colin.

"It will be too bad," Issisarian agreed. "But what would *you* do then, my friend? If the Beni-Islam should prove stubborn, you would no doubt be prepared to consider other plans?"

"Any plans that did not involve the betrayal of the princess," said Colin.

Issisarian leered at him in the moonlight. "Ah, that goes without saying," he answered. "Pray think no more of my remarks. I merely wished to learn what your attitude would be in the event of—certain things happening."

The Armenian fell back. Colin pondered over his remarks, dozed, nodded, till shouts from the leading Arabs brought him back to full consciousness. They had reached the oasis. In the moonlight appeared clusters of palm trees. The Arabs were dismounting beside a stream, fringed with grass.

Food was produced, fires of camel dung began to burn. A little tent was pitched for the princess. Later, Colin ate and drank, dipping his left hand into the common dish of pilaff.

It was cold on the desert. Wrapping himself in his burnoose, Colin slept.

SOMEONE was tugging at his arm. Colin awoke, to find the camp in con-

fusion. Camels were being hastily repacked, the sun was a red disk on the horizon.

Issisarian cried, "Wake up! We are going on at once. A messenger has arrived from Teheran. Herr Hauptmann has discovered our stratagem, and an expedition is starting in pursuit of us. There is no time to lose!"

The Arabs were prodding the camels with guttural yells. The little princess was climbing into her canopied cage. A man brought up Colin's camel, and in a few minutes the tired *chapar* had taken up the march again, in the face of a blinding glare from the eastern sun, which had already dispersed the chill of night.

Some twenty miles ahead extended the line of the Tagatai Mountains, now broken up into a succession of gaunt, bare peaks. The sun grew hotter. Hour after hour they traversed a sandy plain, under a heat more ferocious than anything Colin had known. Three times he replenished his water-bottle from one of the goatskins.

He wrapped his head in his burnoose, to keep out that blinding, pitiless heat. The sand had given place to salt crystals, that reflected the glare from a sun which had not even yet reached the zenith.

The sweat, which had poured from Colin's body, had ceased to flow, his tongue felt shriveling in his mouth. Again his water-bottle was empty. It seemed as if at any moment he could fall from his mount and die.

But shouts broke out, and Colin raised his head and looked through the folds of his burnoose. The Tagatais were quite near now, and the salt crystals were giving place to stone again. Out of the distance a score of horsemen were galloping toward the caravan.

Instantly the Arabs leaped from their camels and began throwing aside the rugs that covered the paniers. They came running back, carrying rifles and bandoliers. They urged their camels forward, yelling, and firing into the air.

The mounted men, galloping toward them, were firing too. The discharge of firearms echoed from peak to peak.

Colin rode to the side of the princess and

reined in. He had nothing but his revolver, and the horsemen were circling all about them now, still discharging their weapons, and uttering savage yells. But suddenly camelmen and horsemen drove their mounts together, yelling, and the rifle firing ceased.

"It is all right," said Fatima, speaking in Persian. "It is as I thought. These are my own people."

An hour later the caravan and its escort were entering the defiles of the Tagatais. They passed between great crags, along a trail so narrow that two horses or camels could hardly go abreast. Then appeared fresh grass and the earthen rims of wells, and small stone houses perched on a plateau up which the trail ascended.

Suddenly, to his surprise, Colin heard himself addressed, in soft and fluent Persian, by the man on the racing camel who had drawn to his side.

"You are likely to have your work cut out," he said, with a grim smile.

Colin turned and looked at him. He wore a burnoose, but his features were fairer than those of most Arabs. Dark eyebrows met across a hawklike nose, and there was something resolute and commanding about his aspect.

"You were not in the *chapar*," said Colin.

"I am the messenger who brought warning from the city that there are others on the same trail. My name is Mirdouk. Has it occurred to you, my American friend, that Issisarian may be making a fool of you?"

"You seem to know a good deal," said Colin.

"I know what I know. Why did you not seek audience of the Shah for your concession, instead of those idle chatterers, the *Mejliss*?"

"Because it is commonly known," said Colin, "that Reza Khan, who rose to Shah from stable boy, is himself incapable of settling such matters, and relies upon his counsellors."

"Yes, I have heard that too," replied Mirdouk. "Nevertheless, the Shah is said to be a man of courage and resourcefulness,

and his exploits are the theme of many a song and story. It might have been more profitable to have sought audience of him."

IF HAUPTMANN was on his way to take a hand in the game, there was no sign of him from the rocky plateau on which the village of Beni-Islam stood.

Horsemen patrolled the desert, sentinels lay on the crags, scanning the distance. In the open space beneath the date palms, under the clustered houses, strange scenes were being enacted.

Men of the tribe had come streaming out to acclaim the return of their princess. Boys of eight or nine, carrying rifles, strutted proudly up and down before her tent, as a guard of honor. Veiled women and girls peered forth from windows and stood on the flat housetops.

A circle of gray-bearded elders had gathered before the tent. Shrouded in black from head to foot, the princess sat before it on a pile of rugs. In soft accents she began to speak.

The speech was Arabic, and all but unintelligible to Colin, but as her tone grew more impassioned, he knew that she was telling the elders of the death of the ex-Shah, Prince Mohammed, and that the throne must be restored if the Sheik Ibrahim was to live.

"A woman pleading for her lover," whispered Mirdouk to Colin, as the elders listened impassively. "Ah, if she would only unveil her face, for I can see how beautiful she is!"

The elders began to stir uneasily. One of them spoke, and a babble of interrogation broke out. The little princess sprang to her feet. Her voice rang scornfully across the open. She flung out her arms in gestures of violent intensity, struck her breast with her clenched hands. The circle of graybeards seemed to cringe before her.

Then suddenly she sank down in a heap, amid an utter silence.

An old man, with the tips of his beard stained henna-red, rose and spoke briefly.

"The elders will give their decision in the morning," whispered Mirdouk.

The princess, with a scornful gesture, withdrew into her tent. The elders rose, gathered in little groups, whispering together, sometimes glancing at Colin, whom they had already discerned to be a foreigner.

Colin could see the horsemen riding on the face of the desert, their white *djellabas* bright spots against the dun of the sands. On the crags he could see the riflemen, peering intently out toward the setting sun.

Everything, at the moment, seemed arrested.

Then a distant, droning sound, as of a large bee, broke the silence. It grew louder. Curses and cries came from the Arabs, as they pointed upward.

And now Colin could see, black against the rim of the sun, an airplane winging its way toward the Tagatais. Then another, and another. Three of them, swiftly approaching the Beni-Islam's stronghold.



As the jailer bent over, Colin's hands went about his throat

Bedlam broke out in the village. The Arabs were firing wildly at those circling dots above, the sentries had leaped up from the crags and were discharging their weapons. The horsemen were riding in furiously from the desert.

Lower, lower the airplanes circled. Then a deafening roar sounded, and two of the houses crumbled bodily and seemed to disintegrate. A spire of fire shot heavenward and subsided into a cloud of dust.

ANOTHER bomb fell, tearing another house out of the huddle of stone structures on the plateau. The firing of the Arabs was growing wilder and feebler. The planes were circling lower.

And now the rattle of machine-guns broke out, as the pilots circled at an altitude of barely three hundred feet, pouring a stream of lead into the fleeing Arabs, without regard to age or sex. Here was a group of women, shot down in their tracks, riddled by a single blast. Children, running in terror from the houses, dropped, pierced through. All round the open space, where the elders had sat in conference, a ring of death had sprung into existence.

A line of horsemen, galloping in from the desert, came under the fire of the third plane, which swooped like a hawk upon them and cut them down as a scythe cuts grass.

Colin, appalled by the slaughter, could only stand and watch. He saw the elders, running frantically to and fro, swept by those fiery blasts, until only a bare half-dozen of them succeeded in finding shelter among the crags. The surprise had been complete. Within three minutes, the Beni-Islam were a mere scattered mob, a handful of survivors, scurrying away, like rabbits, into inaccessible hiding places.

But within a radius of three hundred yards of the princess' tent no bullet had fallen. It was evident that Hauptmann had determined to spare her, at least.

Why not, if she possessed the secret of the hiding place of the Peacock Throne?

She had come out of her tent, and stood in the open, staring at the scene of slaughter, her hands clenched, her body tense and

rigid, though no cry came from her lips.

Colin had moved toward her, and stood like a soldier at attention, waiting for what was to come. Beside him stood Issisarian, apparently paralyzed with fear, his face gray and his mouth open.

And Mirdouk stood there too, his head thrown back defiantly, a savage glitter in his dark eyes.

"The dogs!" he said. "Swine, to slaughter women and children! Never in all Arab history has such deviltry been known! And these are your Franks!" (Meaning foreigners.)

"They are not my tribe of Franks," Colin answered.

Mirdouk said nothing more. The rattle of the machine-guns had died away. The only sound now was the beast-like gasps of the Armenian. The four waited.

One of the planes was still circling the plateau, but the two others were descending, searching for a landing place. They found it, two hundred yards away, and dropped gracefully to the sterile surface. They taxied to a standstill, almost side by side.

They were commercial planes, of German or Austrian design, and had evidently come from the oil concession that Hauptmann's company had held. Each of them had a machine-gun at the nose, and a bombing rack, and each contained six men besides the pilot, two apiece in each of three wide cockpits. Each had two engines, whose roar had changed to a dull hum, and then grew silent, as the propellers ceased to revolve.

The occupants threw off their belts and stepped out. Nine of them were swarthy, hook-nosed men, who might have been Kurds or Afghans. They carried rifles, and in their belts gleamed silver-mounted knives and pistols. The two pilots were Europeans. And there was Hauptmann.

JEERING and cursing, the Afghans moved in a circle about the three men who stood beside the princess, levelling their rifles at them. Hauptmann stopped ten feet away, covering the group with his automatic.

"Well, we missed you at the club last night, Rayne," he said in his formal English. "Bliss won three rubbers. Everyone was wondering what had become of you. Come, drop that revolver on the ground! You are intelligent enough to understand the situation."

Before Colin could decide whether to comply or not, Mirdouk had launched himself at the three men like a tiger, knife in hand.

Hauptmann fired and Mirdouk dropped, blood streaming from his forehead. Hauptmann advanced, bent over the still writhing form, and kicked it.

"You see, Rayne, it is best to be sensible," he said. "Especially on account of Her Highness, the Princess."

But the princess had become transformed into a fury. She flung back her veil and burst into wild denunciation, then sprang at the German.

Issisarian sprang to life. He caught Fatima by the arms and dragged her back, shrieking in her ear until she sank down in frantic sobbing, and flung the veil over her face again. She lay at Hauptmann's feet, her body shaken with weeping.

Colin looked at the two pilots. Their square heads showed them to be Prussians or Lithuanians, and both were clothed in flying costume. He guessed that the two men had probably flown from some European station within the past day or two, in obedience to cabled instructions. Hauptmann had certainly laid his plans with consummate skill.

Hard-faced and middle-aged, Hauptmann and his men looked like men who had served through the Great War; their skill with bomb and machine-gun proved that sufficiently. Men who had become little more than automatons, and would obey any orders, so long as they got their money.

They showed no interest as they glanced at the corpses huddled on the ground. Death didn't interest them; they had seen too much of it.

"Well, Rayne, you see you've lost," said Hauptmann. "You know what we've come for. I'm not interested in you. I

don't want your death. And you're a pretty good bridge player, except for that absurd no-trumps convention you insist on using. As soon as I've got what I've come for, you can go back to the European Club, Rayne. I don't want your death upon my hands if I can help it, and I don't want international complications. I'd much rather beat you again at contract.

"But unless I get it, I'm afraid things are going to stack up badly for you." He glanced up at the sun, which was already dipping into the desert. "What's your decision, Rayne?" he asked.

Colin shrugged his shoulders. "You've credited me with more information than I possess, Herr Hauptmann," he answered. "Address yourself to Her Highness. I am merely an employee."

"Wait! Wait, gentlemen, please!" whined Issisarian. He began chattering to the princess in Arabic. She listened for a few moments, then leaped to her feet and flung her veil aside, her face alight with passionate indignation.

"Never, never shall I tell you!" she cried, in English.

HAUPTMANN laughed, and there was something grim and blood-curdling in that laugh of his. Colin realized he had not taken the man's measure properly during those bridge sessions at the club.

"I'll find a way of getting you to tell," said Hauptmann.

"I'll never tell you," cried Fatima, "though you tear the flesh from my body. It is the Shah's throne—the Shah's, the glory of my people. You have shot them down in cold blood, the women and the babies! See there!"

Fifty feet away lay the body of the elder with the henna-stained beard, riddled through and through with bullets; close beside it a huddle of dead women.

"There lies the only person save myself who knows the hiding place of the Throne, fool of a foreigner! And you have killed him. Now I care nothing. Shoot me or put me to the torture, but you shall never know!"

"Highness! Highness! He will kill us with the torture!" wailed the Armenian.

"I have said what I have said," the girl retorted. "Now let him do his worst!"

Hauptmann's face became demoniac. He turned to the two pilots.

"Take these three and place them in the sheik's house till morning," he said. "Put the girl in a separate room. And watch them, as you value your lives. By morning I think our princess will have experienced a change of heart. Or else you will discover that you know more than you thought, my friend Rayne!"

Hauptmann shouted instructions to the Afghans in their native Pushtu, and the yelling crowd closed in on him.

In the grip of the savage mountaineers, Colin felt all the indignity that a white man feels under such circumstances. But he was disarmed in a moment, and his mind, trained by experience with native races, warned him that resistance would be futile. Kicked and buffeted, and with the curses of his captors ringing in his ears, he was dragged across the open space to a house somewhat larger than the rest, and standing a little apart from them.

Stumbling over corpses and masses of fallen masonry, Colin was dragged away, with Issisarian in the grip of the mountaineers, and following in his wake. Glancing back, Colin saw Fatima struggling in Hauptmann's arms.

That was when he lost his head. He shot out his right and landed squarely upon the nose of one of the Beni-Israel, the blow badly jarring that member. And that moment would have been Colin's last, had not one of the two pilots leaped between him and the menacing knives, shouting at the top of his voice.

As it was, Colin went down under a shower of kicks and blows, and, half-stunned, was only vaguely aware of being dragged down a flight of stone steps and thrust, with Issisarian, into a cell-like room with iron-barred windows.

Then he felt the painful constriction of the ropes that were bound about his arms, legs and body, and the savage jeers

of his captors as they left him huddled up against a wall, half-conscious.

TORTURING thirst, torture of the ropes that cut into his flesh, persisted, and the wail of a voice that Colin dimly remembered.

Suddenly he found that his eyes were open. He was staring through a heavily-barred window into a flood of moonlight. The window was a little below the level of the ground, and in front of it stood a sentry, a rifle at his shoulder.

Colin was looking out upon the scene of the massacre. He saw the corpses still lying in heaps as they had fallen, and he could see two of the airplanes some distance away, in the open space where the elders had sat in council.

He tried to move, and found that the slightest movement produced agony in his cramped limbs. Furthermore, he was fastened firmly to an iron ring that was welded into a steel bar which, in turn, fitted firmly into the masonry of the building.

Most Arab houses are built on the same plan, and this one had evidently been the house of the chief of the Beni-Islam, and this room used for the guarding of prisoners taken in inter-tribal forays.

Colin heard himself moaning for water. He pulled himself together. The whining in the room, however, went on and on, and now, in the moonlight that came through the window, Colin could make out the figure of Issisarian, fastened in the same way to another ring on the opposite side of the room.

"Rayne! Rayne!" said the Armenian "O God, send me an angel to bear me back upon a cloud to Bridgeport, Connecticut!"

The absurdity of that cry brought Colin back wholly to himself. Bridgeport, Connecticut!

"Rayne, can you hear me?" mumbled the Armenian. "They are going to torture us at dawn, and then murder us, unless we tell them where the throne is hidden. I don't know, the princess would

never tell me. And she won't tell anyone but the Shah Reza Khan himself. What are we going to do?"

"Be quiet first of all, you fool!" said Colin, in a fierce whisper.

"I can't be tortured," whined Issisarian. "I'm an American citizen, and it's against the Constitution. If I die, it's going to be fighting for Old Glory."

"Well, you can pretend you're dying for Old Glory when they start cutting off our lips and noses," croaked Colin. "Now shut up!"

"But listen! You *must* listen! I've got a plan. Maybe I can make that fool of a woman tell where the throne is hidden, if they'd only give us a chance!"

"Yes?" asked Colin. "How?"

"I can handle her. I can tell her that Hauptmann is going to take the throne to the Shah, and that we were secretly helping him. Then he'll set the Sheik Ibrahim free. Ain't that a plan?"

"You poor fool, do you suppose Hauptmann is going to restore the throne to the Shah? Don't you know that the Peacock Throne was one of the spoils of the Mongols, captured by the Afghans, and captured by Persia later? Don't you see that Hauptmann himself is in the hands of that crew of his? They know all about the throne."

"But—"

"And do you suppose Hauptmann is going to take the throne back to Teheran, when he can make his getaway to any part of Europe with it in his plane?"

"But we can fool a woman. It's easy to fool a woman. She's in love with Ibrahim. So soft, so easy for a clever man like me to handle."

"By God, if you speak to me again, I'll come over there and strangle you!" Colin snarled.

Issisarian gulped, and began mumbling what were probably prayers. And Colin's fingers were working desperately at the knots in his ropes.

A SECOND Afghan sentry had joined the first in conversation outside the window. He peered through the bars, and

Colin lay inert upon the floor. There followed a muttered curse at the infidel, and then the two sentries separated and began to pace in front of the house.

Looking out into the moonlight, Colin saw that there were scattered corpses lying almost up to the entrance of the building, twisted into grotesque forms, just as they had fallen under the hail of bullets.

The sentry passed. Colin looked out again. Now he was sure of what he had suspected. *One of the bodies had changed position!*

It was that of a man wearing the Arab *djellaba*. He was lying on his stomach, and working his way inch by inch in the direction of the house.

But why toward the house, when the only faint chance of escape lay in working his way in the other direction, toward the crags? He might have had one chance in a hundred of getting away, if Hauptmann had not placed sentries there.

The sentry passed again, and again the man's body began to move. He was crawling forward on his stomach. Now he was at the edge of the shadows cast by the house. And Colin recognized him.

It was the man Mirdouk, his head clotted with blood, but very much alive and conscious. There was a knife between his teeth.

Colin put forth all his strength in the attempt to free himself. Suddenly, as if by a miracle, his ropes slipped. One glided over another to the knot that held them fast. And the knot was under Colin's hand.

He worked fast and furiously. Meanwhile, the sentry passed outside the window again, humming a love song of his native hills, unaware that the seemingly dead man lay outside the circle of the dead.

With bleeding fingers, Colin managed to untie the knot. The ropes slipped from him, and he was free. He lay still, feeling the blood prickle through his cramped arms and legs.

Mirdouk was on his stomach, up against the barred window. "Frank, is it thou?" he whispered. "I have a knife!"

"Go back and lie still," answered Colin. "I am free. If I could get out of this room—"

"In a few minutes the jailer comes to look at you, before the change of guard. Here, take this!"

The knife, a keen-edged Afghan dagger, was thrust into Colin's hand. In a moment Mirdouk was back at the edge of the circle of corpses, and lying inert, as the sentry passed again.

Colin waited. Minutes went by. Issisarian was still whining and muttering. Colin dared not tell him that he was free, but the blood was circulating in his limbs again. He stretched himself luxuriously, stood up against the darkness of the wall, where Issisarian could not see him; lay down again.

There sounded steps outside the door. It clicked open, and the jailer, a wild-looking Afghan with a tangled beard and goatskin coat, came into the room, a bunch of keys jangling at his waist. He approached Colin.

"Ha, dog of a Frank, tomorrow thou diest!" he chuckled. "Call upon Issa, the Frank God, to guard thee!"

"Water!" Colin moaned.

"No water for dogs like thee. May thy tongue rot in thine head, infidel!"

"Listen," Colin mumbled thickly. "I know where a treasure lies. Nay, bend over me, that Issisarian may not hear. I know a treasure—"

As the jailer bent over Colin, Colin's hands went round his throat.

WELL, it was over. No knife-thrust, which, unless struck truly, would have brought a cry that the sentinel outside would have heard. Nothing but Colin's lean, sinewy hands about the jailer's throat, a short and furious silent struggle in the dark, and Issisarian's whimpering moans. After that, the steady pressure upon the larynx until the gasping efforts to draw breath ceased, and the man lay, inert, at Colin's feet.

Colin arose, went over to Issisarian and cut his bonds. "Now stop that whimpering, or I shall slit your throat!" he said.

"Ask nothing. Follow me. If we are caught, yours shall be the first blood to be spilt. I swear it!"

Trembling, Issisarian tried to rise. Colin supported him till his limbs would function. Issisarian, frantic with fear, moved silently toward the open door. The outer door was slightly ajar.

Colin pushed Issisarian back into the shadows and went upstairs. He knew the *haremluk*, the room with the locked door. The second key opened it. Inside, seated propped up on some rugs, was the princess.

She uttered a gasp, cut short by Colin's whispered warning, then flung her veil across her face.

"Follow me, Highness," said Colin, in Persian. "There is just one chance of escaping—one in a thousand. You, a daughter of the Beni-Islam, are brave enough to take it."

Like a ghost, the princess followed Colin down the stairs. Colin marshalled her and the trembling Armenian just inside the open door of the house. He looked out. The sentry was just passing, trilling his love song of the hills. As he passed, Colin showed himself in the doorway for an instant, long enough for Mirdouk to see him. But he could no longer see Mirdouk.

Only a shadow, lying flat against the house, a shadow that was on its feet with a bound and had one hand at the Afghan's throat. There was only a hiss of escaping breath as the body slumped to the ground. Mirdouk arose and wiped his knife upon the sentry's robes, and replaced it in his belt. He dragged the body into the shadows, and in a few moments had stripped it of the goatskin coat and trousers. Casting his own *djellaba* over it, he hurled it among the pile of corpses at the edge of the clearing.

He slipped silently into the house. "You are free, brother? You have killed your man? That is well! He was a cursed Afghan dog." Mirdouk produced a water-bottle and offered it to Fatima, who shook her head. He proffered it to Colin, who took a deep draught and handed it to Issisarian. Mirdouk snatched the bottle away.

"Ah, you Christians!" he laughed softly. "Why give water when this man is about to die?"

"Die? I must live!" babbled Issisarian. "I am a true servant of Her Highness. I have charge of her affairs. I will serve you all my life. Trust me and spare me! Have I not been faithful?"

Colin seized Mirdouk's arm, whose hand held the gleaming dagger. "Why should he die?" he asked. "Is he not one of us?"

Mirdouk hesitated, then slowly replaced the knife in its sheath. "God grant your faith be not misplaced brother!" he answered. "If it is your will to spare this dog, so be it. Let him drink, then!"

Issisarian took a deep drink, emptying the flask. He looked in terror at Mirdouk, who, however, paid no further attention to him.

"Well, then, we must start," said Mirdouk. "The Valley of Ghosts lies not far distant, and, by Allah's mercy, we can reach it at dawn. There is a secret rendezvous in the hills, where the remnants of the Beni-Islam have fled, and there they keep horses and food, so as to have a place of refuge in case they are unable to defend their homes.

"Will the princess show us the place of the throne, so that we can deliver it to His Majesty the Shah, and save her lover's life?"

Colin spoke in Persian, and the little princess answered him.

"Yes," she said, "I trust you. I will show you the place where the throne is hidden, since the elders of my people have been massacred, and there remains no one but myself with whom the decision lies."

"Good!" answered Mirdouk. "Permit me to lead the way. In a short space of time, with Allah's mercy, the German shall find a greater surprise awaiting him than even the Peacock Throne."

Colin had no idea what he meant. But he followed Mirdouk in his stealthy movement outside the house, into the shadows.

THAT the man Mirdouk was an emissary of the Shah, Reza Khan, and that he knew more than he had seen fit to

reveal, Colin did not doubt, as he followed the Persian and the Princess, with Issisarian cringing at his heels.

But even though the quest brought them to the Peacock Throne, Colin did not see how they could hope to carry it out of the Tagatais, with Hauptmann's airplanes able to search out every nook and cranny.

Yet the Persian Mirdouk, with his soft laugh and iron courage, had somehow won Colin's confidence. He knew that this man could be relied upon, and he believed that he could not have found a better follower.

Silently the four crept out of the rear entrance of the house, hugging the shadows, and along the rear of the bombed buildings, picking their way over the masses of fallen masonry. Nothing was stirring, except a jackal or half-wild dog that had already begun its work upon the dead, and fled into the night.

The moon had dropped behind the heights of the Tagatais, leaving the greater part of the plateau shrouded in darkness. Two or three hundred yards away, however, lights showed, either upon the planes or from the interior of the little tent; but behind the houses there were no sentries, and beyond the last of the houses was a stretch of broken ground, with the lower crags of the foothills not far away.

Crouching for cover behind the rocks that strewed the plateau's edge, the four went forward. A rocky defile appeared. Suddenly Mirdouk uttered a hiss. An Afghan upon a camel was riding toward them.

The four flattened themselves among the rocks.

The trail that the rider was taking passed within a few yards of them. The camel was almost abreast of them when Mirdouk rose up and said something in the soft Pushtu tongue. The Afghan, startled, pulled in. He reached instinctively for his revolver.

"Brother," said Mirdouk, "I have a message for you."

He leaped, and once again the deadly dagger found the throat of its victim. Without the slightest sound, the Afghan tumbled from the beast's back, dead.

AT THE smell of the blood, the camel screeched, and turning, began to race across the plateau. "Now Allah be with us!" ejaculated Mirdouk, seizing the princess' hand.

The four raced into the defile, but as they reached it they heard the challenge of a sentry somewhere near Hauptmann's tent. A rifle-shot rang out.

But the four were in the defile now, the princess leading. She ran so fast that it was difficult even for Colin to keep up with her, while the squat Armenian panted at his heels, gasping and whining, and trying to clutch at his belt.

Then suddenly the princess swerved. She glanced back for an instant, then vanished in what looked like a tunnel among the rocks, almost concealed by some scrubby desert growth. Mirdouk followed her Colin was about to enter the tunnel when he saw Issisarian hesitating.

"It's a trap," babbled the Armenian. "Don't you see, those two are in a conspiracy to murder us! I'm not going into that place. Let's go back to Hauptmann and tell him—"

Colin grasped the squat little man by the arm and flung him forward into the tunnel. Groaning, Issisarian began to squirm his way forward, and Colin brought up the rear.

Their progress was slow, for the tunnel was completely dark, and it was only possible to progress by feeling their way forward with hands against the rocky walls. Stooping to avoid dashing out his brains against the rock roof overhead, Colin followed the other three.

Five minutes of this crawling progress, and suddenly a dim light became visible in the distance. It grew brighter, as a shaft of moonlight lit up the exit of the tunnel. There sounded a sharp, guttural challenge, and Colin heard Fatima's voice replying.

Then, suddenly, the four had emerged into a small valley among the rocks, in which a half-dozen men were gathered, rifles in hands—nearly all that remained of the Beni-Islam.

At the sight of the princess they dropped upon hands and knees in a profound

salaam. There followed a short colloquy, and then, escorted by the band, the four proceeded along another defile ending in a large cave, in front of which a fire was dimly burning.

Three women crouching over it looked up apathetically at the arrival of the little group, which went through into another valley beyond, no larger than a city block. But there was a lush grass in it, and a purling stream ran through it, and a dozen horses were grazing.

"Allah be praised!" Mirdouk exclaimed. "By dawn we shall be in the valley of ghosts, and in possession of the treasure!"

THEY had saddled the horses and crammed cakes of barley meal into the saddle-pockets. They had slung a small goatskin of water over Issisarian's saddle, and each of the three men had taken a Mannlicher rifle and fifty rounds of ammunition from a store in the cave. They were on their way again, through an endless succession of defiles, riding at the steady lope of the Persian pony, over a land as bare and flinty as any that they had traversed.

Then, of a sudden, the cliff walls fell back and the mountains opened out, showing an expanse of undulating country, still flinty, but with low desert shrubs dotting the plain. Mirdouk reined in and pointed eastward.

"Now I know where we are," he said to Colin. "This is the eastern entrance to the Tagatais. Brother, had you consulted me, I could have told you that it is an easier route than across the Great Salt Desert, even though it be a little longer."

"Had I known you, I should have sought your leadership, Mirdouk," responded Colin.

Mirdouk replied with one of his soft bursts of disconcerting laughter. He was shading his eyes from the moon and staring eastward across the undulating country. And, looking at him, Colin wondered again what his mission was.

If, as he had said, he was an emissary of Reza Khan, what part was the Shah playing in the tortuous conflict to which

he had committed himself in these hills?

One thing he knew—he had never met a man who impressed him more with the qualities of leadership than this soft-spoken Persian, whose courage was proof against all danger, whose dagger-thrusts were swifter and surer than the snake's spring.

Fatima moved her horse to Mirdouk's side and pointed northward. She spoke a few words that Colin did not overhear.

"The Princess *hanum* speaks truly," said Mirdouk. "By dawn we must be in the valley of ghosts." And he kicked his horse's flanks.

The dawn wind had come up. The glow of the moon was fading, and a sepulchral twilight enveloped the land. Only a single planet still burned in the black sky above. The dawn was breaking with the swiftness of those latitudes, and the three were still in open country.

But a spur of the Tagatais extended down to the plain, only a mile or two ahead. Mirdouk quickened his pace, and the three put their horses to a gallop, following him, the Armenian bumping in his saddle like a bag of oats and whining dismally as each jar shook his fat body.

It was almost light when another defile disclosed itself, running into a rocky canyon that seemed to stretch out without end. The walls rose so high that they seemed almost to form an archway overhead. And again Mirdouk reined in.

"The valley of ghosts!" he said to Colin.

At that moment they heard the faint, droning sound of a distant airplane. Mirdouk seized the princess' horse and set it at a gallop beside his own. In another moment they were hidden from view within the canyon, and Colin followed them.

The canyon walls would conceal them from those in the plane. But the question was whether Hauptmann had found the secret tunnel beyond the plateau. Motionless upon their motionless steeds, the three waited, looking upward.

Presently the plane came into view, followed by another. The two were circling

at an altitude of perhaps eight thousand feet, mere specks, like vultures, against the brightening sky. But whether or not the tunnel had been found, it was evident that Hauptmann's pilots were not on the trail of the fugitives, for the planes droned away again into the distance.

SO INTENT had the three been on watching them that none of them had thought of Issisarian. Suddenly an oath broke from Mirdouk's lips.

"Where is he, that son of a she-jackal?" he shouted.

He rowelled his horse to the entrance of the canyon. Nine hundred yards away appeared the figure of Issisarian, bent double over his horse's back, and driving it remorselessly along the way they had come.

"Shoot, brother, shoot!" cried Mirdouk. "May Allah forgive me that I suffered the dog to live, at your behest! He has ridden hot-footed to betray us to the German!"

Even as he spoke, he had whipped his rifle from the sling about his neck, and, leaning forward upon his horse, fired. Colin followed suit. But Issisarian was too far away. The sun had suddenly appeared, flooding the land with light, but blinding their aim. Colin could see dust-spurts kicked up by the bullets around the fleeing man, but Issisarian drove his horse on and on, until an undulation of the land hid him from sight.

Quietly Mirdouk refilled his magazine, and slung the rifle about his chest again. "That was the will of Allah," he said in Persian, addressing both Colin and Fatima. "But have no fear. Allah protects us, and Hauptmann shall still have a surprise on which he has not reckoned. Ah, the dog, the traitor!"

"Did I not tell you, my lord, to cut his throat before we started?" asked Fatima.

"You told me so, Princess *hanum*, and never before have I failed to follow a woman's judgment, when my own was set on the same path," Mirdouk replied. "Now we must ride fast."

He swung about in the saddle and smiled into Colin's eyes. Hardened by his years

in Persia, used to men, knowing the cheapness of protestations of friendship, Colin was yet conscious of some magnetic quality radiating from his companion, something that lifted him above the fear of the future.

He spurred his horse in the wake of Mirdouk and the princess, along the canyon, which seemed to grow higher constantly, between sheer walls that shut out the risen sun and left the riders in a dim twilight.

THE trail was wide, despite the height of the walls, which seemed to dwarf it. It might have been as wide as a city street. It was level too, and strewn with flints. For two miles or more they galloped.

Then, of a sudden, the trail ended. In front of them rose an impassable cliff, effectively blocking it. There was no possible egress. Colin realized that they had ridden into a *cul-de-sac*; a blind alley that would leave them wholly at the mercy of Hauptmann and his men, when they arrived.

He looked at Mirdouk. The Persian's face was wholly impassive. If he realized the desperate nature of their predicament, his expression failed to show it.

There was a large opening at the base of the cliff that shut them in. For a moment Colin hoped that this might be another tunnel such as they had passed through, leading to freedom. His face must have showed his thoughts, for Mirdouk said softly:

"Not that way does escape lie, brother."

"Where, then?" asked Colin.

"From Allah!"

He vaulted from his horse, and held his hand for Fatima's foot as she descended. They led the three horses, which were already sweat-covered from their gallop, into a deep depression in the ground at the base of the cliff, removed saddles and bridles quickly, and linked the animals together by their halters. Fatima spoke softly, and Mirdouk started.

"By heaven," he cried, "we placed the waterskin upon the saddle of the Armenian! For that he shall die by slow torture, with eyeless eyes facing the sun!"

Colin felt the parching thirst of the Persian desert already beginning to dry his body. It was still cool in the canyon, but he had drunk only half the contents of the water-bottle, relinquishing the rest to Issisarian.

But Fatima had moved quickly into the opening in the cliff. Colin could see now that it was barely a few feet deep; he could see the cliff wall rise at the farther end of it.

A mound of sand, blown from somewhere, had apparently accumulated against it. Fatima pointed eagerly, and Mirdouk, without more ado, began shoveling it away with his hands.

Colin fell to with the Persian, while Fatima watched them, uttering little cries from time to time. The sharp sand tore into the quick of Colin's nails, but it was amazing how quickly the two were able to shovel it away. For something like twenty minutes they worked, until the sand that they had cast behind them lay a foot deep all over the cavern.

Mirdouk had lost his stoicism. He was working like a madman, and muttering as he did so. Once he paused to wipe the sweat out of his eyes, then went on again.

Then Colin's hand struck something.

A MOMENT later Mirdouk uttered a louder cry. Something was hidden in that heap of sand. And Colin knew that the wild story, in which he had never quite believed, was true.

He knew it when a rich gleam caught his eyes, when the legs and base of the throne came into sight. Then the rock curved back, showing the two peacocks, wings extended in a lustre of blazing emeralds that seemed to light up the little cavern.

And now it stood clear to view in the midst of the sand piled up about it—the Peacock Throne, spoil of the Mongols, the glory of India, of Afghanistan, and of Persia, a mass of scintillating gems that was worth perhaps as much as all the jewels in the rest of the world put together. A treasure more splendid than had ever been assembled in the whole history of

man, because a thousand years had gone into the assembling of it.

For centuries it had been fought for. Blood had been poured out in torrents for it, wars had been waged for it, and the splendor and magnificence of the glittering trophy left Colin staring at it, mute with amazement.

"So the quest is ended!"

Mirdouk looked at Colin, a sardonic expression on his face. He was once more cool and self-possessed. Fatima stood near him, the double veil drawn across her face. Colin, glancing from the one to the other, had suddenly the impression that some intimate understanding existed between them. They were in possession of some secret, some clue to the situation, of which Colin had no knowledge.

The irony of it sent a little spurt of anger through Colin's mind. What was the use of the Peacock Throne, when they three were hopelessly entrapped in that blind alley among the mountains; with Issisarian already, no doubt, in communication with Hauptmann, and the arrival of the planes a foregone conclusion?

Was Mirdouk mad with exultation at having found the treasure, so that he was incapable of facing the situation?

A little ray of sunlight flickered on the wall of the canyon and seemed to cling to it. With a feeling of despair Colin looked at the steep cliffs on either side. No, there was no way out, and even if they abandoned the treasure and sought to escape, death awaited them in the open land beyond the defile.

The horses, standing patiently in the hollow beneath, glistened with sweat. It was hot even there in the canyon, and there was no water for man or beast.

"Yes," Colin answered, "the quest is ended. And our lives too, I think. Of what use is the throne to a dead man?"

"The plans of Allah are inscrutable," responded Mirdouk calmly. "So, in the meantime, let us build a wall of stones that will afford protection against Hauptmann's machine-guns. Behind that, you and I can fight. A man's fight, brother, and, if Allah wills, a man's death!"

Colin saw the slow inclination of Fatima's head. She seated herself upon the pile of sand within the cave. Motionless, she watched while the two men set about their work.

HUGE stones, that had fallen from the tops of the cliffs, lay everywhere. Colin and Mirdouk stripped off their bur-nooses and set to work. Within a half-hour they had assembled a barrier of great rocks in front of the cave and about the depression in which the horses were standing.

On top of these they placed smaller stones, Colin handing them to the Persian, who put them in position, ranging from one end of the wall to the other. The breastwork was already three feet high when the faint droning of the planes began to be heard.

The two men stopped work and listened. Nearer, nearer, louder, and now directly overhead, until the three planes came into sight.

They were flying high up above the canyon, perhaps six thousand feet, and they were moving in a close formation, examining every foot of it. There was no doubt but that Issisarian had already informed Hauptmann as to the exact location of the fugitives.

Now the planes were immediately above the cave. In the half-darkness, it might have been possible for the three figures to have escaped observation. But Mirdouk leaped forward and, with rifle at his shoulder, emptied his magazine into the sky.

The planes circled and vanished. They came back. There sounded the roar of an exploding bomb, and a mass of rock detached itself from one side of the canyon and dropped into the defile.

A second bomb exploded harmlessly upon the top of one of the cliffs. A third struck one side and then another, sending a shower of rock splinters flying.

Mirdouk laughed exultantly. "Not thus can they destroy us, brother!" he cried.

Colin saw that that was true. Only by a miracle could the bombers have hoped



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to hit the cave, almost concealed beneath the overhanging cliff. The rock wall that the two had built was practically unassailable from above.

The bombers evidently realized this too, for three more bombs fell wildly, as if dropped in desperation, and not one of them even reached the canyon.

The planes vanished, droning away into the distance.

"Build higher, brother!" shouted Mirdouk gaily. "Two feet more, and we are secure against their machine-guns! They will come this way." He pointed along the defile.

AGAIN the two men set to work. Colin's arms were almost numbed under the strain of the heavy stones, and his body was drenched with sweat, but the wall was growing. Nothing short of artillery could have demolished it now. It must have been nearly five feet high when the sound of the planes was heard again at the end of the canyon.

Mirdouk set the last stone into place. "That is well done," he said. "Now we can have a man's fight. And trust in Allah, who is veritably your own God. In His good time he will send His messengers to aid us."

The thought then flashed through Colin's mind that Mirdouk had gone mad. But Mirdouk was already resuming his white *djellaba*, and Colin followed suit. He took his rifle, made a pile of cartridges upon the ground, and crouched down beside Mirdouk, waiting.

There was not long to wait, for the drone of the planes was growing louder, though he could tell from the engines' sound that they had been throttled down. And suddenly the three planes came into sight, one behind another, at a bend of the defile.

They were gliding slowly over the ground, moving toward the cavern. A masked and hooded pilot in the nose of each bent over his machine-gun. In the rear cockpits sat the Afghans.

A hundred yards away, where one of the cliffs jutted out into the canyon, the three planes came to a rest.

A white flag fluttered. A man stepped out of the foremost plane and strolled nonchalantly toward the barricade. He held his hands open, showing that he had no weapon. It was Hauptmann.

A brave man, perhaps, but he knew the chivalry of the Persian nature, and he knew that Colin would not fire upon him. He halted fifty feet away. Suddenly he began to rock with laughter.

Mirdouk's soft laughter answered his. It was an amazing thing to see those two men laughing, Hauptmann standing in the defile, and Mirdouk leaning over the top of the stone barrier.

"Why do you laugh?" came the soft accents of the Persian.

"It's funny!" Hauptmann answered in the Persian language, but addressed Colin in English. "You made a good play, Rayne," he said. "I don't know how you did it, or who your friend is. But this looks like the end of you."

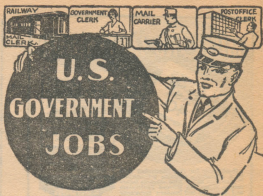
"I know the throne is in that cave behind you. This place tallies exactly with the description I had, though I didn't know the location. Now I'm offering terms. The throne, and nothing but the throne. I'll guarantee your lives, the three of you. You can go to the devil!" he snarled. "What's it to be?"

"What says he?" inquired Mirdouk of Colin, who translated Hauptmann's message. And Mirdouk laughed again, but there was a new note in his laughter, a little note of triumph.

"There are three sorts of laughter, brother," he said. "There is the laughter of men when they jest with one another. And there is the laugh of a woman when she loves. And the third laughter is that of a fool, as thorns that crackle under the pot, the laugh of a fool whose eyes Allah hath blinded, so that he shall not see his approaching end."

"What shall I tell him?" Colin asked. "I don't believe that he will kill us if he can avoid it. My government would learn of my death, and its arm would reach out and find him, wherever he fled."

Mirdouk put his hand on Colin's shoulder and looked steadily into his eyes.



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"Now I see," he answered, "it is for the sake of the Princess *hanum* that you have spoken thus, and not because you are afraid of death. But I acquit you of responsibility for what may happen to her. Shall we two not fight a man's fight here with this German and those Afghan dogs?"

He turned to Hauptmann. "Go back, you foreign dog!" he cried. "We fight! Go back, for the doom which Allah hath prescribed for you is already at hand!"

"Is that your word, Rayne?" cried Hauptmann. "Then there will be no mercy!"

"That's my word, Hauptmann," answered Colin.

And, as it seemed to him, Mirdouk had chosen certain death for the three of them.

HAUPTMANN had hardly reached his plane before the storm of lead began to break against the rocky walls of their barricade. The second and third planes, moving into echelon formation, until they filled the defile, let loose blast after blast from the machine-guns, and the echoes rolled upward and reverberated from cliff to cliff, with deafening sound.

But the outburst died away as quickly as it had begun. Hauptmann had evidently seen that to waste bullets against the wall was folly. The wall reached almost to the height of the roof of the cavern in which the throne was concealed. New tactics must be brought into use.

The Afghans had taken cover somewhere in the defile, only the tops of the heads of the pilots, at the machine-guns, were visible, and to pick off any of these meant exposing oneself to an immediate fusillade. Colin saw Mirdouk scooping out a loophole between two stones with his dagger, saw him thrust his rifle inside and put his eye to the hindsight.

The crack of the rifle followed. A fragment of wood flew from the fuselage of the leading airplane, and the pilot let loose another blast. Another crack, and the bullet clanged upon the steel shield of the machine-gun, behind which the gunner was now crouching, invisible.

Mirdouk had handed Colin his dagger, and Colin, finding an opening between two stones, was working desperately to make himself a loophole. Again the firing had died away. The fight seemed to be resolving into a stalemate.

But Colin was faint from want of water, and there seemed to be but one end to it.

The horses, terrified by the fusillade, were milling round and round in a ring. Halters snapped, and the beasts rushed aimlessly to and fro behind the barricade. Another blast of lead swept the barrier, over which the horses' heads and shoulders had come into view. The three dropped, instantly dead, piled up close beside the spot where Colin and Mirdouk were crouching.

And now Hauptmann seemed to have decided upon new tactics, for he was no longer wasting lead against the barricade of stones, but sending a continuous fusillade just over the top of it, the bullets striking the roof of the cave behind, and ricocheting backward and forward from the walls.

The Persian turned and shouted to Fatima, who moved closer to him, out of immediate danger, and seated herself again, a veiled and shrouded, silent figure, at his side. With full clips in their magazines, Colin and Mirdouk waited for the attack that was evidently coming.

They had not long to wait. Suddenly the forms of a dozen Afghans came into view, and as the fusillade ceased for a few moments, they dashed forward, swords in hands, uttering wild cries:

"Allah! Allah! Ya-Allah-ah-ah!"

But the attack crumbled within thirty paces, for Colin and Mirdouk were emptying their magazines, and four of the twelve lay writhing among the flints that strewed the ravine, while the remaining eight turned tail and ran. Yells of defiance and fury came back to the defenders.

The storm of lead that followed exceeded all that had gone before it in fury. It pattered like hail against the barricade, and sent chips of stone flying from the roof of the cave everywhere.

Colin and Mirdouk, passive under that

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storm, thrust fresh clips into their magazines, and waited.

FIVE or ten minutes passed. The Afghans came into view again. They were no longer running, but worming their way forward upon their stomachs, and each of them, as he moved, pushed a great boulder in front of him, shielding his head effectively. Meanwhile, the blasts from the machine-guns continued.

Colin fired constantly, trying to pick off their assailants, but his bullets only rebounded from the stones which the Afghans pushed before them, and the Afghans were coming steadily on. They were only a few feet away now. Suddenly the drumming of the machine-guns ceased. And with that, leaping from behind the protection of the stones, the Afghans charged toward the barricade.

"Allah! Ya-Allah!"

Huge mountaineers, with hawk noses and black-bearded faces distorted by fanaticism and fury, they came swarming forward, trying to get a footing upon the stones. In their hands they carried the great, curved, deadly yataghans, one sweep of which will send a man's head whirling from his body.

Colin withdrew his rifle from the loophole and emptied it into the charging mass. One man toppled over dead, struck by every bullet in the magazine. Then Colin and Mirdouk were fighting with clubbed weapons, and parrying the Afghans' furious blows.

Rifles crashed on heads and sent men reeling. A sword-sweep grazed Colin's temples, missing the head by a matter of an inch. That man was down. But five of the Afghans had come leaping over the barricade, and the deadly fight went on.

They were at too close quarters for the Afghans to use their swords now. Colin was striking out with his fists. A dagger-thrust ripped his wrist, and he sent the man whirling over among the dead horses by a blow to the jaw. He saw Mirdouk fighting against three men who were circling him with daggers, and thrust himself against them. One of them staggered back,

roaring with pain as Colin's fist smashed his nose to a pulp. As the second struck at Mirdouk, the Persian leaped, a cry of exultation breaking from his lips, and his dagger clove the Afghan's head almost from his shoulders.

And suddenly, with a scream of fury, the veiled princess had sprung to life, and her own dagger pierced the third man through the body.

He reeled backward, yelping, and Mirdouk's sword found his throat.

"God be merciful to you, brother!" said the Persian, with his soft laugh.

Two men were running, three were crawling back. Colin pulled Mirdouk down just as the furious rattle of the machine-guns began again. They crouched, panting, behind the barricade. They had beaten off the attack, but death was still before them; death awaited them, slow but sure. Colin's strength was all but gone, and, half-dead from want of water, he could only crouch, rifle to loophole, waiting until the swimming gorge went out in blackness and Hauptmann reaped the fruits of his scheme.

He felt Mirdouk's hand on his shoulder, and pulled himself together.

"Be strong, brother," said the Persian. "Now is our hour of victory. Do you not hear?"

Colin listened. The fire of the machine-guns had once more ceased. And out of the distance came a strange clanking sound, like nothing Colin had ever heard before.

Then, through the clanking, Colin could hear the harsh droning of an internal combustion engine. It sounded like a giant plane, except that it seemed to be upon the ground.

There was confusion among the planes at the bend of the defile. They began frantically trying to back or turn. Two of them collided with each other, and one collapsed in ruin against the side of the cliff.

The clanking sound grew louder, mingled with the crunch of flints and a churning, as if some monster was working its way along the ravine. Then it came



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Half-blinded by the rolling clouds of smoke, Colin was only half-aware of Mirdouk grasping him by the arm and drawing him from behind the shelter of the stones.

"Said I not that we were in the hands of Allah, brother?" he asked, laughing softly. "Verily, gentlemen, this foreigner is a man, but for whose aid I should no longer be what I am."

Colin found himself looking into the faces of two men wearing the uniforms of officers of the Persian army. In the ravine behind, a dozen Persian soldiers were attempting to approach the wreckage of the planes, from which dense clouds of smoke were still rolling.

Mirdouk was smiling into Colin's face with frank friendliness.

"If I deceived you, brother," he said, "it was perhaps in order that I might test your qualities of manhood. Or perhaps it was such a jest such as Reza Khan is said to love. For even before the expeditions started, it had been arranged that the Germans should be trapped in this ravine, although its exact location was unknown to me. Hence the delay, which would have cost Persia her ruler, but for your valor."

"You are Reza Khan, the Shah!" Colin exclaimed.

"I am Reza Khan, the Shah, who rose to the position from stable boy, by Allah's will," replied the Shah with composure. "A man who is incapable of settling matters of state, and relies upon his counsellors!"

He grasped Colin's hand. "But think no more of that," he smiled. "Is there a ruler upon earth of whom such legends are not bruited abroad? Thanks to you,

brother, the Peacock Throne is once more in the hands of Persia's ruler, and with it, the power and the glory that were ours in the olden times."

Two soldiers approached, with a third man between them, a shuffling, cringing form that dragged its feet along the ground as it moved. Through the clouds of thick smoke Colin recognized Issisarian.

THE wretched man broke into piteous whining as he was led up to Reza Khan. In an instant the Shah's whole demeanor had changed. Fire flashed from his eyes, his face grew more cruel than any that Colin had seen.

"Ah, this dog of a traitor! Where was he found?" Reza Khan asked.

"He was found trying to flee," replied one of the two officers, "and, knowing who he was, we brought him with us, to learn His Majesty's orders with regard to him."

"Cut off his eyelids, nose, and lips, and place him bound on a high peak, where he may watch tomorrow's sunrise. And let a man stay beside him till he dies."

Issisarian collapsed, a moaning, shuddering heap. Colin intervened.

"Sir, if I have, as you say, deserved anything at your hands," he said, "I ask this man's life and freedom as my reward. In time of victory, the greatest kings always show mercy."

Reza Khan scowled and muttered. "It cannot be!" he cried. "The dog would have betrayed us all! No punishment could be too great. Were I not merciful, as you say, I would have ordered such tortures as make his death seem a boon by comparison!"

Issisarian set up another piteous whine for mercy. He tried to crawl to the Shah's knees to clasp them, but one of the officers intervened with a kick that sent him grovelling back.

"Nevertheless, I still ask this favor," persisted Colin. "Can a man change the nature of the jackal or the hyena? Give me his life as my reward."

"Ah, you Franks, you Franks!" burst out the Shah. "Is this the secret of your power, that you show this pity which we

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Moslems cannot understand? Well, then, I give you this dog's life—and this is the hardest thing that has ever been asked of me!

"Take him away, and see that I never set eyes upon his accursed face again," he ordered one of the officers. "Let him be conducted to the northern border and set free, under penalty of death if he ever return to Persia. Now are you content, my friend?" he added, as Issisarian clasped Colin's knees and began babbling his gratitude. "Good! Then bring him whom I ordered you to bring with you!"

THE little princess had been standing throughout the interview, like a small, shrouded column of black. Colin noticed an imperceptible movement on her part, however, as Reza Khan spoke.

The two officers departed toward the wreckage, whose clouds of smoke were beginning to die down. Colin stood beside Reza Khan, who was still frowning. Evidently the release of Issisarian rankled sorely. He spoke not a word, and silently the three waited until one of the officers came back, with another man, a slight and boyish figure, wearing a white bur-noose and the headpiece of an Arab ruler.

"Ah!" came from Fatima's lips. Her figure leaned forward for an instant, and her arms were extended beneath the robe; then she resumed her former attitude.

Colin looked at the younger man. He appeared to be about twenty years of age, there was a slight growth of black beard about his lips. His face was pallid, as if from confinement.

Reza Khan was smiling. "Ibrahim ben Osman, of the Beni-Hassan, you see now that Reza Khan keeps his word," he said. "I have restored you to liberty, in accordance with the compact that I made with the Princess *hanum*. Tomorrow you shall be installed as ruler of the Beni-Islam, and shall, in return, pay fealty to me as overlord and Shah-in-Shah.

"But I have such news for you as will gladden your ears. I shall select for you a bride from among the royal family of Persia, and shall promote you to a post

of honor at my palace. For it is my intention to make the Princess *hanum* my fourth and most favored wife."

He looked benignantly upon the young sheik, Ibrahim, as if he had just announced the most pleasing news in the world. But the princess uttered a cry, and throwing back her two veils, flung herself at the Shah's feet.

"My lord, you will not—you cannot!" she cried. "Rather would I thrust my dagger through my heart than be parted from Ibrahim, whom I have loved since childhood. Ah, lord, I am nothing to you. See my face, which I have shamelessly unveiled before you. The Shah-in-Shah cannot take to himself a woman whom he has seen unveiled, nor one so lowly as I, an Arab girl from the desert. Give me to Ibrahim, lord, and we shall bless your name for ever!"

Reza Khan started, his face grew thunderous. He glared at Fatima, who promptly flung her veils about her face again, and sank down, sobbing, at his feet.

He turned to the young sheik. "Well, Ibrahim ben Osman, what sayest thou?" he asked.

"I say," replied the young man boldly, "that sooner than lose this woman whom I have always loved, I would plunge my knife through her heart, and then through mine."

There was no gentleness in the Shah's laugh now. "That is well said," he answered, "for Reza Khan cannot be mocked by a youth and a maiden. Draw your dagger, then, and plunge it through her heart."

The shrouded girl rose and deliberately began unwrapping the heavy robes that covered her. Ibrahim drew a dagger from its sheath and moved toward her.

Then Colin, with a cry, tried to spring between them. But the Shah's hand caught his in a grip of steel.

"Let them be," he said. "Strike, Ibrahim, and strike hard and truly!"

The youth raised his arm, drew back the dagger. In another moment it would have struck home to Fatima's heart.

Then suddenly Reza Khan released his hold of Colin, and catching the sheik's dagger-hand, adroitly twisted it, so that the weapon flew through the air and dropped on the other side of the stone barricade.

"Go together in peace, my children," he said. "Perchance this, too, was one of Reza Khan's famous jests. Perchance I only wished to test you. And perchance not," he added, but in so low a tone that only Colin could hear. "No, no thanks. Go together, and trouble me no more, for I have weighty matters on my mind."

THE dawn was brightening in the eastern sky when Reza Khan and Colin reined in at the entrance to the defile.

Northward extended the open country beyond the Tagatais, a stony waste that stretched for twenty miles or so, but beyond that, Colin knew, was the fertile terrain of northern Persia, and the stout little horse would easily carry him across the wilderness before the heat of the sun became insufferable.

"This is farewell, brother," said Reza Khan, in his soft Persian. "We have met, we have loved each other, we have fought together, and now we must part. That is the way of men." He pressed a purse into Colin's hand, laughed at his hesitation. "This gold, and the few jewels that you will find therein, are a small recompense for what Reza Khan owes you, brother."

"I have given you two things besides—the life of that dog, and the Princess hanum's desires. Are not these greater gifts?"

"Yet there is one thing more. When you reach your destination, tell your company that Reza Khan and the *Mejliss* have decided that the concession which they have sought is theirs. And now may Allah guide you, brother."

Wheeling his horse without another word, he spurred back into the defile.

For a half-minute Colin sat watching, until horse and rider had disappeared from sight. Then he kicked his steed in the flanks and started on his journey northward.

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STATEMENT OF THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, CIRCULATION, ETC., REQUIRED BY THE ACT OF CONGRESS OF AUGUST 24, 1912, AND MARCH 3, 1933 OF FIVE NOVELS, published monthly at New York, N. Y., for Oct. 1, 1938.

State of New York, County of New York, ss.

Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared Helen Meyer, who having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that she is the Business Manager of FIVE NOVELS, and that the following is, to the best of her knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management, etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Act of March 3, 1933, embodied in section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form, to wit:

1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business manager are: Publisher, George T. Delacorte, Jr., 149 Madison Ave., New York, N. Y.; Editor, Florence A. McChesney, 149 Madison Ave., New York, N. Y.; Managing Editor, None; Business Manager, Helen Meyer, 149 Madison Ave., New York, N. Y.
2. That the owner is: Dell Publishing Company, Inc., 149 Madison Ave., New York, N. Y.; George T. Delacorte, Jr., 149 Madison Ave., New York, N. Y.; Margarita Delacorte, 149 Madison Ave., New York, N. Y.

3. That the known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 per cent or more of the total amounts of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: None.

4. That the two paragraphs next above, giving the names of the owners, stockholders, and security holders, if any, contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders as they appear upon the books of the company but also, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting, is given; also that the said two paragraphs contain statements embracing affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner; and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association, or corporation has any interest direct or indirect in the said stock, bonds, or other securities than as so stated by her.

HELEN MEYER

(Signature of Business Manager)

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 20th day of September, 1938.

ALFREDA R. COLE

Notary Public, Nassau Co. 1849, Certificate filed in New York County, N. Y. County Clerk's No. 858, Reg. 8C818

(My commission expires March 30, 1940)

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