FIVE-NOVELS MONTHLY

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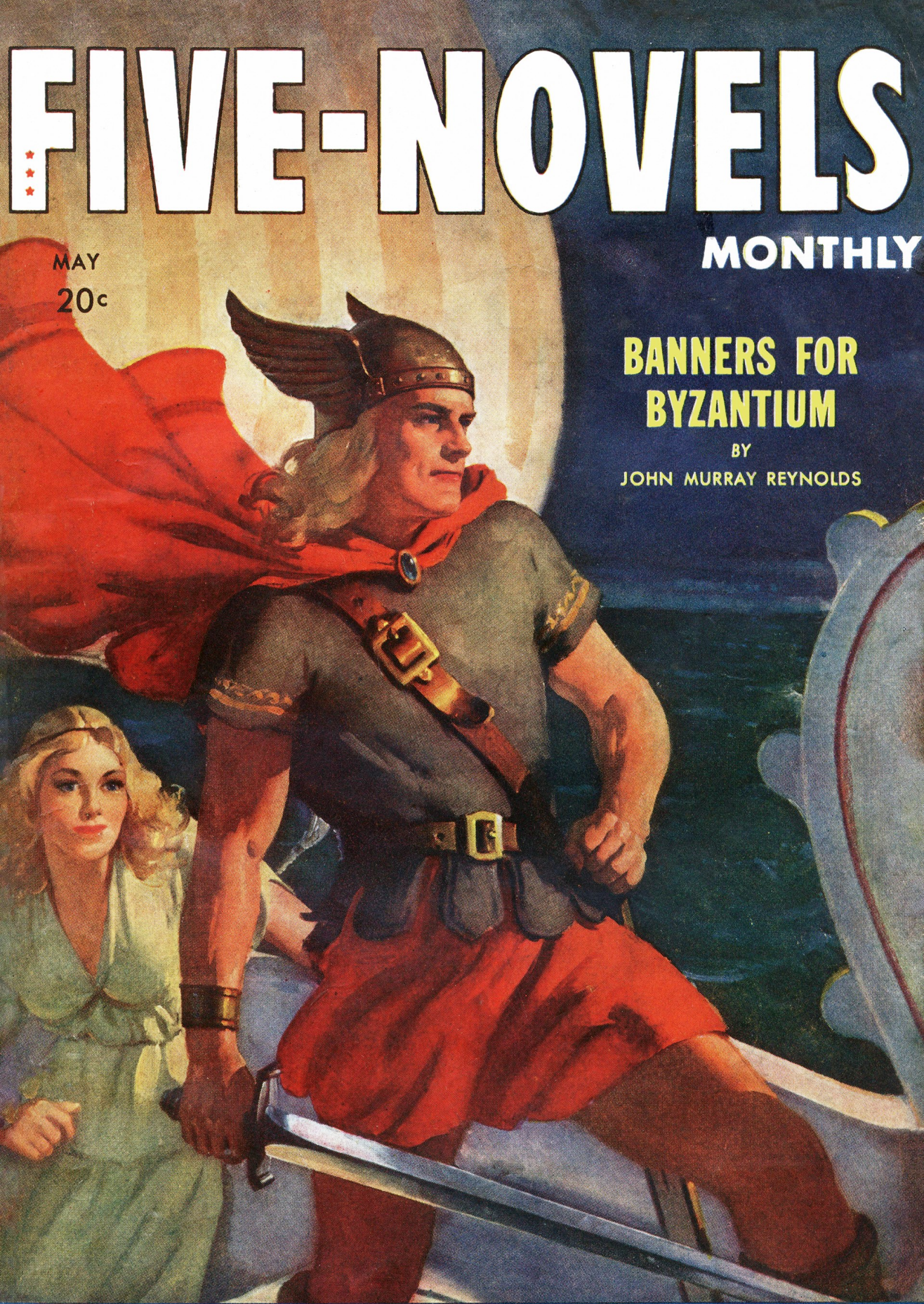


BANNERS FOR BYZANTIUM

BY
JOHN MURRAY REYNOLDS

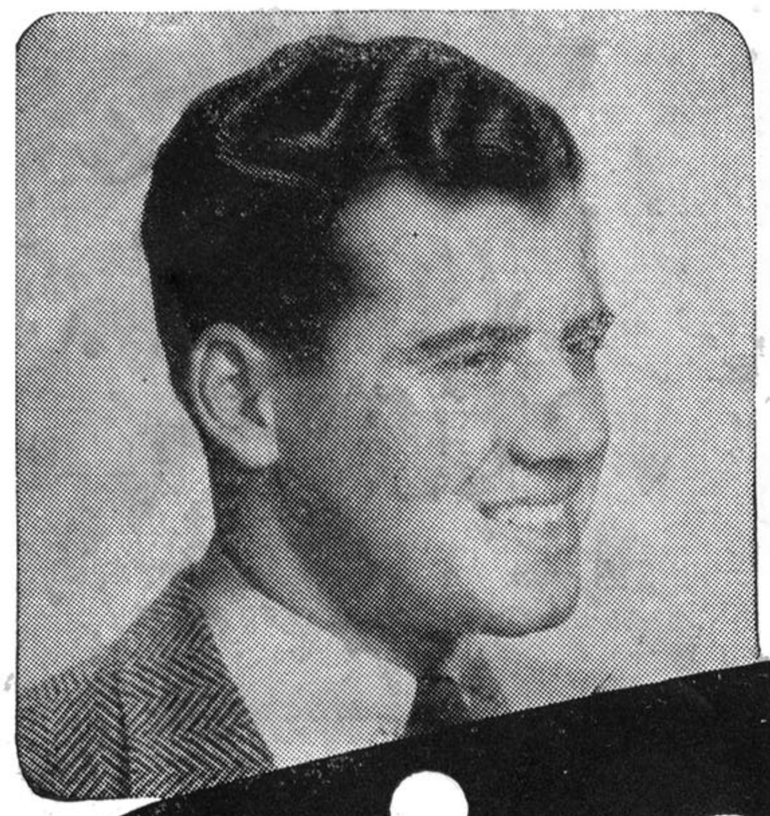
THE NEBRASKA KID

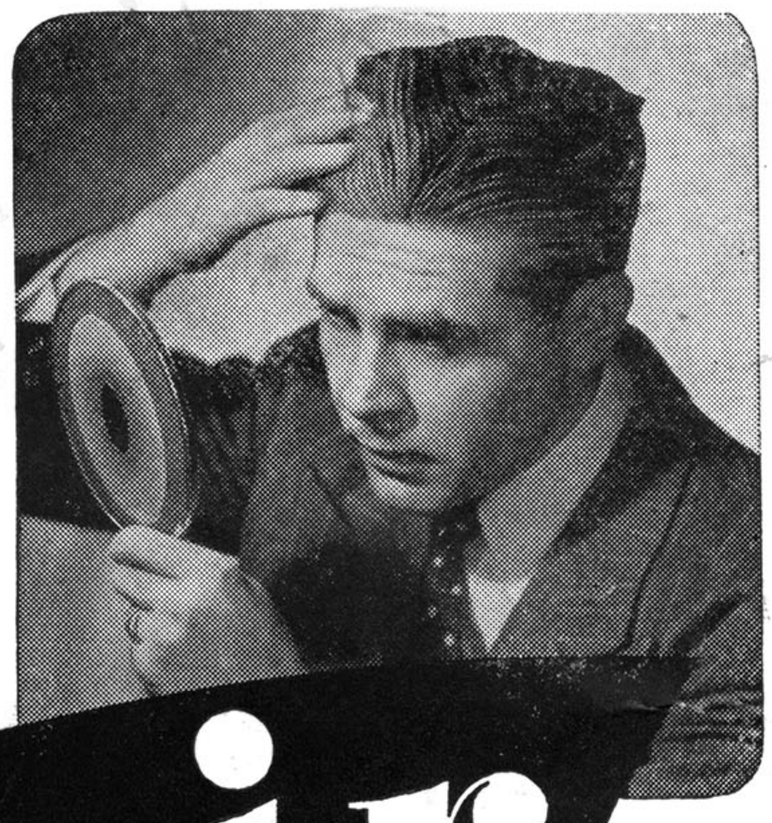
BY CORNELIUS MORGAN

HANGMAN'S LOOP

BY EDWARD S. WILLIAMS

EXACTLY THE SAME AGE—YET...
ONE LOOKS YEARS YOUNGER





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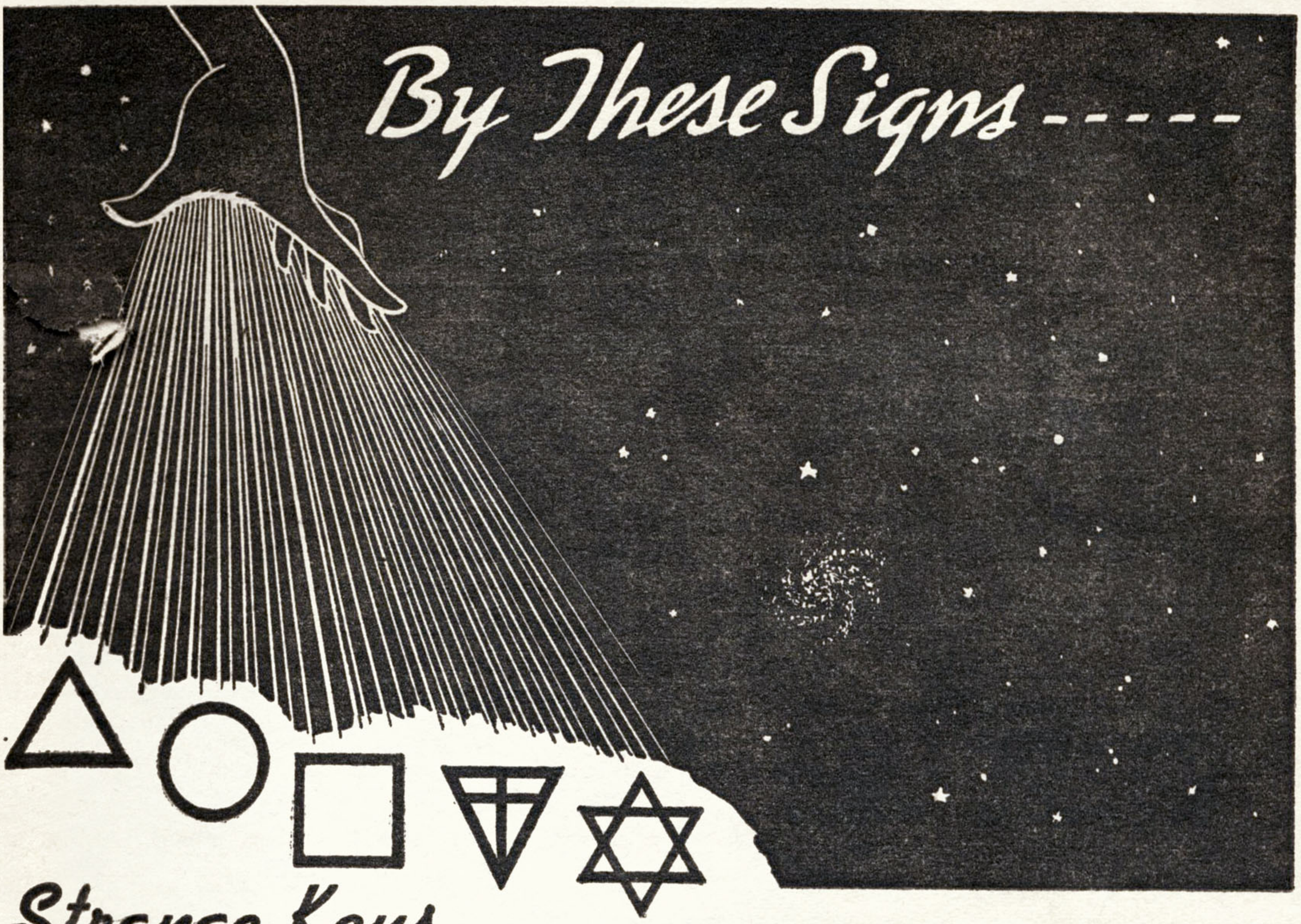

to the Powers of the Universe

"GOD GEOMETRIZES," said an ancient sage. Within the straight line, curve, and angle—and their combinations—exist the forces of creation. These *secret symbols* contain the mysterious laws of the universe. Upon their right use—or the neglect of them—the success or failure of every *human enterprise* depends.

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FIVE-NOVELS MONTHLY

F. A. McCHESNEY, Editor

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FORECAST

UNFORGETTABLE is the word for Cornelius Morgan's adventure novel, *Flight in the Dark.* The story of an R. A. F. pilot who, after losing his memory in a crash over France, returns to England many months afterward knowing nothing of the past, and ignorant even of his own name. Asked if he could be Brad Everett, a missing American flyer, he has no answer except that he might be, he does not know. And then he learns that Everett is believed to have murdered his brother pilot and friend, Lieutenant Mannering, in St. Johns Wood just before the flight over the Meuse in which Everett apparently crashed. Asked again and again who he is, reminded over and over of the murder of Everett's flying comrade, he wonders if he is—if he can be—a man who ruthlessly murdered his friend in cold blood. Quietly he submits to questioning, to tests, wanting desperately to clear himself, to establish his identity, and to blot forever from the record, and from his own conscience, the terrible doubt and suspicion that make him an outcast among men.

A new writer whom we are glad to bring to Five-Novels readers is Edward Ronns, whose murder novel, *Sometimes They Die,* is tops. The story of a man's colossal effort to get a real killer behind bars even as an innocent and lovely woman in a death cell waits, hour by hour, minute by minute, for the moment when, all hope of reprieve gone, she must know the agony of the last mile, the gruesome horror of the death chamber, and pay the penalty of the law for a murder of which she is innocent.

David Allan Ross has written another smash-hit adventure—a thrilling story of submarine action in the East. This is the story of Lieutenant Eddie Harmon, and it is a record of the daring, bravery, and unswerving faithfulness to duty of all men in our submarine service. Theirs is high courage, steel nerves, and a purpose that defies death because victory is everything and danger is a small risk when the goal is freedom.

ALSO

Justice in Gunsmoke, by Philip Ketchum

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A stirring new baseball novel by Ben Peter Freeman

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MURDER AT THE MOVIES!

In the luxurious Chicago movie theater "Hellzapoppin" had just run its course, and the second feature—"Sealed Lips," a gangster melodrama—was flashing across the screen. When a shot rang out, most of the audience believed it was simply one of the sound effects in the film. But this wasn't make-believe—it was murder!

High up in the balcony, a young man dashed for an exit. And the girl with whom he had been sitting toppled out into the aisle, her life's blood staining the deep carpeting!

Who was the lovely young victim? Who was her murderous escort? These were the two questions uppermost in the minds of Chicago's crack detectives as they set out to solve a crime which again proved that fact is stranger than fiction. You will have a thrill a minute as you read the story of their rapid-fire investigation, published this month in FRONT PAGE DETECTIVE under the title, "Kiss of Death for the Laughing Virgin."

This is but one of many exciting features in the big new FRONT PAGE DETECTIVE for May. A second lead story tells of amazing prison escapes which no real-life mystery fan will want to miss. The title is "Escape Artists I Have Known," and the author is Joseph Fulling Fishman, former federal prison inspector.

Another outstanding hit in the May FRONT PAGE DETECTIVE is the yarn entitled "Georgia's Petting Party Murder," describing a deep-dyed intrigue of love and murder which presented a challenge to the keenest law-enforcement officers in the South. Additional titles include:

"One Bullet for Another Man's Wife"

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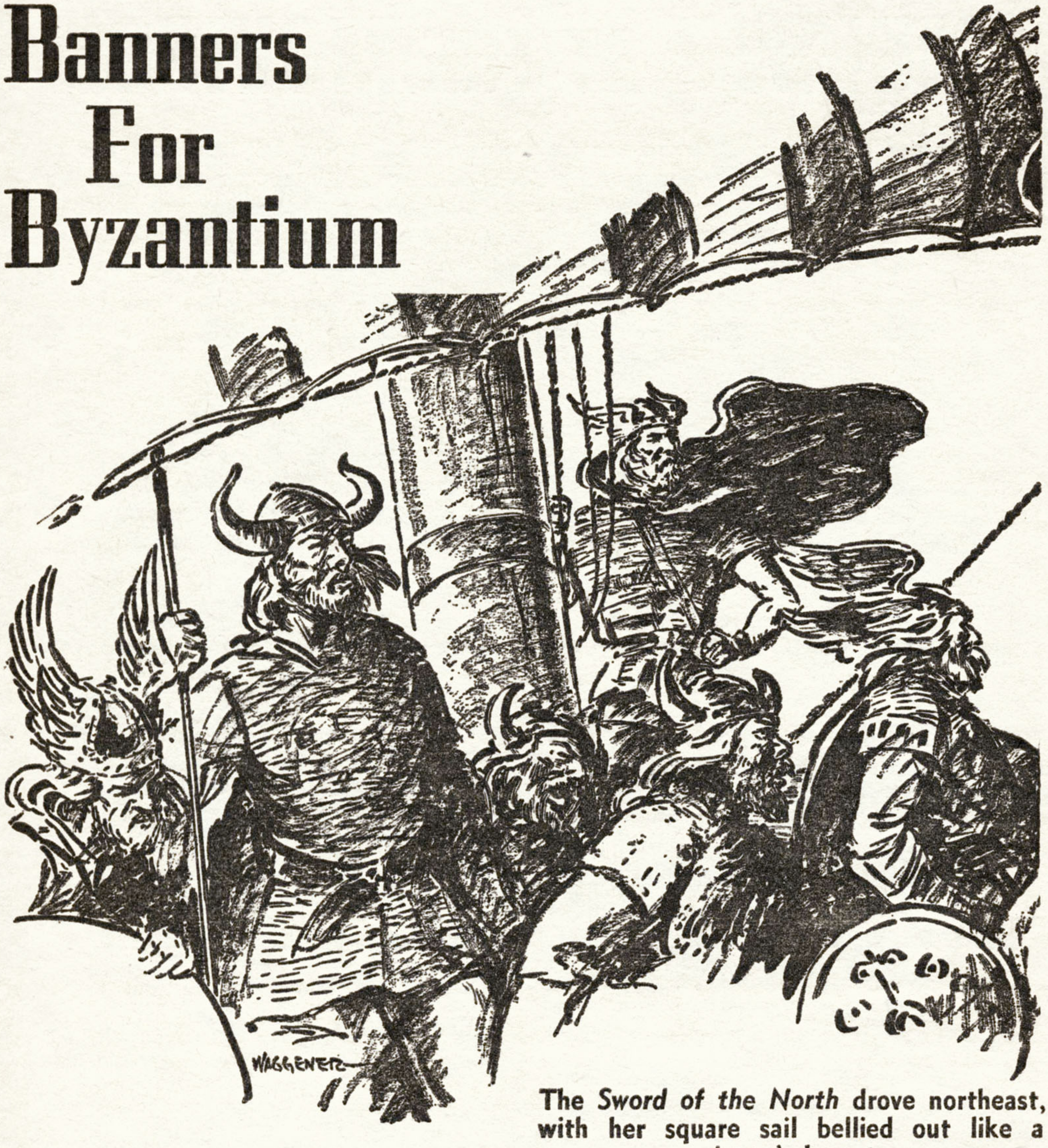
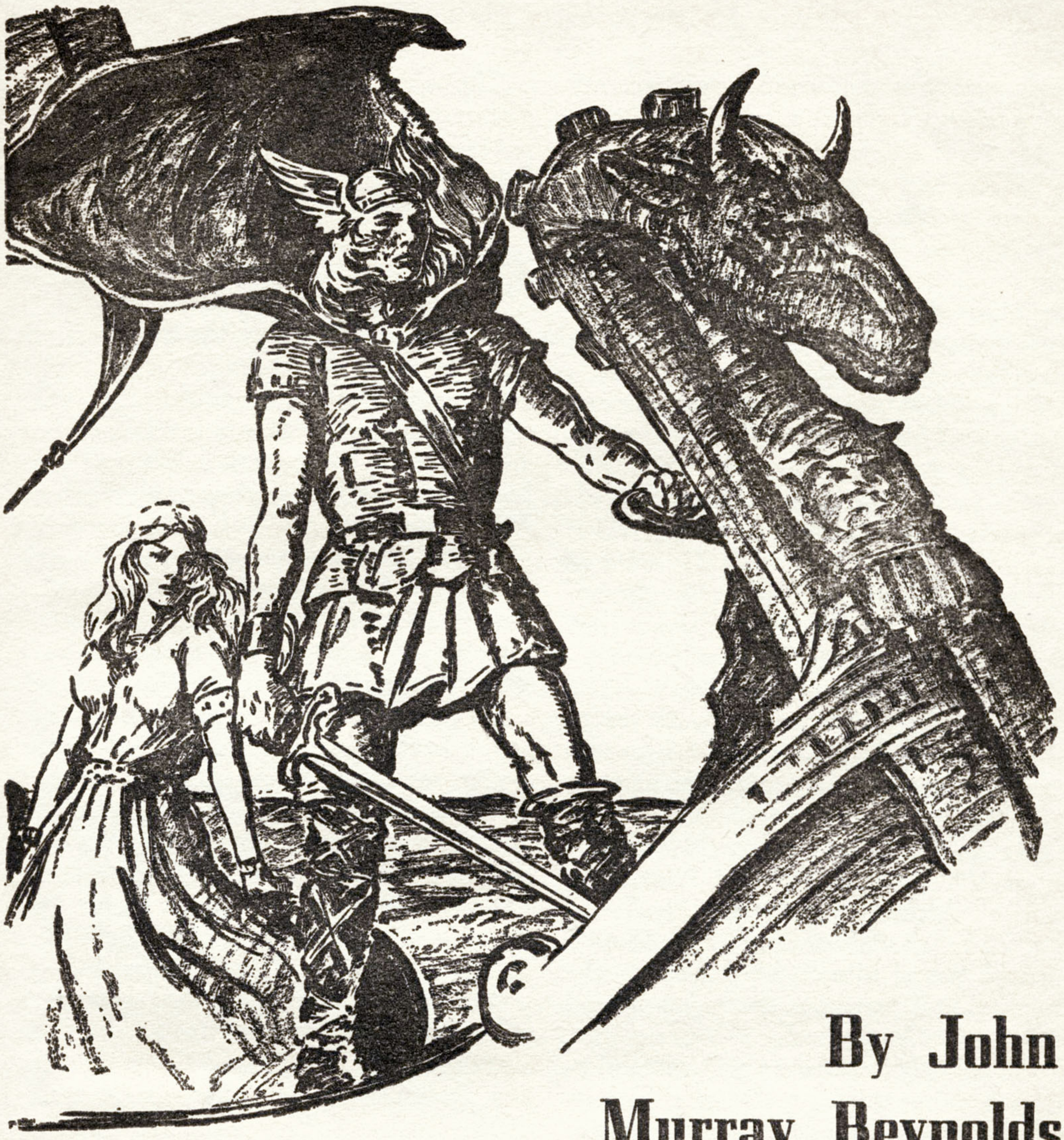
Banners For Byzantium



The *Sword of the North* drove northeast, with her square sail bellied out like a pigeon's breast.

THERE were two arrows through Bjorne's shoulder, and the jarring blow of a heavy boulder against his helm had stunned him, so that he lay helpless across one of the thwarts of the long-ship. The Viking craft was being pounded into subjection by the smashing stones from the catapults of the Mediterranean pirate. Bjorne's father, Harald Red-beard, lay dying in the stern. A few Norsemen were still on their feet, knee deep in the water that filled the open hold of their sinking craft, but the big-hulled pirate *bucca* was closing in to take the survivors prisoner.

It was over a month since Harald Red-beard had left his home at Snorrefjell in Norland to embark with his son and many of his most trusted carls. This time he went not as a Viking on a raid, but as a trading franklin with bales of rich gear to barter in distant seas. They had sailed down the coast of Norland, and through the Frankish Firth—the English channel—where the low coasts of England lay to starboard, and all



By John Murray Reynolds

along the shore to the Narrow Straits. Harald had heard tales of the great wealth of the men of Mikligard, which the foreigners called Byzantium or Constantinople, and he was minded to trade there. His long-ship had been halfway across the green waters of the Inland Sea when it met this black-hulled *bucca*.

The slender ship of the Wick-folk had no chance when the high-sided Norman pirate laid her aboard. In another kind of weather the Viking craft might have escaped, but it was a gusty day with a choppy sea and the *bucca's* big spread of sail gave her an advantage. When he saw that he could not escape the larger craft, Harald Red-beard turned to fight.

The Norland carls were unafraid as they stood along the shield rail with drawn weapons, the sunlight shining on their winged helmets. They had fought against heavy odds before this, but this time they were up against the war engines of the Mediterranean craft. The heavy stones and the steel-tipped beams from the pirate catapults pounded the

Viking craft into subjection without her being able to strike a real blow. . . .

FLUNG half conscious upon the greasy deck planking of the *bucca* a few minutes later, while the rest of his surviving comrades were being hauled from the wreckage of their sunken vessel, Bjorne struggled up on one elbow to stare aft at the pirate leader.

These Mediterranean pirates were a motley and bloodstained crowd of many races, but the man who led them was cast in a different mold. Slender and almost effeminate he was, wearing gilded armor and a purple cloak. His plumed helmet, that bore the insignia of a Byzantian officer, had a lowered visor that completely concealed the man's face.

Suddenly Bjorne understood. The Byzantine Navy was supposed to patrol this inland sea, but this gilded officer was secretly a pirate leader who arranged to keep the Emperor's patrols away from whatever waters his ship might be ranging at the time. A moment later, as a pair of brawny pirates dragged the wounded and dying Harald Red-beard aft and forced him to his knees on the poop, the Byzantian drew his sword with a whistle of steel.

"Your stubbornness in not surrendering cost me much loot, dog of a barbarian!" he snarled, his voice a chill note of doom as it came through the visor of his helmet. A star-shaped scar was visible on his upper right arm as he rolled back his purple silk sleeve. An instant later his sword had whistled downward—and Harald of Snorrefjell lay dead on the bloodstained planking.

Unsteadily Bjorne got to his feet. His head was still ringing like a bell, and the blood from his wounded shoulder was smeared all across his chest, but he was in the grip of a raging anger that blinded him to everything else. Three steps forward he took, four steps, his big hands outstretched and groping for the Byzantian's throat—but then the weakness of his wounds overcame him and he fell prone on the planking.

The pirate leader gave him a casual glance.

"Dress his wounds, then take him below and chain him to an oar with the others," he said.

WEEKS later, Bjorne the son of Harald was still aboard the *bucca*, sitting on one of the benches on the lower bank of oars. Whenever he moved his left leg, his short chain rattled and the steel cuff tugged at his ankle. Bjorne swore under his breath whenever that happened. All the young Norseman's former cheerfulness had gone from his wide and freckled face in the weeks since he had been captured, and he snarled soundlessly through his teeth whenever an overseer went by along the cat-walk with his whip swinging free in his hand.

It was very dim, down there on the lower bank of oars. The cold and filthy water of the bilge sloshed around Bjorne's bare feet while he tugged at his oar. The only light they had on the lower bank was the glow that came down through an open hatchway above and the crescent-shaped patches of light that struck in through the oar ports. It happened to be a sunny day, that particular afternoon, but changes in the outside weather made very little difference to the oar slaves chained in the bowels of the ship.

They were rowing with the regular cruising stroke that afternoon, and the confined space below decks was a confused babel of sound. There was the clang of the gong that kept time for the rowers, and the rhythmic creak of the oars, and the hoarse breathing of laboring men. Sometimes the bullying voice of one of the overseers rang out, or there came the sharp crack of a whip striking against flesh. At last a command came down from above and the rowers sat motionless, their oars lifted clear of the water. Another command followed, and with sighs of relief the weary rowers drew the long blades inboard and laid them against the base of the benches. A favoring wind had come up, so that for a few

hours there would be no more rowing.

Bjorne stretched his stiffened muscles and glanced briefly at the calloused palms of his hands. At the moment he looked very little like the hereditary ruler of Snorresfjell in Norland and a prince of the blood of Eric the Red! The grime of many weary weeks was upon him, his long red hair was a matted tangle, and for clothing he had only a single greasy rag of loin cloth. He spat in the bilge as he glanced at the nearest overseer.

"The day will come when I'll snap the neck of that misborn toad with my bare hands!" he muttered under his breath. The man on bench beside him, a grey-bearded Viking called Eric the Scald, rattled his leg chain angrily.

"You can have *him*, lad," he growled. "I want the other, that swarthy Levantine with the scarred face, he who hit me with the whip yesterday."

"We'll get them both—but then we'll find their gilded master and tear out his heart!" Bjorne said. "I have sworn a great oath that I will not set my hand to any other undertaking until I have slain that foppish renegade who murdered my father when he was too sore hurt to defend himself!"

IT WAS far into the twilight when the *bucca* at last dropped her anchor in one of the many coves of the Sicilian coast. The oars were stowed for the night, the weary slaves sat huddled on their benches. A pair of lanthorns swung low from the overhead beams. Bjorne sat erect and peered through the sweat-dimmed murk till he had located each of his companions who had been captured with him. Each night he did this. He was chief of the Snorrefjell folk, now that his father was slain, and even in captivity it was his duty to watch over his house carls.

On the bench beside him still sat Eric the Scald. Eric of Caithness, who was a great warrior and a mighty swordsman, but who was even greater at making the kind of songs that could grip the hearts of men! Often had Bjorne heard the songs of Eric ring through the smoke-filled *skalli* at home till they brought all the warriors to their feet with ringing shouts. Peering about the shadows of the dimly lit hull, Bjorne located the others. Hjalmar the Icelander—young Thord who was his own cousin—Evan the Outborn—a score all together. They were all still alive. Bjorne nodded with satisfaction, and then slumped down on his bench as some slaves came into the hold with a jug of water and a bowl of food for the rowers on each bench.

Later, when all the others were asleep on their benches and the overseer on guard in the hold was dozing at the foot of the ladder, Bjorne took a thin sliver of metal from the folds of his loin cloth. He had found it in the bilge some weeks before, and it was worth more to him than many times its weight of gold or jewels. Now, reaching down with the thin fragment of metal gripped in his fingers, he picked at the water-soaked wood of the beam to which his chain was fastened.

Hours passed. The smoky lanthorns on the *bucca's* hold burned low, the hot air was rank with the crowded stench of sweaty and unwashed bodies. With the tip of one finger Bjorne explored the holes he had made at the base of the staple that held his and Eric's chains. In these weeks of patient work he had gone far down into the wood. He touched Eric's arm.

The big greybeard came instantly awake. He did not speak, but at Bjorne's nod he took hold of his leg chain and both men bent forward on the bench, their feet wide apart. They pulled on the chains with straining muscles. The wood had at last been sufficiently cut away from around the shanks of the staple, and the iron loop pulled loose with a sudden jerk.

Half a dozen men lifted their heads at the sudden rattle of chains. Bjorne and Eric instantly sprawled down on their bench as though asleep, and Bjorne pushed the staple loosely back into its place once more. The overseer, after sit-

ting up for a moment, apparently decided that all he had heard was some slave stirring in his sleep, and once more lay down at the foot of the ladder.

"Let's get him now!" Eric whispered hoarsely. Bjorne shook his head.

"Not tonight. Having our chains loose is our once chance of escape, but we must be patient till the best moment arrives. Our time will come soon."

THE GALLEY was under way again at dawn, moving over a smooth and glassy sea. Between the steady strokes of the gong and the creak of the swinging shafts, Bjorne could hear the soft splash of the oar blades as they bit into the quiet waters outside the ports. The sound made him homesick for the open air and clear sky. This would have been a fine morning to be standing on the deck of some free vessel, but here, in the cramped and malodorous lower hold of the *bucca*, there was the same weary monotony. The sweating and whip-scarred backs of the rowers rose and fell all together . . . the gong pounded out the rhythm . . . the long benches creaked in unison.

That was the afternoon that the *bucca* captured the Saxon long-ship. The pirate craft had been idling along under sails alone when trumpets blew the alarm and the polyglot crew hurried to their places. The overseers bounded down into the hold, their whips cracking.

"Out oars, you scum of the sea!" they bellowed "Out oars, you bilge rats!" The long shafts were thrust out the ports, and the oars took up their beat to supplement the sails.

The fight was short and decisive. It was another case of a small northern craft having no chance against the big pirate galley. The Saxons surrendered sooner than had Bjorne's stubborn Norsemen, so that there were more prisoners, and the captured vessel was dropped astern to tow at the end of a hawser. Bjorne could see up through the open hatch as the captives were brought aboard the pirate leader where he stood on the poop, with his face as always covered by the gilded visor.

The last captive aboard was a girl. By the cut of her long skirt and tight bodice, she was a West Saxon girl from the British Isles, but the long hair that had fallen loose about her shoulders was a flaming red. There was probably Briton blood in her veins. Even though her wrists were tied behind her back, she twisted in the grip of the two Norman archers who held her, and she cursed the pirate leader in mellow Saxon. Even when they dragged her down in the lower hold, lashing her to a stanchion and stopping her mouth with a gag of twisted rags, her eyes still blazed defiance.

Bjorne grinned in his shaggy beard. That girl was a woman after his own heart! There was fire in her.

"When we break loose we'll take her along," he whispered to Eric. The old scald nodded.

"Aye! The blood of Freya herself must flow in the veins of that one!"

It was near sunset that night when the *bucca* came into the outer harbor of Tarentum, and the oar-thresh was touched with crimson. Bjorne nodded with satisfaction when he saw that the ship was to lie at anchor this night, instead of moving in to one of the piers. That fitted in much better with the plan he was beginning to develop! He also grinned when he saw that the crew was settling down to an evening of relaxation after the long voyage. The throb of a drum and the plaintive wail of Eastern instruments came from the forecastle, and there was a clink of wine flasks.

"Let them royster all they like!" he whispered to Eric. "That will make our task just so much easier."

"Then we make the break tonight?"

"Aye! The captured long-ship that trails astern is our means of escape."

IT WAS the fourth hour of the night before things began to quiet down aboard the *bucca*. The lanterns in the lower hold burned smokily in the hot darkness, the guard was standing at the

base of the ladder with his foot on the bottom step. Bjorne stealthily reached down and pulled out the staple that he and Eric had loosened the night before. The iron cuff was still locked around his ankle, of course, but the length of chain now simply lay across the beam with its other end free. Glancing around the murky shadows, Bjorne saw that the other men from his own ship were stealthily watching him. The word had been passed from man to man among them and they were all alert.

At last the guard moved. He glanced briefly up through the hatch at the top of the ladder, and muttered something under his breath. Probably he was cursing the luck that made it his turn to be on duty this night of revelry. Then, with a shrug of his heavy shoulders, he started forward along the cat-walk. He glanced mechanically at each bench as he passed, but his whip trailed idly from his hand and his manner was casual.

Bjorne watched without moving, while the guard went the whole length of the hold and turned back again. Then, just as the drowsy overseer went past on his return trip, Bjorne rose swiftly to his feet. He took two strides. The chain at his ankle rattled across the timbers with a metallic clash. The guard wheeled swiftly—but he was a second too late. Both of Bjorne's big hands had him by the throat to cut off any outcry!

THE GUARD'S bloodshot eyes were wide with terror. He clutched frantically for the hilt of his sword, but Eric the Scald had leaped to Bjorne's assistance. An instant later, as the man went limp from the strangling pressure at his throat, Eric lifted him in his two big hands. The giant Norseman shook the overseer like a rat for a moment, then flung him squarely in among the massed slaves who had all come awake on their benches.

A dozen pairs of scarred and brawny arms caught the overseer as he fell. This was a moment of which those whip-scarred and vengeful men had long dreamed. They snarled as the spinning guard fell in among them. He screamed once—horribly. After that there was no sound but the heavy breathing of the oar slaves as they crushed out the guard's life against the heavy timbers of the hull. At the end there was only a broken and bloody mass that lay inert on the planking of the bottom while the bilge water sloshed around it.

"That's one of them, by the Helm of Wodin!" Eric whispered hoarsely.

Bjorne picked up the keys the guard had dropped. He unlocked the cuff from his own ankle, then tossed the key to Eric to free the others. As he hurried to stand guard at the base of the ladder, he carried his short chain by the ring that had formerly been locked around his ankle. The heavy links would make the thing a formidable weapon in a close fight.

There was a steadily mounting murmur behind Bjorne as he stood there at his post, a clamor of hoarse whispers as Eric freed the other slaves. There was a sudden sharp cracking of wood as they began to rip up the oar benches and break them into pieces that would serve as weapons.

A moment later a man appeared in the hatchway above. Bjorne recognized him in spite of the dim light—the slave guard with the scarred face who had whipped Eric ! The man had evidently been on duty in the upper hold, probably half drunk, and the mounting clamor from below had at last penetrated to his drowsy brain. He took only one hasty glimpse into the turmoil below before he turned to leap for the upper ladder that led to the open deck—but Bjorne moved with lightning speed!

In two bounds the tall Norseman was up the ladder and caught the guard by the shoulder, spinning him around. The man went for his sword, but Bjorne swung the length of heavy chain like a flail, and the whirling links caught the overseer squarely across the eyes. He moaned once, and his knees bent under him, and when he went down he lay still,

for what had been a face had become only a ghastly pulp.

"That pays for Eric's scarred back!" Bjorne hissed, and took his place by the ladder that led to the open deck above.

NEARLY all the slaves had now been freed. Vengeful and impatient as they clutched their improvised weapons, they were with difficulty held in check by the more deliberate Norsemen among them. Bjorne turned to the captive Saxon girl and pulled the gag from her mouth.

"This craft is too big for my taste," he whispered as he began to loosen the thongs that held the girl to the stanchion. "We'll gather your men and mine, and slip away in the long-ship that still trails astern."

"My thanks, Norseman!" the girl panted through bruised lips as Bjorne freed her. "Though you were long enough about setting me free!"

"I wanted to free the fighting men first," Bjorne said. The girl snorted, and flung her long hair back over her shoulders.

"Listen, Norlander!" she said. "I am Edwina, the daughter of Ethelred who was a thane of Cwealin of Wessex. Give me a sword and I'll outfight most warriors!"

Bjorne laughed. "So be it, Edwina the daughter of Ethelred! You'll have a sword as soon as we can break into the place where the weapons are stored. Now we go aloft."

"By the Hammer of Thor, it is time!" boomed Eric the Scald. "I am long overdue for a little skull crushing among these southern pirates! They are about to learn that he who makes slaves of Norsemen digs his own grave!"

There were but few sentries on deck of the *bucca* that night, for they had nothing to fear in the harbor of Tarentum. Only a pair of Norman swordsmen were idling near the bulwarks when that wild-eyed borde of half naked men came pouring up from below, swinging their improvised clubs. The two men-at-arms died against the bulwarks, their skulls crushed in. Their swords were taken by the foremost of the escaped slaves, and Bjorne Harald's son lifted his voice.

"Come on, my brothers of the orlop! Strike hard for freedom, before these dogs can collect their wits and organize!"

IT WAS a wild and bloody fight that followed then, fought on the dew-wet decks of a Norman pirate. A fight in which there was no quarter whatever. On one side were the sea raiders of the crew, who were better trained and better armed, but were heavy with wine, as well as taken by surprise. On the other side was a yelling, shaggy horde of liberated slaves who knew that their lives were worse than useless if they lost this battle, and who flung themselves on their erstwhile captors with a savage ferocity.

In the confused shambles of that midnight battle, only the Norsemen of Bjorne and the Saxons of Edwina had any definite plan. Quietly the men from the North drew together, two groups of kindred bloods that together formed a compact unit of about forty. Their pounding shoulders smashed open the locked door of the *bucca's* storeroom. As Hjalmar the Icelander peered inside, he gave a deep-voiced shout.

"Plenty of weapons here for the taking, carls! Best of all, our own gear lies stored here!"

Naked blade in his hand, Bjorne was looking for the *bucca's* master—for the thin figure in the gilded armor, the man with the star-shaped scar on his arm, the Byzantine who had slain a prince of Norland. Through all the cluttered cabins he ranged with a group of slaves gone mad with the blood lust, smashing doors and overturning settles, but still he could not find the pirate leader. He finally learned the truth when he smoked out one of the pirate lieutenants and pinned the man to a bulkhead by a sword-thrust through the shoulder.

"The Hawk is not aboard!" the wounded pirate gasped. "He left us this afternoon, by a swift pinnace."

"His name? Where will I find him?" Bjorne rasped.

The man's reply was gasped through bloodied lips, but it had an unmistakable ring of sincerity.

"I do not know, Lord! None of us aboard have ever seen his face, or know him by any other name than the Hawk. He has gone back to Byzantium."

Bjorne jerked his sword free and turned on his heel to stalk out on deck. He was cheated in the moment of victory! The picture was clear enough now. The wily Byzantian sailed aboard his pirate vessel part of the time, but then left it by a swift despatch boat to return to the city and take up his other identity. Bjorne's eyes were cold, and his face was set in grimly determined lines.

"We take that long-ship that lies astern and sail for Mikligard at once," he snapped to Eric. "Let all our people gather at the stern!"

AS THE Vikings and Saxons drew together at the rail a little later, they looked very different from the slaves of an hour before. Instead of ragged loin cloths, they now wore the leather birnies and winged helmets of their own lands. Broad-shouldered men with shaggy beards, they bulked large in the starlight. Bjorne noticed that the Saxon girl now wore a light birnie over her dress, and wore a conical helmet.

For a moment Bjorne glanced around at the cluttered decks of the *bucca*. Some few survivors of the crew were selling their lives as dearly as they could, but the slaves were now in full control and a one-eyed Levantine was starting to organize them.

"The long-ship is more to the taste of us Northerners," he said. "Let the other slaves keep this craft, if they can hold her. But hearken to me, all of you! Whoever sails with me follows a long sea lane on what may be a one-way voyage. I have sworn the oath that may not be broken, not to turn back till I have slain the man with the scarred arm who slew my father. Who goes with me?"

They answered him with a deep shout, a roaring bellow of approval, holding their swords and axes aloft. Saxon gave him the same reply as did Viking, and Edwina the daughter of Ethelred clashed her own blade against the light metal shield she now carried on her left arm.

"Many of our men of Wessex died at the hands of that same gilded pirate," she said. "If the trail leads on to Mikligard, or even to the waters that lie at the end of the earth, it does not matter. Let us go!"

Quietly the Northerners dropped down into the long-ship astern. When the last man was aboard, each dropping his round targe in place along the shield rail as he took post on the benches and reached for an oar, Eric cut the hauser with a single short stroke of his axe.

"Give weigh!" Bjorne commanded. "Starboard oars ahead, port astern, till we swing her."

The blades bit deep, the oar thresh stirred up flashes of green fire in the water. When the long-ship's carved bow was pointed toward the harbor mouth, Bjorne snapped another command and the slender craft leaped swiftly ahead. He was drawing his sword to beat time for the rowers when Edwina touched his arm.

"I can beat time as well as anyone else, Norlander," she said, drawing her short sword and taking a shield from the rail. "Do you give all your attention to the steering oar till we are clear of the harbor. It's slow death by torture for all of us if ever we fall into the hands of these folk of Tarentum again."

Their moment of greatest peril came as the long-ship passed out the harbor mouth. A watcher on the walls sighted their slender hull across the moon path and called a sharp-voiced challenge to them.

"Row for your lives!" Bjorne hissed to the men on the benches, and the long oars bent from the strain as the Saxon vessel leaped ever faster through the black water.

IN THE moonlight, Bjorne could faintly see some hasty movement atop the walls. He heard the creak of a catapult being drawn back, and then the crashing thud as it was released. A huge boulder streaked against the stars for a second, then splashed into the water some fifty yards away. Others followed, but the dim light and the speed of the fleeing vessel made accurate shooting difficult. The missiles were falling well astern by the time the long-ship hit the groundswell of the outer seas. Not until they were well away from the walls of Tarentum and it was evident that no ships pursued them at the moment did Bjorne at last bark the command to cease rowing.

They all rested on their oars. The long-ship coasted ahead with diminishing speed, to the murmur of the ripples alongside and the slow drip of water from the extended oar blades. Free once more! They had the clean stars overhead, instead of the greasy beams of the *bucca's* upper deck, and a salt wind was blowing in their faces.

"We'll row in shifts for the rest of the night," Bjorne said.

A voice answered him out of the darkness. "Rowing on the thwarts of a free ship is very different from toiling on the benches of a Norman slaver, O son of Harald! If we row all night, we'll go that much further on the trail of the man we seek."

"Well said!" boomed Eric the Scald. "Give me the steering oar, Bjorne son of Harald, and *I'll* keep them going *all* night!"

Eric had laid aside his helmet, and his long grey hair was tossing on the night wind. As the oars dipped again, dipped in a long slow beat suitable for many hours of steady rowing, the Scald lifted his deep voice in a song. It was the Saga of Olaf Haakonson that he sang them, a tale of old voyaging in unknown and misty seas, and his deep voice gave rhythm to the rowers as the long-ship plowed onward through the night.

Bjorne went forward, to the tiny triangle of deck in the bow, leaning on his sword. His big hands closed grimly about the hilt as he thought of the death of his father, and of the other stout carls who had died alongside Harald Redbeard when the flying boulders from the Norman pirate smashed the Snorrefjell craft into splintered ruin. That had been a lowly sort of death for veteran Vikings of a score of sea fights! There would be much weeping among the women at Snorrefjell when the news of this voyage finally came back to the white town on the fjord! Bjorne's mind went back to the old days, to the winter nights in his father's *skalli* at the head of the fjord.

Aye—those were the days! In his imagination, Bjorne saw again the vast *skalli* at feast time, when all the carls and bearsarks sat at the long tables while the torchlight flamed on the weapons hung along the walls, and the high-beamed ceiling was lost in the smoky shadows above. He could smell again the foaming mead and the roasting meat, and the sharp scent of good, dry wood thrown on the great fire. Old days! Here, in this strange warm sea that was very different from the mist-veiled waters of the Northland, those days at home in Snorrefjell seemed far more than a few months removed. The only connecting link was the deep voice of Eric the Scald, lifted in the sort of song that could ever fire the hearts of men.

The Saxon girl came forward a little later, her long hair tossing on the night *breeze.*

"In what guise do we go to Mikligard?" she asked.

"As wandering adventurers selling our swords," Bjorne answered. "What is the name of this long-ship?"

"*Sword of the North.*"

"Ho—there could not be a better name than that!" Bjorne said. "It is an omen. The Northern sword speeds swiftly on the trail of the gilded pirate!"

NEXT DAY the wind rose. The *Sword of the North* drove northeast before a favoring wind, with her square sail

bellied out like a pigeon's breast and with all her rigging taut. Freed from the oars at last, the crew mostly made themselves comfortable on the thwarts and slept, though a few clustered in the bow to amuse themselves with dice and knuckle bones. Now and then a shower of warm spray would come smacking over the shield rail, and whenever the water began to slosh around the floor boards, someone took off his conical helmet and bailed it out.

It was late afternoon when they sighted the wrecked galley, and as they drew nearer Bjorne could see that the strange craft was too near water-logged to stay afloat much longer. The gale had broken her. She was a slender, graceful craft, white painted and of a style new to the Norsemen, but now her tall masts were down and floating alongside. Rags of silken sails fluttered on the wind. The light bulwarks had been stove and broken by the fury of the gale, and as the stricken vessel rolled sluggishly Bjorne could see the cluttered chaos of the decks. A few survivors clung about the poop. As the *Sword of the North* lowered her sail to row alongside, a slender figure leaped up on the shattered bulwarks.

"Hail! You in the long-ship!" she shouted.

This was a woman of a sort that Bjorne the Norlander had never seen before. The hair that flowed from under her silken kerchief was as black as the wing of a raven. She was tall and graceful, but she looked slight beside Edwina the Saxon or beside any of the women of Snorrefjell. Her silken clothing of purple and gold was sorely stained and bedraggled, but she had still the assured confidence of one accustomed to command.

"A princess!" someone said, and Edwina snorted angrily.

"Thin-chested wench! No real man could find her attractive!"

The raven-haired girl hailed them again, speaking in Norse with a strange, soft accent.

"Hail there, you aboard the long-ship! Will you take us off before this galley goes to the bottom?"

"Of course. Why else do you think we rowed over here?" Bjorne demanded bluntly.

The woman laughed, but the middle-aged man who stood beside her flushed angrily.

"Guard your tongue, fellow!" he said sharply.

"Guard your own, or we'll leave you to drown!" Bjorne snapped.

The *Sword of the North* came alongside in the lee of the stricken galley, the Norsemen standing up to grip the shattered bulwarks for a moment while the survivors climbed over the shield rail. There were only three seamen, swarthy men in brightly colored tunics, and then the Byzantine woman and her escort. The nobleman glanced scornfully at the open hold of the long-ship and her scanty gear, and then turned to Eric as the oldest aboard.

"What ship is this, fellow?" he demanded.

Eric the Scald put his big hands on his hips and stared down at the Byzantian. For all his weight of gilded armor, the nobleman looked slight beside the big Norseman. Eric was irritated, and his long grey moustaches bristled.

"It seems that they teach poor manners in this part of the world, fellow!" he rumbled. "Just who are you?"

"I am Stravikos of Pelos, a noble of the household of his Most High Majesty, Agustus Comnene!" As he mentioned the name of the Byzantine emperor, Stravikos momentarily shielded his eyes, as though even the reflected glory of the emperor's name was too much for eyes to bear. "I was escorting the Princess Cleona Paleologi back to Bryzantium when the storm wrecked us. You will take this strange craft of yours to Byzantium at once."

"I'll take you apart in another minute!" Eric snapped angrily. "By the Hammer of Thor, you talk large for one of so small stature! We go where we please, and we take orders from no one."

"Now, by the Rood—!" Stravikos cried, and half drew his sword.

"Now, by the devil—!" Eric mocked, and lifted his axe. Then Bjorne pushed in between them.

"Please, Eric!" he said, and to the Byzantian: "I command here. It happens that we are bound for Mikligard anyway, so we will take you there, but it is not because of your orders."

"So long as we get there, I do not care!" Stravikos muttered, and turned away. Eric plucked at Bjorne's elbow.

"Perhaps yon sour popinjay has a star-shaped scar on his upper arm!" he whispered.

Bjorne shrugged. "We cannot ask each Byzantian we meet to lift his right sleeve for us. Now is the time for patience. The time for action will come later, after we reach the city and start to make some inquiries."

AGAIN they bore east, swinging ahead over the long seas with their wake a foam streak astern. The Byzantine princess came aft to Bjorne, where he stood at the steering oar. Cleona Paleologi was as lithe and slender as a willow tree, and her smooth skin was faintly olive-tinted. The salt-stained and bedraggled condition of her attire could not conceal its richness, and even her torn purple veil was embroidered with gold.

"Do not mind Stravikos, Sir Norseman," she said smilingly. "Some of our Byzantine nobles take their titles very seriously, and he is worried by his duty of getting me back to the city safely. What seek you in Constantinople?"

"Work for our swords. I have heard that there is need for good warriors in your city of Mikligard."

"Aye, the Varangian Guard. There are many men of your race in the service of our Emperor, and they hold a place of honor. I will speak to the Emperor."

When Cleona went forward a little later, Edwina the Saxon came walking aft, her blue eyes stormy.

"I do not trust that thin-flanked wench, cousin!" she said.

Bjorne laughed. "You are simply jealous of her finery and position, little Saxon! She means us well."

"I do not like the look in her eyes," Edwina persisted stubbornly. "The friendship of a woman like that is more to be feared than treasured!"

DAY after day they sailed to the northeast, over blue waters dotted with the pleasant little isles of Greece. Though Bjorne had no speech at all with Stravikos, who had been stubbornly silent the whole time he was aboard, he often looked up to find the Greek's narrowed eyes fixed on him with a brooding glance. He talked much with Cleona Paleologi, to Edwina's obvious annoyance, and once Eric the Scald spoke of the matter.

"Beware of this Byzantian woman, Bjorne," the old warrior said gloomily. "For that matter, beware of all women! They are kittle cattle. Many a good warrior has been ruined by them."

"Go sharpen your axe, old war dog!" Bjorne laughed. "I know what I am doing!"

At last there came a day when the gilded towers and lofty domes of a great city began to lift along the horizon ahead. The Golden Horn! The city of Constantinople, or Byzantium, called Mikligard by the Norsemen, the mightiest and most luxurious city the world had ever known! The Lady Cleona stood on the narrow deck at the bow, swaying easily to the ship's motion.

"There lies our goal, Norseman!" she said.

Bjorne shaded his eyes with his hand. "What kind of place is this city of yours?" he asked. Cleona's smile was inscrutable.

"It is a city of contrasts, my Bjorne. Come to visit my palace, and you shall sit on a silken couch as you listen to the melody of Eastern music. You shall drink wine that has been cooled by snows brought across the Bosphorus from Asia."

"*I* do not like the sound of this Mikli-

gard!" Edwina said. The Saxon girl had come up to lean against the rail beside them, and Cleona looked at her with a faint smile.

"You might do well in Byzantium at that, little barbarian, for you do have a wild sort of beauty. I'll be glad to take you into my household, after we get ashore."

The domes and towers of Byzantium spread all along the horizon now, with the mountains of Asia over the way. The long-ship passed through a fleet of fishing vessels and then, as she neared the harbor mouth, a cruiser came speeding swiftly toward her. A fast pamphylion of the Byzantine navy, the slender craft swept forward with her banked oars swinging all together. The sunlight caught a flash of steel above her bulwarks and shone on the great bronze tubes mounted at bow and stern.

"Our first welcome to Mikligard!" Bjorne said. "At least she is but a small ship, if she prove unfriendly!"

Stravikos' voice came in mocking reply. "Aye, barbarian, she is a small ship. But she carries doom if you do not obey her orders! Those things at bow and stern are fire tubes, the engines that hurl our deadly Greek fire that burns even on the water and consumes all within reach. Your swords and axes would avail you not at all if the cruiser chose to use her fire tubes against you."

Stravikos' smile was bland and unpleasant. Evan the Outborn, standing nearby, drew a long knife from his girdle and tested the edge.

"Just so that we understand each other, my gilded friend, I have this knife to cut your throat if yonder craft so much as spits at us through her devilish tubes!"

The guard ship backed water in a smother of white spray, her oar blades bending like whip shafts, and an officer in a gilded corselet leaped up on the bulwark. He shouted something in a strange tongue, Stravikos replied, and a moment later the pamphylion had backed off and gone her way. The *Sword of the North* was free to enter the harbor of Mikligard.

ALL the way into the inner harbor Stravikos took them, between the many ships that dotted the roadstead. Past lines of marble walls they went, and terraced streets, and gardens filled with colored blossoms, and many palaces where armed retainers stood on guard at the water-gates. When at last they came to the palace of the Paleologi, Stravikos nodded, and Bjorne threw his weight against the butt of the steering oar.

Spearmen in livery of scarlet and gold came to attention as they saw the long-ship swing inshore, and an officer called a challenge. When Stravikos replied, Bjorne caught the name of Cleona among the swift flow of Greek syllables, and at once there was a great stir on shore. Slaves and serving women hurried out, more guards came, and a red carpet was spread down to the waters edge. Cleona stepped to the rail.

"This is my home, Bjorne," she said. "I will not forget your kindness. Goodbye—but we shall meet again."

Bjorne stood leaning on the shield-rail, watching the Lady Cleona walk up the marble steps. A man in a plumed helmet and a purple cloak came forward and bent to kiss her hand.

"Who is that man?" Bjorne asked of Stravikos. The Greek glanced up the stairs for a moment, then looked at Bjorne with a twisted smile.

"That? That man, barbarian, is not one for whom it would be wise for a man like you to hold either jealousy or dislike; nor even any emotion at all except a deep and obedient respect. That is Eutyches of Thessaly, strategos in command of the city garrison, and one of the most powerful men in the whole empire."

"Does he have a star-shaped scar on his upper right arm?" Bjorne asked.

Stravikos eyes filmed, and the lines that led down to the corners of his mouth grew momentarily deeper. Bjorne knew that his question had startled

Stravikos in some way, but the man's face was too complete a mask for Bjorne to read it.

"That's an odd question, barbarian! Why do you ask?"

"No matter," Bjorne shrugged. "Give us a pilot and we'll row around to the headquarters of the Varangians."

The ropes were cast off from the bronze bollards on the dock, the long-ship began to row away. Edwina came up to Bjorne where he stood by the steering oar.

"Bjorne," she said, and her eyes were troubled, "I feel that this gilded city is evil. I have a boding that if once we land here, the *Sword of the North* will never again reach the cool waters of the outer sea!"

"Who knows?" Bjorne shrugged. "No man may say what the grim Three Sisters will decide as his fate. We have both sworn the oath that may not be broken, sworn not to turn back until we have taken vengeance upon the gilded brigand who slew both our fathers, and we know that he is somewhere here in Mikligard."

"Say no more!" The girl flung back her head. "It will never be said that the daughter of Ethelred of Wessex was afraid of the path of honor. We stay."

AS THE pilot at last guided the long-ship into a dock close to the Imperial Palace, Bjorne saw that the guards at this particular pier were of a different sort from the others. No gilded Greek spearmen were these, nor yet swarthy Turcopoles from Asia with their pointed helms and black beards. These guards were tall, broad-shouldered men in scarlet and steel, men who bore battle axes as weapons and had long hair flowing from under their crested helmets. As the long-ship slid alongside the dock, with her oars trailing for a moment before they were tossed, a deep voice hailed her in good Norse:

"Hail, wolves of the sea! Welcome to Mikligard the Great! Whence come ye?"

Bjorne cupped his hand to his mouth. "Long-ship *Sword of the North,* under command of Bjorne Harald's son, bearing men of Snorrefjell in Norland and men of Wessex in England."

"Land and welcome!"

As Bjorne stepped ashore, a grinning Norseman took his hand in a mighty grip. He was a grizzled veteran with skin the texture of old leather, and one ear had once been shaven clean off by the swing of an axe.

"I knew your father in the old days, boy," he boomed, "when I used to call in at Snorrefjell. Men call me Thorfinn One-ear. I am now a lieutenant in the Varangian Guard of this city, serving the Emperor because his pay is high and there is plenty of work for stout fighting men. Do you come to join us?"

"We might," Bjorne said cautiously.

Thorfinn shrugged. "By Wodin, boy, you could do worse. We are all exiles here in the Varangians, Danish and Norse and Saxons, with a few of the adventurers of the Russ. We live well, and men say that the Emperor places more trust in us than in any of the Greek troops officered by his own nobles. Well —come ashore, and make up your minds later. For the present you will be lodged at state expense in the Frankish Hospice."

Leaving the *Sword of the North* moored to the dock, her crew took their weapons and started up the street. Round shields were slung on their backs, battered helms were rakishly tilted. Bjorne watched them with a slow grin lightening his somber features. Norsemen and Saxons might be weary and tattered, but they still must swagger and ruffle it in the presence of strangers!

They tramped through the narrow streets of the waterfront quarter till they came to the marble pavement of the Mese, the wide street that ran through the heart of Constantinople from the Western Gate to the Sacred Palace.

All about the Northern wanderers swarmed the chattering throngs of a great city. Orientals and Europeans rubbed elbows along that street, all the

peoples of the known world were there. Silk-clad Greeks went past with a leisurely gait, bearded Hebrews hurried by in their grey robes. Veiled women rode in litters with armed slaves to guard them. Moslems with curved swords and white cloaks paused to talk on street corners, unclothed slaves were bound to rings along the wall for buyers to inspect. Now and then a nobleman drove by with a rattle of chariot wheels, or a desert nomad rode past on horseback with his restless eyes constantly roving over the crowd.

"I did not know there were so many people in the world!" Hjalmar the Icelander muttered uneasily.

Glancing over the heads of the crowd for a moment, Bjorne was startled to see Stravikos pointing in his direction as he talked with a group of white-robed Moslems.

Bjorne was vaguely worried. It might be mere chance that the Greek officer was within sight of them at that moment, but in a city as large as Byzantium it was certainly an odd coincidence. He had the answer a few minutes later, when his men rounded a corner and were suddenly beset by a throng of swarthy men wielding curved swords!

ONE of the Saxons and one of Bjorne's own Norsemen were cut down at once. Then the veteran steadiness of the Northern warriors asserted itself. They drew their weapons and locked shields with a deep shout. Wielding his heavy axe with a fierce anger in his heart, Bjorne wondered what lay behind this unprovoked attack. He had heard that street fights were common occurrences in Byzantium, but at least there was generally some quarrel or disagreement to start them. He could only conclude that Stravikos, nursing the affronts to his dignity that he had endured during the journey on the longship, had hired these Moslems to attack them.

The swift, curved blades of the Easterners played against the Norse shield-wall like summer lightning. The Moslems were more numerous and they were pressing the Vikings hard, but then came a deep shout and a full company of Varangian Guards trotted around the nearest corner.

The Moslems did not wait for the approach of the disciplined troops, but took to their heels at once. As the Vikings leaned panting on their weapons and the Varangians halted beside them, Thorfinn One-ear hooked his broad thumbs in his girdle and said in his booming voice, "Well, my red-headed friend, I find you in a quarrel already!"

"They set upon us without warning," Bjorne panted. "I think they were hired by Stravikos, the Greek officer we picked up at sea."

"It sounds like the sort of thing Stravikos might do," Thorfinn said dubiously. "And if he makes a report to the Emperor, his tale will doubtless sound badly for a group of strangers in the city. It would be best for you to enlist in the Guard at once."

Bjorne shrugged. He was determined to stay in Mikligard, and he had already seen enough of the Imperial City to know that it was better for a man to have a set place in its scheme of things.

"So be it," he said. "But tell me—do you know of any gilded Byzantian officer who has a star-shaped scar on his upper right arm?"

"That's an odd sort of question!" Thorfinn tugged at his beard for a moment, then shook his head. "I have no idea. The sort of tunic these Greeks wear hides the upper arm. Why do you ask?"

"I have—a private reason," Bjorne said.

Thorfinn chuckled. "From the grim look on your face, son of Harald, I would say that it bodes ill for such an officer when you find him—if he doesn't kill you first! But come along to the Strategium and I'll have all of you enlisted in the guard."

"And what of me?" Edwina asked.

Bjorne laid one hand on the girl's shoul-

der. "We must take the offer of the Lady Cleona and have you stay at her palace, little Saxon. It is evident that this scented city is not a place where a girl may stay without a powerful protector."

WITHIN a few days the newcomers were fully inducted into the ranks of the Varangian Guard. They were taught the stern discipline of that corps, the first real Foreign Legion of all time, and they were instructed in the use of the catapults and other engines of war that were new to them. Sometimes Bjorne wondered at the adaptability of the human mind. Within these few days,

Bjorne and Eric led them, their bloodstained axes flashing in the sun.

his men had become as much at home in the hot and dusty streets of teeming Byzantium as they had once been in their native fjords.

Late one afternoon, just as Bjorne had come back from drill and was stripping off his armor to take a plunge in the marble baths that adjoined the barracks, Thorfinn One-ear came to seek him. The old veteran was grinning broadly.

"Get your gear well cleaned and polished, boy!" he said. "You go to the Sacred Palace tonight."

"Am I assigned to the guard detail?"

"Who said anything about going there on duty?" Thorfinn boomed. "There is some kind of feasting there tonight, and you are invited as a guest. It seems that you have friends at court."

"And enemies too!" Bjorne said.

Thorfinn stepped close to tap him on the chest. "Hearken, boy! Watch your step and your tongue and even your thoughts when you go to the Sacred Palace. The walks and walls have ears."

"I'll be careful," Bjorne said shortly. "Tell me, do you think that Eutyches will be present?"

"The great Strategos? Of course!"

It was just after dusk that Bjorne came near the rambling mass of buildings that formed the residence of the rulers of the Eastern Empire. The Sacred Palace, where ruled Agustus Comnene, Basileus of Byzantium and Emperor of the East, was a city and a fortress in itself. Buildings of marble and alabaster fringed the blossom-laden gardens of the palace. Porticos, columned with turquoise and chalcedony, lined the countless fountained courts. Against the outer walls of the palace lapped the dark blue waters of the Bosphorous, where a guarding dromon with fire tubes ready and archers alert was always drifting slowly by.

Bjorne had been several times a guard at the palace and was beginning to know his way through its miles of corridors, where eunuchs and other slaves passed on busy errands and where every door was guarded by armed men. He also knew that the Sacred Palace had other features beside its gilded exterior. Far below the drowsy pleasure courts were the dungeons into which many men had vanished forever. Imperial stranglers moved on sandaled feet through secret corridors between the walls, and many a corded sack had been rowed away from the water-gate at night to be dumped into the deep waters of the strait. The Sacred Palace of Byzantium was a place of gayety and music—but also of torture and death.

This night the sound of soft music drifted through all the outer gardens of the palace. Colored lanterns were slung beneath the trees, more lanterns bobbed in the bows of barges and pleasure galleys nearing the marble steps that led up to the gardens from the water's edge. There was a muffled beat of oars beneath the bright stars overhanging the Bosphorous, as the nobles and ladies of Byzantium landed at the Santa Barbara gate to climb up to the scented gardens behind the sea wall. Latticed windows were gleaming all around the courtyards, and armed guards strode jingling through the shadows along the walls. There was a sound of distant singing.

MOVING restlessly through the silk-clad and gayly chattering throng, Bjorne felt out of place. As an officer of the Varangians present by special invitation, he was tolerated by the courtiers, but he felt no kinship with them. They were alien in thought and plan, as well as in speech and race. So Bjorne drifted quietly from place to place, and ignored the condescending glances of those he passed. And then he saw Eutyches. The Strategos was standing in a corner of the wall, talking to a Turcopole bowman.

This was the first time that Bjorne had seen the Byzantian general from close at hand, with his lean face and cold eyes, though he had been resenting the other man ever since that day

he delivered Cleona home to her palace. For an instant Bjorne's hand closed on the hilt of his dagger, but then it fell away again. After all, he was only a wandering Viking who had become a Varangian of the guard, and he had no right to become jealous of a man because he was attentive to a princess of the Paleologi!

Idly, and without thinking it particularly important, Bjorne noticed that there was something furtive about Eutyches at the moment. The strategos was standing in an angle where a clump of thick bushes screened him from observation from most directions, and his narrowed eyes kept shifting quickly from place to place as he spoke to the bowman. Their voices were low and guarded.

Bjorne shrugged and walked away. The palace intrigues of the strategos Eutyches were no affair of his. A little further along through the garden, Bjorne suddenly heard his name called. He turned—but for a moment he did not recognize Edwina of Wessex in this stately woman who wore the flowing robes of the Byzantine court. Gold threads had been plaited into the girl's ruddy hair, and there was no trace of the warrior hoyden who had wielded a bloodied sword on that wild night they took the Norman *bucca* from her masters.

"I have been waiting for you," she said.

"Edwina!" Bjorne took both the girl's outstretched hands for a minute. "I did not know you, little Saxon! They have certainly transformed you into a fine plumaged bird of the court! How do you like this life?"

"Oh, it is well enough for a while," the girl said slowly. They had seated themselves on a carved alabaster bench beside the path, and in the light of the colored lanterns Bjorne could see that Edwina's eyes were troubled behind the thin white veil that covered her face. "The luxury and the new clothes were exciting for a while, and the Lady Cleona treats me well, though I can never tell what is in her mind. But there is neither security nor peace of mind in this gilded life, Bjorne."

"We accomplish our purpose in this city, and then sail away again when—" Bjorne broke off short as the Lady Cleona came toward them.

Bjorne instinctively took off his helmet as Cleona approached. Even when wet and bedraggled aboard the wrecked galley, she had possessed the manner of an aristocrat, but now she looked every inch a princess of the house of the Paleologi. Very tall and stately she was, clad in white silk and wearing the purple girdle reserved for those of royal lineage. Jewels gleamed on her arms, and there were ropes of gems around her slender throat. Her jet-black hair had a metallic luster in the soft light; her face was palely lovely behind the thin purple veil.

"Bjorne, my Norland friend, I had thought you would come to see me before this," she said as he bent to kiss her hand.

"But you are a Princess."

"But not an important princess," she smiled. "We of the Paleologi wear the purple girdle, but we wield no power, and have only what the bounty of the Emperor allows us."

CLEONA had slipped her hand through Bjorne's arm, and they were walking slowly along one of the garden paths. Suddenly he looked around for Edwina—but the Saxon girl had vanished. She must have slipped away soon after Cleona appeared. Or, rather, Bjorne suddenly realized, he and the Byzantian woman had simply walked away and left Edwina standing there. He felt guilty about it, but there was nothing he could do at the moment.

"I want you to come to see me privately in the next day or so," Cleona said. "We will not be bothered by formality and ceremony then. In truth, I hate this life of the court and would far rather be sailing the seas somewhere, as we did for those few days after you res-

cued me from the wrecked galley."

"I don't think Stravikos enjoyed himself much in those days." Bjorne said.

Cleona sniffed. "Stravikos! He is as haughty and vengeful as all the rest of these gilded courtiers. But he means nothing to me."

The fête had now reached its height. There was more music and the walks were thronged, and slaves hurried by with trays of crystal goblets filled with iced wine. A large group came along the walk beside which they were sitting, and Cleona rose quickly to her feet.

"Swiftly, my Bjorne!" she said. "It is the Emperor himself!"

Augustus Comnene, Lord Basileus of Byzantium and Emperor of the East, the most powerful monarch in all Europe and hither Asia, was not an imposing figure. He was a plump, stocky little man with a curly black beard. However, Bjorne could sense that the homage of the guests was based on more than a mere formality. Any man who wielded so much power could arouse fear, even if not a great amount of respect. Bjorne doffed his own helm and prepared to bow. It came hard to a stiff-necked Viking to bow the knee to any sort of outlander, but he had taken the Varangian oath, and as long as he remained this man was his supreme commander.

Bjorne Harald's son never knew what it was that led him to glance up and to the left, just before the Emperor came abreast of him. Cleona was already sweeping the ground with her skirts in a graceful curtsy when some subtle warning made Bjorne glance up at the angle of the wall. An archer was crouching there with arrow already on string.

There was no chance to interfere—there was not even time to shout an alarm to the Emperor whose life was menaced—for the bowman was already drawing his nocked arrow to his ear. There was only one possible thing to so, and Bjorne did it in the fraction of a second that remained. He plucked the heavy dagger from his belt and hurled it straight at the assassin!

THE heavy blade flew straight and true. During snowbound winter nights in the *skalli,* Bjorne had often amused himself by hurling his knife at one of the heavy wooden posts supporting the roof, and now that practice stood him in good stead. The point took the bowman squarely in the throat. The grip of the man's fingers loosened, the arrow flew wide, and the archer fell crashing to the grass on the inner side of the wall.

Agustus Comnene showed no signs of fear at his narrow escape, nor even much surprise. After all, he who wore the purple of Byzantium ran a constant risk of assassination. The Emperor shrugged, and then nodded to Bjorne.

"The thing was well done, Varangian. My thanks for your quick wit and steady eye. See if the man is dead."

Bjorne crossed to the fallen archer and pulled his knife from the man's throat. He cleansed the blade by thrusting it in the soft ground, glanced down at the body for an instant, and then returned to the Emperor.

"The man died instantly, sire," he said.

Augustus shrugged. "I could wish that he lived, so that we might apply the torture to find out who hired him to kill me. But it does not matter. I say again, Varangian, that you have done well. What is your name and origin?"

"I am Bjorne Harald's son, sire, from Snorrefjell in Norland."

"Strange, barbaric words!" Agustus said musingly, "yet I have learned that you barbarians are always true to your salt. Which is more than can be said for many men of my own race!" For an instant his glance—suddenly very cold and calculating—swept the circle of gilded courtiers around him, and it seemed to Bjorne that it rested longer than normal on Eutyches. Then he turned back to the Viking. "For this night's work, you will be promoted to second in command of the battle fleet that is soon to leave for an expedition against the Emir of Sidon."

The Emperor nodded and moved on, with his group around him. Bjorne walked over to stand looking down at the dead assassin. It was the Turcopole bowman who had been talking to Eutyches behind the screen of bushes earlier in the evening! The implication was plain. The gilded strategos was dabbling in palace politics and had tried to do away with his royal master. Bjorne hesitated for a long moment, but then he shook his head and turned away. No one would take *his* word against that of the powerful Strategos. He would simply have to keep his knowledge to himself.

As Bjorne walked back to the path, Cleona hurried swiftly to him. She put her hands on his shoulders.

"You were wonderful, my Bjorne!" she said hastily. "I feel that you are destined to go far in the service of Byzantium, and I know that I can help you. I must hurry back to the Emperor now, but I want you to come to see me some evening during the week. Will you come?"

"I will come," Bjorne said. For an instant Cleona was in his arms, her lips hot and eager behind her veil. Then she hurried away.

Bjorne stood with his helmet in his hand, staring after Cleona till her tall figure had vanished from sight across the garden. Then he grinned, and ran one hand through his thatch of ruddy hair. A lot of things had happened this evening! He turned—and not till then did he see Edwina, who had been standing in the shadows a few feet away.

"Edwina—wait!" he said, but the Saxon girl turned on her heel and hurried away without answering.

FOR the next few days the waterfront of Byzantium hummed with activity, as the fleet was made ready for a punitive expedition. Vessels of all classes, from the mighty dromon biremes and the swift pamphylion cruisers, down to pot-bellied supply craft, were being made ready for sea. Rigging was tested and tarred anew, the catapult and ballista sinews were overhauled. There were bundles of freshly fleched arrows brought aboard for the archers, and piles of heavy boulders for the stone-casting engines, and drums of naphtha and other chemicals for the dreaded Greek fire.

As second in command of the fleet, Bjorne was tangled in the maze of preparation. He wanted to get away to see the Lady Cleona, but always some matter of stores and outfitting came up to interfere. Finally, on the last evening before the fleet was to sail, a slave came with an urgent message. His presence was desired by the Lady Cleona Paleologi at the third hour.

"I will be there," Bjorne told the slave. He had a feeling that this evening was an important one.

Bjorne was grinning to himself as he walked up to the gates of the Paleologi Palace some hours later. He was thinking of the unbelievable tales of the glory of Mikligard that had been told in the various *skallis* along the coast of Norland by returned voyagers in the past, and of how he would have his own tales to add to the legend when he went back to Snorrefjell. After all, few Vikings had been close enough to a Byzantine princess to get a good look at her—much less hold one in his arms as he had the night of the fête. It was even possible that he might bring a new mistress back to Snorrefjell when he came, a slender and dark-haired woman such as the men of the fjords had never seen. Bjorne wondered if Cleona would be unveiled this night.

He nodded patronizingly to the spearmen at the palace gate as they let him through. He was at least half an hour early, but that should not matter.

The female slave who received Bjorne in the entrance hall appeared to be disturbed about something. Her eyes widened in surprise, and she stammered as she asked him to wait while she announced his presence. The girl hurried away through one of the curtained doors opening off the entrance hall, but she came back a moment later.

"Please wait. The Lady Cleona will receive you in a little while," she said.

Left alone in the room, Bjorne took off his helmet and looked curiously around him. He was in a large, hexagonal chamber that was lighted by swinging lamps of hammered brass. A faint scent of sandalwood incense hung in the air. The walls gleamed with inlaid mosaics of colored tiles and semi-precious stones, with scenes from Greek mythology where pagan gods and mortal women were roaming green fields and woodlands. The room had no windows at all, but each of the six walls was pierced by a curtained doorway.

When the slave left him, Bjorne sat down on a carved bench near the entrance door. For a minute he fiddled with his hilt, feeling at a loose end and regretting that he had come so early. Then he decided to go back to the barracks on an errand and return in an hour. He called for the attendant.

There was no reply to Bjorne's call. Glancing around the lamplit entrance hall, he tried to remember which of the many doors the girl had used when she left. After a moment's hesitation, he parted the curtains on the second door to the right and started down the corridor.

THE passage was dim lit and thickly carpeted, leading well back into the palace. As he neared another curtained door at the far end, he heard a faint rumble of voices beyond. Bjorne hesitated. He had probably taken the wrong door after all, and it might be embarrassing to be found wandering alone through the inner corridors of the Paleologi palace. He was about to turn back —but suddenly he heard his own name mentioned. That decided him. Bjorne took a few more strides, and stood just back of the curtains at the end of the corridor.

Through the slot at the end of the hangings, Bjorne could see the Lady Cleona. She was unveiled, as he had hoped that she would be, and she had never appeared more lovely. Blue-black hair was a cloud about her shoulders. Jewels gleamed in the girdle of her long purple skirt, and on the golden breast plates that were all she wore above the waist. She stood with one hand on her hip and the other holding a wine glass, smiling as she stood there, and she was facing a lean man in gilded armor. It was Eutyches the Strategos!

Bjorne's hand closed on his hilt so tightly that he felt the knuckles begin to crack. Here, where he had pictured Cleona as busily making ready to receive *him,* he found her in conference with the one Greek nobleman whose cold-eyed arrogance Bjorne most distrusted! As Bjorne watched them, the Byzantian officer drained his glass and set it down on a table.

"But how can you be sure that this bull-necked Varagian will do the thing for you?" he asked.

Cleona smiled slowly. "Look at me, my Eutyches!" she said. "Could many men resist me tonight? Certainly not this simple barbarian! Bjorne already is in love with me, I tell you, and after tonight he will be my slave. Poison Agustus Comnene for me? It will be easy to get him to do it! I will promise to have him made Strategos after *you* are Emperor of Byzantium."

"It may work," Eutyches said slowly, "but I am ever distrustful of untried tools. At least be sure to have this barbarian killed before he leaves this house, if he does not completely fall in with your plans."

"Be sure of that," Cleona said. "I will have men waiting outside each door. And now go, my Eutyches. Use the secret passage, for my Varangian friend is already waiting in the entrance hall and he may become impatient."

THE Strategos lifted a tapestry that hung against one of the walls and pressed on one of the stones with the tips of his fingers. A narrow door opened in the wall, moving on silent hinges. A moment later, when Eutyches had gone

through, the door closed again and there was no sign that there had ever been any opening in the wall. At Cleona's sharp call, a young slave girl came in to clear away the wine glasses and other signs that she had been entertaining company.

Bjorne still stood motionless where he was, in the shadows of the corridor, with his jaw muscles tense and his eyes gone cold as drifting pack-ice. He was in the grip of a half dozen different emotions, none of them pleasant. There was anger that set him bitting his lips; and there was chagrin that he had been so completely deceived by the Byzantian woman. There was shame that even such as she could consider the son of Harald Redbeard capable of poisoning the man whose salt he ate. And even now, there was jealousy that Eutyches was favored by Cleona while *he* was to be only a tool! At last Bjorne shook his heavy shoulders and began to move quietly back down the corridor—but he was a second too late.

Glancing swiftly around the room to make sure that everything was in order, Cleona's quick eye must have caught a flash of Bjorne's armor through the gap in the curtains. In an instant she had crossed the room and thrown the hangings aside.

"*You!*" she said. "You overheard!"

It was a scene that Bjorne Harald's son was never to forget; one of those momentary tableaux that remain forever stamped on the memory. The luxurious room in the soft glow of the lamplight . . . Cleona's graceful and scantily clad figure standing erect with one arm outstretched in an accusing gesture . . . her dark hair a sable cloud about the softness of her shoulders . . . and the slave girl's frightened face. Then acid Byzantian curses poured from Cleona's writhing lips, and she beat her fist against a gong that stood on an inlaid tabourette beside the door.

Bjorne did not wait. He could not strike down an unarmed woman, but he had heard enough to know that the note of the gong was the signal for his death, so he turned and ran down the corridor at top speed, drawing his sword as he went.

Even above the jingle of his own armor and the swift pound of his running feet, Bjorne could sense a stir and bustle about the palace. Several other gongs had now taken up the signal given by Cleona. He met the first of the guards as he neared the end of the passage. A liveried Greek swordsman tried to block his path, but Bjorne ran clean over him by superior weight and strength.

There were two more men in the entrance hall. Spearmen of the palace guard, they crouched to meet him with their short spears leveled, but Bjorne laughed through his teeth. His fighting blood was growing hot now! Try to trap a Viking, would they? Bjorne shouted, and leaped at the two spearmen with his heavy blade whirling in both hands, and his flailing steel shattered the spear shafts like reeds. As the two men fell back and groped half-heartedly for their short swords, Bjorne leaped for the outer gate and drew back the bars.

The pair of Greeks stationed outside were made of sterner mettle than the others. They fought, and for a moment the narrow street was filled with the clash of weapons and the hoarse cries of fighting men, but the pair of slight Greeks were no match for a burly Viking in full armor. Bjorne's swift point took one of them in the throat, and a moment later a slash of his heavy blade had laid the other man prone and groaning on the ground. Then Bjorne sprinted off down the street, heading toward the waterfront.

AS HE ran, Bjorne laughed. He felt better. The clash of steel had cleansed the last of the cobwebs from his mind, so that he had no longer either jealousy or regret in connection with the Lady Paleologi, but only a great relief at being clear of her. If it had not been for his fortunate error in picking

the wrong corridor when he went to seek for the attendant, he would never have left the palace alive. Once he was closeted with Cleona, and she was beginning to enlist him in the plot to poison the Emperor, she would have posted armed guards outside every door and the odds would have been too heavy for him to get away. It was his early arrival that had upset her schedule.

There were few people abroad in the dark streets of Byzantium at this late hour. The scattered pedestrians stepped prudently aside at the sight of a man running swiftly and with a naked sword in his hand. There was no pursuit, however, and after a while Bjorne slowed down to a walk and sheathed his blade. Naturally, Cleona would not dare have her uniformed servitors chase a Varangian guard through the streets of the city! The danger he faced in the future would be one of assassination.

It was quiet along the docks, with the black waters lapping the strakes of the drowsy fleet and the starlight gleaming on the armor of the sentries on duty. A warm wind blew in from the Bosphorous. There was a faint creak of straining cordage and swaying spars as the ships shifted slowly at their moorings, and Bjorne Harald's son drew a long breath of relief. Matters of intrigue and assassination could wait till he came back to Byzantium. Tomorrow he was setting out on a voyage!

Evan the Outborn was on guard at the gangway. His thin, square-jawed face creased in a smile as he lifted his axe in salute.

"We wondered what sort of errand had taken you ashore at this late hour," he said with the easy democracy of the Norland Carls.

Bjorne grinned. "It turned out to be a sour sort of errand," he said, "but it doesn't matter now."

SOON after dawn, when the eastern horizon was still banded with saffron clouds, the battle fleet of Byzantium stood out around the Golden Horn for the open waters of the Mediterranean. A squadron of slender-hulled pamphylions darted in the lead like a school of flying fish, their oar blades flashing in the sun. Behind them came the great dromons, their double banks of oars swinging all together, and then came the varied vessels that made up the rest of the fleet.

Bjorne leaned on the rail of the bireme *Acteon*, his flagship, and watched the gilded skyline of Byzantium fade into the horizon astern. He was glad to be at sea again, Viking-faring with a stout force under his command, but this expedition meant that much more delay in the search for vengeance that had brought him to this scented land. And there would be trouble when he got back to Mikligard. With Cleona Paleologi for an open enemy, he would be in constant danger of the assassin's dagger or the poisoner's potion. Then Bjorne shrugged. The woman could not harm him here, and what happened later would be in the hands of the grim Norns who spun the fates of man.

Bjorne was in command of the scouting squadron, which consisted of his dromon flagship and five pamphylions. All these craft were a far cry from the thong-bound long-ships on which he had been reared! It was odd to be on a vessel as big in sheer size as this bireme, to see the bronzed backs of the slaves swaying rhythmically at the oars while his own Norsemen idled about the decks, to hear the musical note of the gong the hortator struck to keep time for the rowers. Then Eric the Scald came swaggering along the deck with a broad grin on his bronzed face.

"Ho, Bjorne, the axes are hungry!" he said. "By the Hammer of Thor, I grow as soft and fat as an old woman! I hope we see action soon, to take the stiffness out of our joints!"

Days passed, with the smooth routine of a fleet at sea. Some mornings later, on another dawn, a chill mist shrouded the face of the waters as Bjorne's squadron—ranging far in advance of the main

fleet—drew near the Sidonese coast. The dromon *Acteon* crept through the mist slowly, with her gong muffled and her oars swinging in a short half-stroke, while the pamphylions kept pace with her on each side. Though thick as ever at the water's edge, the mist was thinning out at the top and the peaks of brown hills began to loom ahead.

"The mist will soon clear, and we'll see if the hunting be good!" Bjorne said, leaning on the haft of his axe on the poop.

All the crew were at their stations. The archers lined the bulwarks with bows ready and sheafs of loosened arrows close to hand! the heavily armed Varangians were grouped by companies amidships. Some Greeks in leather jerkins were moving about the bronze flame-throwers in the waist. Still the bireme crept forward, the steel-shot ram at her prow slipping through the water with only a faint ripple.

At last came the change! Half of the sand in the hortator's hour glass had run through when a breeze swept over the sea and split the mist into dozens of broken and rapidly vanishing streamers. Before them lay the white-walled city of Sidon, and out from the harbor charged a squadron of a dozen ships with their lateen sails spread to the breeze and their oars threshing in a hasty beat. Their decks were crowded with men. The clash of cymbals and the throb of kettle drums drifted before them on the breeze.

Bjorne studied the Moslem squadron with a grim smile. They outnumbered the vessels in his own force—but he knew the worth of his men, and he had come to know the value of the Byzantine ships. He slipped the thong of his battle ax over his wrist.

"Send one pamphylion back to the main fleet to report, old warrior!" he said to Eric the Scald. "Then we'll give these Easterners a taste of our steel."

"Good!" the old Viking exulted as he hurried astern.

Every man went into action.

THERE seemed to be little order or discipline in the Sideonese fleet, and and one speedy galeass had drawn well ahead of its fellows. Bjorne beckoned to his trumpeter, and a moment later a signal call sent two of the pamphylions swooping down on the Moslem vessel like coursing wolves. Her catapult spoke a moment later, and a boulder raised a mighty splash as it fell near the bow of one of the Byzantine ships.

Swiftly three vessels drew together, their catapults loosing their missiles as fast as they could be handled. As the range shortened, the stones struck home on both sides, either smashing into the timbers with splintering force or wreaking red ruin among the men clustered on deck. Arrows had begun to streak through the air. The clash of cymbals sounded defiantly from the Moslem vessel, and the high-pitched battle cry of Islam floated across the water: *"Allah il-allahu! Din Mohammed!"*

With their oars swaying all together, the pair of Byzantine vessels closed in on both sides of the galeass. From their higher sides they loosed a rain of arrows that left the Moslem benches a shambles, then they swept in for the death blow. Standing on the poop of his dromon, Bjorne saw a torrent of scarlet and steel spill over the bulwarks as the Varangians boarded the galeass, and he saw the mass of white-clad swordsmen rise to meet them.

The fight was short and sharp. A few minutes later the Varangians abandoned the galeass—a desolate hulk that drifted away with all her oars trailing idly and a column of black smoke rising from amidships. The pair of pamphylions wheeled about and streaked back to rejoin the squadron, with the rest of the Moslem fleet yelping at their heels.

As the main squadrons came together, a pair of big galleys swept down upon Bjorne's ship. He nodded to Eric the Scald.

"Let them come," he said, and the old Viking barked a command to the men at the war engines.

The bireme began to show her teeth. A ballista twanged from a starboard sponson, and with a thud and a crash the forward catapult went into action. The bowmen yelped in shrill excitement as they clustered along the bulwarks. Boulders flew back and forth as both galleys closed in, and then Bjorne looked down at the young Greek in command of the fire throwers in the waist.

"Loose the fire!" he said, and lifted one arm over his head.

THE long bronze tubes on the *Acteon* slanted slightly higher, and a man stepped forward with a blazing torch. The Greek officer threw his weight against a long lever. There was a sharp hissing of compressed air—and then a sudden burst of flame came from the muzzle of each tube!

High in the air arched the twin streams of fire, one to each side. The blazing mixture of naphtha and sulphur and other chemicals burned wherever it hit, burned even on the surface of the sea, and both galleys backed water in a smother of foam as they saw their peril. Their oar blades bent like whip shafts, and their crews shouted in alarm.

The galley to starboard managed to veer away from the fire, but the other was struck amidships. At once she became a torch! The dreaded Greek Fire set her instantly aflame across the deck and bulwarks, while the fire ran swiftly up her tarred rigging. She lost headway. Bjorne dropped his arm as a signal to the Greek to cut off the fire, and then cupped his hands to bellow new commands.

Around came the *Acteon,* swinging swiftly as the men at the steering oars threw their weight against the long sweeps, while the blue waters were churned to a foaming white maelstrom as the starboard banks backed water to counteract the forward thrust of the port rowers. The bireme turned—and steadied at command—and then leaped forward again with her steel-tipped ram boiling through the troubled waters and the rowers bracing their feet on the beams to get every last pound of power.

The galley tried to swing aside, but the fire had caught many of her rowers and her striped sails were already ablaze. There was no escape. Bjorne saw the Moslem rowers leaving their benches before the threat of the flames, he heard th shrill shouts of alarm. Flights of hasty arrows raced toward the oncoming dromon, feathering themselves in the bulwarks or striking down some of the massed fighters on deck. The intervening strip of water grew ever narrower—and then the bireme struck home!

There was a sharp crackle of splintering oar blades. The Moslem shafts snapped like toothpicks. The steel-tipped ram struck the timbers of the galley's strakes and smashed through them, and punched a hole in her side. Men were thrown to the deck from the shock. The galley's masts quivered like reeds, spinning the hurtling bodies of men down from the tops. Rigging snapped like threads, the foremast came down. The crash of shattering timbers rose to a medley that was like a moan of pain. There was another crash as the second and shorter ram struck home, widening the hole pierced by the first, and the galley heeled sharply.

With her double banks of oars churning the water to foam, the *Acteon* backed slowly away from the shattered and sinking hulk. Already the galley was heeled half over and sinking fast, all ablaze amidships, with the heads of hundreds of swimming men beginning to dot the water around her. At that moment the other galley ranged alongside. She was not built to ram, but she thudded against the bireme's starboard quarter while a horde of swarthy men in pointed helmets surged over the bulwarks with curved scimitars in their hands.

This was the sort of thing for which the Varangians had been waiting. They had learned the Mediterranean form of long-range warfare with catapults and fire tubes, and they realized its value, but

they preferred a hand-to-hand fight of the sort to which they had been bred. Now, as the Moslems boarded their vessel, the Norsemen locked shields and moved aft with a roaring shout.

BJORNE and Eric led them, their bloodstained axes flashing in the sun. The Moslems had no chance. The terrible Viking axes clove through their light helmets and damascened armor as easily as though they had been parchment. The Viking shield-wall moved relentlessly ahead. At the end, the surviving Moslems leaped down into their own vessel and tried to pull away, but the Varangians boarded at their heels and raged up and down the cluttered decks of the galley till all resistance was at an end.

Bjorne wiped the blade of his axe and looked about him. The battle was over, for the remaining Moslem vessels were in full retreat for the shelter of the inner harbor. Aside from the two Moslem craft that Bjorne's dromon had cared for, three others were wrecked and sinking. Of Bjorne's own squadron, one pamphylion was a shattered hulk with a consort standing by to pick up survivors, and another had been badly battered around the poop by stone casters, but the rest were intact. Eric the Scald was grinning broadly as he bandaged a swort cut in his forearm.

"A very pleasant morning, by the Beard of Wodin!" he said. "I think I'll make a saga about it."

"Signal the squadron to withdraw," Bjorne said. "We couldn't fight the whole Sidonese fleet if the Emir should send it out to avenge the squadron we mauled."

The Strategos of the Fleet sent Bjorne's squadron back to Byzantium, to report the first victory. They sailed quietly homeward before favoring winds for several days, and it was about noon of the day before they were due back at the Golden Horn that they sighted a sail coming from the direction of the city. The craft was small, and it had something the appearance of a Norse long-ship. After peering at it with a puzzled frown for a moment, Bjorne sent Hjalmar the Icelander up to the masthead for a better view. The stocky warrior came hastily back to the deck a moment later. His broad face was troubled.

"I'll swear that yonder craft is the *Sword of the North,* Bjorne!" he said. "And she rides low and sluggish, like a ship that is near to sinking!"

STRAVIKOS, the gilded courtier that Bjorne had once rescued from the sea, was propped in the stern of the battered Saxon long-ship. He had two arrows through his chest, and there was a bloody froth on his lips. Equally near death was the *Sword of the North* herself, with her timbers riven by the impact of boulders and her hull filled halfway to the thwarts by sloshing sea water that the constant bailing of her motley crew could not conquer. There were some Greek spearmen in that crew, and a few Moslem sailors, and a pair of Stravikos' slaves.

"It was the strategos Eutyches!" the dying Stravikos gasped as they carried him aboard the dromon and laid him out on the deck planking. "He and that black-hearted witch, Cleona Paleologi! They poisoned the Emperor last evening, and seek to make themselves masters of Byzantium. This ship was tied unguarded at the pier, and I managed to steal her with a few men. The guard ship caught and near sank us before we got away, but a mist came up in the night and we lost them. We sailed in search of you."

"But why?" Bjorne asked.

The Byzantine's pale face flickered with a sardonic smile. "Not because I think you have any affection for me, barbarian! I tried to have you and your men killed when you first landed, for your effrontery aboard your ship, and you must know that. But I now come for revenge, to have *you* take revenge on the murderer of the Emperor."

"What do you mean?"

"The people of the city do not yet know that Agustus is dead or what is happening, and Eutyches is not telling them until he figures out a way of persuading the strategoi to accept *him* as emperor. He holds the inner palace with his own men, but I can tell you of a secret passage that will lead to the dungeons below. You can be in the palace before dawn."

"But why should I go? Palace plots are no affair of mine," Bjorne said.

Stravikos' glazing eyes flickered open again. "There are two reasons why you should go, barbarian. One is because Eutyches is torturing the Saxon girl named Edwina to make her admit that *she* poisoned Agustus, and so lift the blame from his shoulders."

Edwina! Bjorne clenched one fist and slammed it down into the palm of the other hand. He was a fool! In his bitterness at Cleona and his elation at having escaped from her trap that last night in Byzantium, he had completely overlooked the fact that Cleona would be likely to vent her spite on the Saxon girl.

"I go at once!" he rasped.

"There is yet another reason," Stravikos whispered. "Once you asked me if I knew of a Byzantian officer with a star-shaped scar on his right arm. Eutyches has such a scar."

"I go at once," Bjorne repeated.

Stravikos gave him the directions for finding the secret passage, and at the end his whispered words were only just audible.

"You are the tool of my revenge, barbarian! I have been true to my salt!" he said—and died.

Calling the pamphylions of his squadron alongside the *Acteon*, Bjorne took the Norsemen from each crew aboard the bireme and replaced them with men of other races. At the end, his own vessel was manned only by men of his own blood. Then he ordered the lighter ships to swing around and return to the fleet without him. He could see the puzzled wonder on the faces of the Greeks commanding the pamphylions, but they saluted and went back to their own craft. At once, while the cruisers wheeled to retrace their courses, the dromon headed at full speed for the Golden Horn.

ALL the rest of that day and all through the night, the big bireme plowed ahead toward Mikligard. She went like a Norland vessel now, for big-thewed Varangians had laid aside their armor to replace most of the slaves at the oars. Stilled was the gong of the hortator; instead, big Eric the Scald clashed the flat of his sword against a shield to keep time while he roared out a war song of the Wicking-folk to hearten the rowers. Hjalmar the Icelander nodded with satisfaction as he stood at the steering oar.

"This is more like old times, Bjorne!" he said. "We should take this craft for our own."

"We have already done so!" Bjorne said grimly.

Bjorne himself never left the *Acteon's* poop. Grim-faced and white-lipped he stood here, watching the horizon ahead or else walking nervously to and fro. At last he knew the identity of his enemy, of the gilded Byzantine officer in secret league with the sea rovers, and his long trail was nearing an end. But what of Edwina? That thought set Bjorne biting his lips till he tasted the salt blood. Stravikos had said that Eutyches was already torturing Edwina—and it would be many hours more before he could reach Mikligard. He might have a double vengeance to perform, but he would probably be too late to save the girl. When an old Saxon, the leader of Edwina's Wessex men, came to him with hesitant questions, Bjorne looked him squarely in the eye.

"I hold myself to blame for Edwina's peril, Cedric," he said quietly. "It is due to my thoughtlessness. If we arrive too late to save her, I shall not survive the fighting."

It lacked an hour of dawn when the

Bireme at last came to the inner harbor of Byzantium and was challenged by the guard ship. A hail came drifting across the black water, and Bjorne cupped his hands to his mouth as he replied.

"Dromon *Acteon*, back from the battle fleet to report the first victory over the Emir of Sidon!" he shouted.

After a moment the reply came back. "Pass in, *Acteon*. Report to the Strategos of the Docks in the morning."

IN ACCORDANCE with the directions that Stravikos had given him, Bjorne moved his ship close ashore, some distance from the Imperial Palace. They crept inland with muffled and slow-moving oars, Bjorne standing in the bow, alternately glancing up at the stars and trying to peer shoreward through the blackness of a moonless night. It was so still that even the muffled thud of the oars and the gurgle of the water seemed loud in his ears. At last the bow grounded gently on a sloping beach, and the Varangians began to drop downward into the shallow water. There were some olive trees ahead, around a cluster of old tombs.

Bjorne had been in Byzantium long enough to know that the Imperial Palace was honeycombed with secret passages. Some were generally known to the guards, others were known to but a single trusted officer. Stravikos had been the guardian of one such passage, and when Bjorne pressed in a certain way upon the wall of one of the tombs, it opened to reveal a narrow flight of steps leading down into the blackness. At the foot of the stairs he found the lamp that Stravikos had told him would be there, a lamp that still burned as the courtier had left it. Bjorne refilled it from a jar of oil that stood nearby, then handed the lamp to Eric and started down the passage.

They went through a stone-walled tunnel far below ground. Water sometimes dripped from the ceiling, and lichens blotched the walls.

With silent haste, weapons in their hands, the Norsemen went along the passage. There was no sound aside from the soft tread of their sandals, and Bjorne hissed warningly whenever a sword belt jingled or a scabbard tapped against the stones. The passage seemed endless, but at last there came a faint flicker of light ahead. Bjorne whispered to Eric to wait, and went cautiously ahead.

The light grew stronger as he groped his way forward. He could hear the faint sound of voices. At last he came to a bolted door that was pierced by several peep holes. The stone on the other side of the door was carved, the pattern so arranged that the holes were invisible from that side, and Bjorne looked through into the room beyond.

The secret passage had led to a vast and vaulted underground chamber. It was lighted by a dozen urn-shaped lamps, but their light seemed dim and fitful in that gloomy place. There were a score of spearmen lounging there, and several swarthy and brutish men in leather jerkins. Torturers of the palace! Weird and monstrous engines of pain stood all about, and Bjorne knew that he looked in upon the main torture room of the Lords of Mikligard.

Eutyches and Cleona were sitting on a carved bench at one end of the chamber, a bench that had been set on a square of red carpet. Bjorne's grip tightened on the handle of his axe for a moment, as he saw his three enemies there together, but then he turned to look at Edwina.

The girl wore only a loin cloth, and her hands were fettered. She was walking slowly up and down between two of the torturers who held her by the elbows, walking with unsteady feet while her body drooped with utter weariness. It was evident that she was nearly asleep on her feet, but the guards continually jerked her into wakefulness to keep her moving.

"Agree to confess publicly that you poisoned Agustus, and then you'll have a

swift and merciful execution!" Eutyches said.

The Saxon girl shook her head without speaking, and Cleona made a gesture of anger. The Byzantine woman's eyes were hot and impatient behind her purple veil.

"For two days we have tried to break this stubborn wench by these means, Eutyches! Give her a taste of the hot irons!" she said.

The strategos shook his head. "You forget that our position is none too secure, and that we must have this confession *believed* by the strategoi and the nobles. They would not believe the words of a broken and bloodied wreck. Her body must be unmarked when she confesses before the assembly—but I will have her strung up by the thumbs again."

EUTYCHES turned to give a new order to the torturers, but the words stuck in his throat. Bjorne Harald's son had opened the door at the end of the passage and was now leaning on his axe, his face grim and terrible in the lamplight.

There was a moment's dead pause, all the Greeks staring at the tall figure of the Viking as though they suspected black magic. Then the spell broke. Eutyches shouted, Bjorne leaped forward, and after him came Eric the Scald with two hundred angry Varangians raging at his heels.

The shadowy, vaulted chamber was filled with the clash of steel and the cries of fighting men. The terrible Northern axes sheered through the gilded Greek armor as though it had been leather. Bjorne pressed his way through the throng to reach Eutyches, and at last there came a moment when the strategos stood at bay in a corner of the chamber with his naked sword in his hand.

"On guard, sea robber!" Bjorne barked. "Renegade! You did not recall, when you saw me as a Varangian officer, that I was one of the men you plucked from the sea the day your *bucca* took the long-ship *Valkyrja!* Learn now that he who makes slaves of Norsemen digs his own grave!"

The Byzantian's thin face was twisted in a snarl as he moved forward, right foot advanced. Bjorne cut with his axe then, but Eutyches parried the blow with his shield while his point darted for Bjorne's throat. The Greek officer was a master of the blade! His point and edge were ever threatening, and his sword was like a living thing in his hand. Several of the Varangians began to edge near, but Bjorne snarled at them to keep back. The son of Harald Red-beard would finish his own job alone.

Steadily Bjorne pressed Eutyches, without pause, and his superior strength began to tell. Beads of sweat were standing out all over the Greek's thin face now, and his cold eyes held a shadow of fear. Once his blade had cut deeply into Bjorne's arm, but the Viking's attack never weakened. The smashing blows of his axe had battered Eutyches shield into a bent and nearly useless thing.

Then came the end. Once again the Greek made one of his swift sword-thrusts for the throat, and this time Bjorne twisted aside instead of parrying. As the point slid past his throat, Bjorne thrust out with the end of his axe as though it were a sword. The impact of the heavy weapon against his chest, with all Bjorne's weight behind it, threw the strategos off balance. As he fought to hold his footing, Bjorne swung the axe aloft. The heavy blade flashed through the air in a gleaming arc, then shore through helm and skull alike. All the way down to the jaw bone he clove the renegade nobleman. Eutyches of Thessaly would poison no more emperors, and sink no more Norse long-ships on the Inland Sea!

PANTING as he wrenched his axe free from the Greek's skull, Bjorne looked about him. Bodies were scattered thickly on the floor of the torture chamber,

and the Varangians were cleaning up the last resistance. Cleona was in the grip of a pair of brawny Vikings who had seized her before she could flee through the far door. Her crossed wrists were lashed together with a leather thong. As Bjorne watched, the Paleologi princess suddenly bent her head and raised her bound hands to her mouth.

The poison ring! Cleona stiffened, the pallor of death already blanching her face as she swayed on her feet. One of her many gems had carried a dose of deadly poison concealed under the bezel, a last resort in the case of some dire extremity such as this, and the daughter of the Paleologi had taken her own life in preference to captivity.

"It's just as well," Eric rumbled with satisfaction. "That saves us the trouble of hanging her! And by the Hammer of Thor, I swear that I would have strung her up to that ceiling beam if she had lived!"

Bjorne had cut Edwina's bonds and wrapped her in his cloak. She was drugged by weariness, but otherwise unharmed. When Eric the Scald came to him for orders, Bjorne climbed up on a bench.

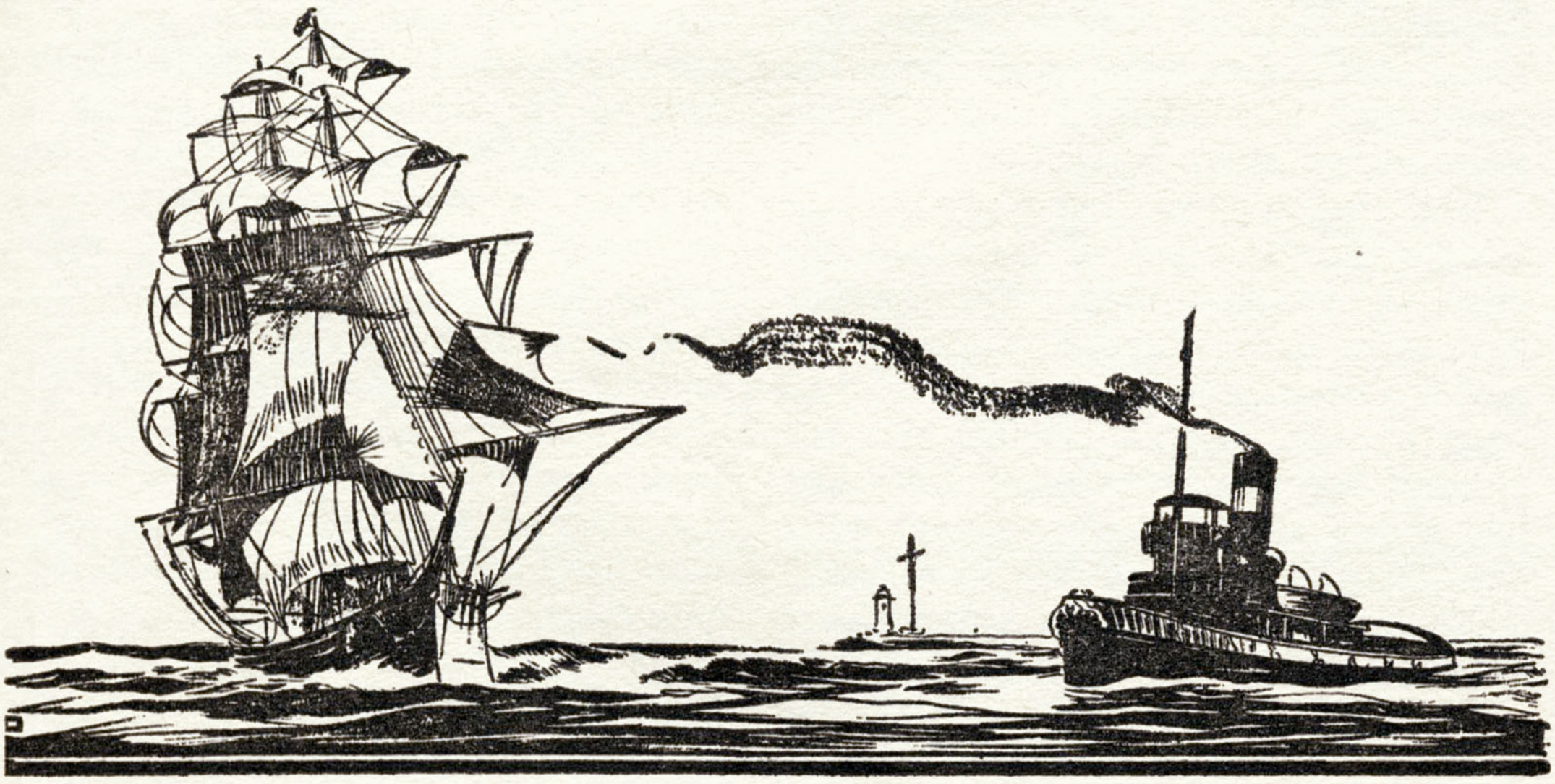
"Hear me, carls!" he shouted, still holding the Saxon girl in his arms. "Hear me, you men of Snorrefjell, and Saxons of Wessex, and all you other Varangians! We rule this place at the moment, and not one has escaped to carry the news of our coming to other parts of the palace. There will be a new ruler in Mikligard in a day or so, but what do we care for palace politics? Now that Agustus is dead, we are all discharged of our oath as Varangians. I say that we go quietly back to the beach by the same passage through which we entered, and keep the bireme for our own. We will change her name and have a new *Sword of the North,* and then sail away from these waters to our own Northern seas. Are all agreed?"

They answered him with a ringing about, clashing swords and axes against their shields as they cheered him. Eric tossed his heavy weapon clear up to the vaulted ceiling, and caught it by the haft again as it fell. Bjorne, carefully carrying Edwina in his arms, turned toward the entrance to the passage.

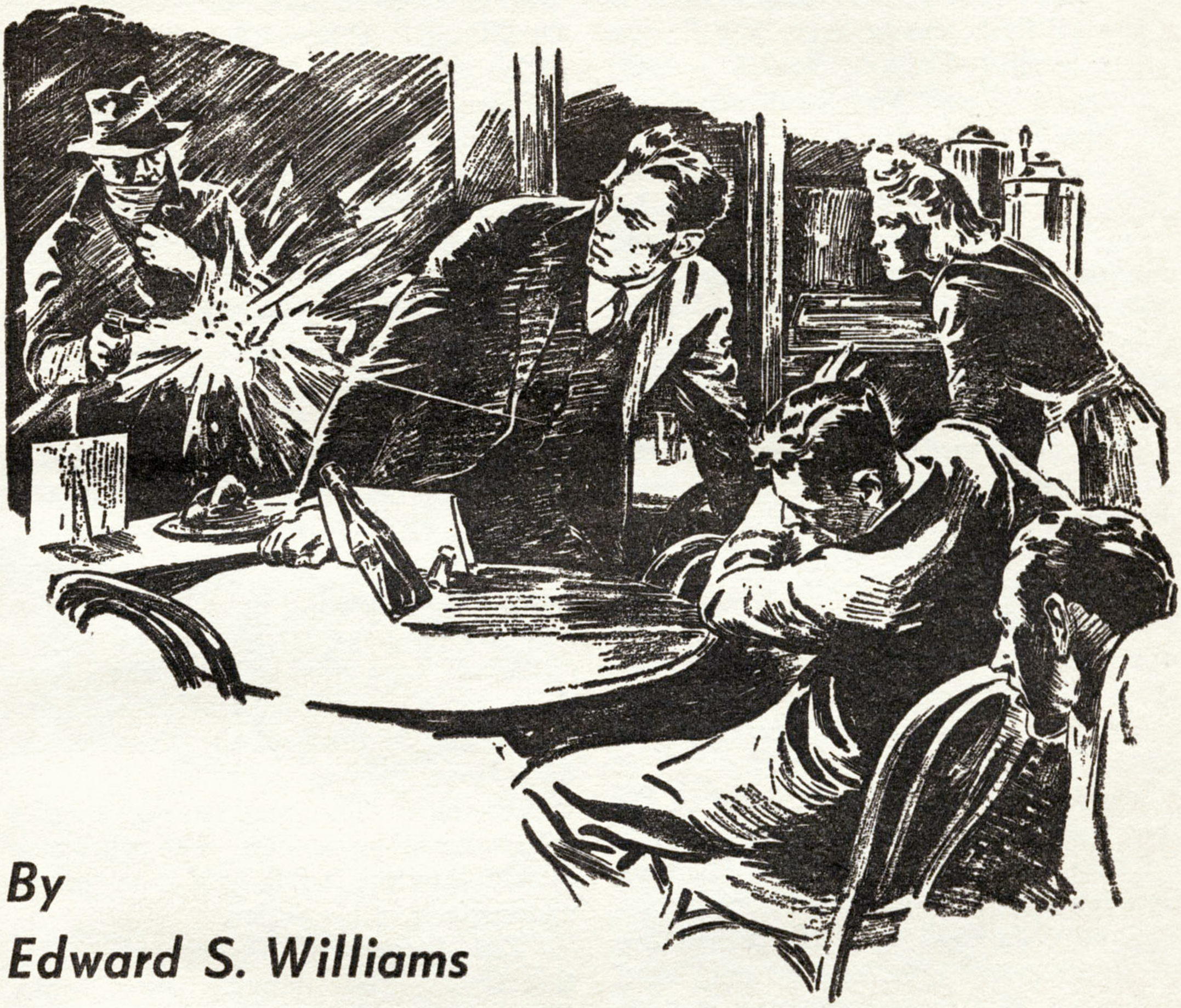
"Does the plan suit you too, little Saxon?" he asked.

The girl nodded drowsily.

"We will be going home," she said softly. "Home. . . ."



Hangman's Loop



The big plate-glass window behind Stretch Mayhew rang with the drilling impact of bullets.

By

Edward S. Williams

IT WAS after six. There was a foggy haze overhead that turned street lamps into pale, fuzzy oranges floating in the murk. The whole block of dingy, third-rate storefronts was dark, save for the windowful of assorted junk with three gilt balls painted on the glass, and the word Bregoff.

There was still light in the pawn shop. The man who approached its door wore his hat low over his eyes, its brim turned down all around. His silk muffler was high on his throat; when he ducked his head it hid his mouth and chin. The collar of his coat was turned up.

He might have been so wrapped against the chill of a December fog, or he might have had other reasons. A lot of people who stopped in to see Izzy One Eye weren't anxious to be readily identifiable. For Izzy the One Eye Bregoff was a fence.

He came from his back room at the flat gabble of a cracked bell that was affixed to the door on a spring. Izzy was something of a surprise. He was young, dapper, almost handsome. There was nothing wrong with his eyes. But he had inherited the name, as well as the business, of his father whose one glass eye glared fixedly, blankly at his customers while his good one, veiled behind slitted

lids, made searching observation. Bregoff Senior had been dead these many years, but Izzy One Eye remained.

So, also, remained the atmosphere. It was good for business. Izzy Bregoff, who spoke perfect English, smiled greasily and said, "Yess? You vant somet'ing, my frien'?"

"These—" The man in the turned-down hat spoke nervously. He took his closed left fist from his pocket and opened it, adding with a husky burr, "They're genuine and I know what they're worth. They're heirlooms. I heard about you from a—friend. How much'll you give me—outright?"

Bregoff glanced at the pearls in the other's palm, then stared. They were genuine, all right. They were more than that—they were hot! His breath sucked sharply through his teeth; his greedy soul yearned and the connoisseur in him cried out for possession of these gems. Even in the dimness their rosy translucence was a delight. He reached for them.

The caller kept his right hand in his coat pocket. Izzy Bregoff snapped on a brighter lamp on his counter. He took up a jeweler's glass and fixed it, monocle-like, into his right eye. He turned the pearls over and over, one by one. And the greed in him overwhelmed caution as well as the connoisseur.

He did not know this man. Ordinarily a thief would have to come to him known, or at least well vouched for, for Bregoff to handle his loot. But this was different. These—he could have sworn it—were six of the stolen Morgan pearls, hot as the hinges of hell. Somewhere there were a hundred and ninety-four more just like these. Perfectly matched; valued at sixty thousand dollars. And six could be Izzy's for the asking.

These six alone, he thought, are worth two grand to me—maybe more. Overnight, and without risk. Can I hold this mug here while I phone Mayhew? Would the guy fall for that old stuff? I don't think so—and he's got a gun. But for two grand—

Wait! Maybe I've got a way. Take longer, but maybe it'll work. . . .

Slowly, as though reluctant to stop looking at those flawless beauties, Izzy One Eye straightened, took the glass out of his eye.

"You haf more of these perhaps, yess? These heirlooms?"

"What d'you mean, more?" The man's body stiffened visibly.

"Unly," said Izzy, "that I could gif you more. These pearls are matched, my frien'. With fifty—a hundred—t'ink vat a beautiful necklace, a tiara, might be made! You haf more you sell?"

THE man with the muffled face stared at Izzy One Eye under the brim of his hat. Without moving his head, his eyes cut toward the street and came back. "How much," he asked hoarsely, "say for—a hundred like these?"

"Aiee!" Izzy cried softly. "For a hundred, ten t'ousand dollars!" And in his excitement he dropped the glass that he had been wiping, polishing with his handkerchief. The small tube of bakelite rolled across the counter. The other man caught it before it fell, held it as though unconscious of his action.

"Ten thousand!" he rasped. "*Ten* thousand! You damned gyp artist, they'd be worth three times that!"

"Indeed?" Izzy shrugged and rubbed his hands. "Perhaps—could be, my frien', I give you twelve. But it would be a gemble. I t'ink ve understand each other, eh?"

Silently the man handed Izzy his glass. The fence accepted it in the hand that still held his handkerchief. Then the other snarled, "You robber! If I had any more I certainly wouldn't sell 'em for that! But I need some money now. How much for these six?"

Izzy picked up the pearls carefully from the velvet mat on which they lay. Lovingly, he cradled them in his hand. Without looking up he breathed, "Fife hundred—I should say," he added quickly when the other started a protest. "But I make it seven-fifty."

"One thousand, blast you! And that's robbery!"

"Eight and a half is fair," Izzy said firmly. "One cent higher I could not go."

"Get the money— Wait!"

As Izzy Bregoff started to turn toward the rear, the other man stopped him. "Yess?" Izzy questioned.

"Where are you going? There's your safe—behind you!"

"Of course. But in that tin can I keep no monies. That is for burglars to crack hopefully. Only a minute, and I get—"

"All right. But listen, Bregoff! You leave that door open! If I hear anything that sounds like a telephone dial—"

"I t'ink," said Izzy One Eye, "ve understand each other." He winked and went away.

Only after the deal was closed, after his visitor had gone, did Izzy Bregoff go to the telephone. And only because he saw a quick profit and no risk did he go to the phone at all. He called Stretch Mayhew. He was so absorbed in thinking of easy money that he didn't see the face at his back room window, which opened out onto a small courtyard in the rear.

Neither did he notice the shadowy figure that tailed him when he closed up the shop and walked toward the subway. . . .

STRETCH MAYHEW was a very tall man in grey tweeds. He looked thin, but it was his seventy-five longitudinal inches that fostered that illusion. Actually, he was the possessor of a considerable amount of the long, lean, ropy muscle that makes for quickness, toughness and endurance, rather than brute strength. He had a homely, pleasant face.

He chose a table near the window, where he could watch for Bregoff.

The waitress who came to take his order was Eve Tabor, and she was the reason why Mayhew came out of his way to eat dinner two or three nights a week at this grubby place.

Eve Tabor was the wife of one, Paul Tabor. Personally, neither of them meant a thing to Stretch Mayhew. But after a few weeks of observation, Mayhew was beginning to think that charming, pretty Eve Tabor might not be so innocent as she looked. Might know where her husband had stashed the Morgan pearls. And that *did* mean something. There was a standing ten grand reward offer, by the company which had insured the pearls, for their recovery.

Two hundred of them—matched pearls that had taken a long time to collect. Max Morgan, Inc., the manufacturing jewelers that had made the collection, was a relatively small firm. But Max Morgan, owner of the business, was something of a nut about pearls. Even though it had strained his resources, he had completed the collection. He had shown the pearls to a prospective customer and had been commissioned to make them at once into a necklace.

That was on a Saturday. That night the pearls were placed in the company's safe, a formidable, modern affair to which only Morgan and his office manager knew the combination. On Monday, when the safe was opened, the box was still there, but the pearls were not.

Max Morgan, owner or not, had a bad time. So did Oscar Blanchard, the office manager. So did the rest of the employees, one after another, for it was an inside job. No faintest doubt about that.

There were plenty of suspects, at first. Besides Morgan and Blanchard, there were Robert Orme, an engraver—Paul Tabor, a jewel setter—an old fellow named Goldsmith who was, curiously, a goldsmith. There were an apprentice worker and a stenographer whose names Stretch Mayhew had forgotten.

But all of them, except the apprentice and the steno, had had access to the safe during the day. They all worked with the precious stones and metals which were kept in the safe. Each had occasion to go to the safe to put away a finished object or to get more material.

In such a small firm, as Morgan himself pointed out, they were more like a family than a business organization.

There had been safeguards, of course. The contents of the safe were checked every night. Each pennyweight of gold, every diamond chip was accounted for under the supervision of Max Morgan. But even then it was possible, in a case of something like those pearls which were in a small, closed box, for a determined thief to have a substitute box ready and to exchange boxes in an opportune moment.

It was Paul Tabor and Robert Orme who had done the checking on that Saturday night, with Morgan supervising as usual. Morgan himself had closed the safe. The investigation, both by Police and insurance company dicks, ran round in circles until one little fact came to light.

Eve Tabor had a new three-hundred-dollar fur coat—and Max Morgan was not noted for liberality in the matter of salaries. But Paul Tabor had paid cash for that coat on the very Saturday night when the Morgan pearls were last seen.

THE case broke wide open from there on. It was almost too easy. Paul Tabor said it was his wife's birthday present—that he'd saved for two years for that coat. But he'd had no savings account in any bank. He said he'd just saved the money in a tin box at home. A little tin box with a padlock; he showed it to them.

But that story blew up when an extra persistent insurance dick found one of the missing pearls in the Tabor apartment. Apparently it had been dropped and had rolled into a crack between the floor and shrunken baseboard. And a couple of days later, the D.A.'s office dug out the fact that Paul Tabor had done a year, as a boy, in a Midwestern Reform School—for theft.

But the conviction of Paul Tabor didn't get Max Morgan back his pearls, nor did it release the insurance company from the necessity of paying Max Morgan sixty thousand dollars. After some more industrious sleuthing, the insurance company posted a reward. Ten grand for the recovery of the Morgan pearls, and not too many questions asked. That was where Stretch Mayhew became interested.

She was a pretty thing, this Eve Tabor, he thought now as he watched her scribble his order on her pad. But that might not stop her from being a crook.

For weeks, off and on, Mayhew had kept an eye on Eve Tabor. The insurance dicks had done that too, he knew. And like them, he'd about decided that the girl was honest, that she hadn't known anything about her husband's crookedness. But then Mayhew had changed his mind. Marty Baker had been turned loose from the Pen—the same one where Paul Tabor was confined—and Marty had made a beeline for Eve Tabor. That alone was enough to excite suspicion.

Marty Baker was an old-style hood. Boss of a gang of rum-runners, Marty had had plenty, twelve years ago, when the cops finally had nailed him down with a ten-to-twenty stretch for second-degree murder. But Marty's bank roll had been picked clean in the trials and appeals that preceded his trip up the river. Now he was living in a cheap hotel, evidently broke—but calling on Eve Tabor two or three times a week. And eating his meals here, where she worked as a waitress.

That's why Stretch Mayhew had started coming here. Already Eve Tabor had accepted him as a regular patron. Pretty soon the time would be ripe for a hopeful, "What're you doing later on, honey? Ever get lonesome?" But not tonight.

IZZY BREGOFF had phoned just as Mayhew was leaving his office. Izzy was a fence, and Mayhew could have proved it if he'd been so minded—and Izzy knew it. But being a private op

untroubled by a rigid conscience, Mayhew saw no good Izzy One Eye could do him in jail.

Weeks ago, Mayhew had told Izzy to keep his eyes skinned for unset pearls that might turn up in his own peculiar market. He'd told him that a lead to the right pearls would be worth a two-grand cut in the reward. And Izzy had phoned tonight, close-mouthed, but excited about something. He'd agreed to meet Mayhew here.

"Mr. Mayhew—" Eve Tabor set his plate down in front of him.

"Yeah?" Mayhew drawled absently—then his eyes snapped up. She'd called him by his name!

"I—I guess you think," she faltered, "it's funny, me speaking to you like this. But I've seen your pictures in the paper. Look, I get through my shift here in five minutes. When you've finished your dinner would you mind meeting me outside? You see, we aren't supposed to talk to patrons here, but I—I want to talk to you."

Mayhew almost laughed. Here was his line, and she'd reversed it on him! But then the urge to laugh was gone. Why did she want to see him outside? Was she fingering him—for Marty Baker, for instance? Had he stumbled unaware so close to those pearls that his quarry had now become the hunter?

A man's figure crossed his thought-obscured field of vision. Mayhew didn't realize, until the newcomer had taken a table far down the room, that it was Marty Baker. But then he said, "Why, yeah—sure. After I've eaten. Where'll you be?"

"Outside." She smiled beautifully. "I'll see you when you come out. Letting you know like this, I won't feel quite so much like a—a girl out for a pick up. Because I'm not that. Well—be seeing you."

She went toward the rear and disappeared—but did she nod slightly as she passed Marty Baker?

He couldn't be sure. But as he applied himself to his steak, another thought occurred to him: was there any connection between his date with Izzy and Eve Tabor's sudden desire to talk to him?

He wished now that he'd thought of that before he asked Izzy to meet him here. But the harm, if any, was done. And where the hell was Izzy Bregoff?

Fifteen minutes passed—twenty. Mayhew began to fidget, to swear under his breath. He ordered more coffee, and chain-smoked cigarettes, watching Marty Baker. Then, without Mayhew having seen him enter, Izzy Bregoff stood grinning down at him.

"Well!" The op grated irritably. "Where the devil have you been? Think I've got nothing better to do than—"

"Take it easy, Stretch," Bregoff said. "I've got something for you. I've got—"

"Pearls?"

"Yeah."

"Sit down."

The big plate-glass window behind Stretch Mayhew rang with the drilling impact of bullets. There wasn't a whole lot of noise—it was a small-caliber gun. But Izzy Bregoff didn't sit down. He lay down, full length, on the floor. Holding his belly in both hands, he bent slowly forward until he lost balance and toppled. His head hitting the tile floor sounded like a dropped coconut. Izzy the One Eye squirmed around for a second, his legs threshing, a queer groaning noise in his throat. Then he lay still.

Mayhew saw Marty Baker disappearing through the door that led to the restaurant's kitchen. Stretch Mayhew cursed, but he didn't pursue. Izzy Bregoff might not be dead. . . .

HE SAW several things at once, all of them blurred and run together like the impression on a multiple-exposed negative. Things had happened too fast for any one man to get it all.

As he bent over Izzy Bregoff there was in his mind the picture of Marty Baker's disappearing figure—the bullet-starred window, and the vague and in-

distinct figure of a man beyond it with a flame-spouting gun in his hand. That let Eve Tabor out—at least out of the shooting. She could still have been the finger, and some of those bullets could have been intended for Stretch Mayhew.

That man! Mayhew hadn't seen his face at all. He'd had only a glimpse of a figure with a turned down hat, turned up collar, and instead of a face a dark, indistinct blur—probably a scarf.

He saw all that vaguely, as well as the blood-soaked front of Izzy's shirt when he turned him over and laid back coat and vest. Mayhew counted four separate holes sprayed at random over Izzy Bregoff's midsection. Two of them had punctured lungs, he knew. The other two were lower down; any one of them might be fatal. Together they certainly would be, although there was still a weak pulse in Bregoff's wrist. There was a struggle to breathe that brought a crimson ribbon from the corner of Bregoff's mouth and down over his chest.

Mayhew was aware of screaming waitresses and shouting men, of crowding, staring people all but stepping on him in their horrible eagerness to see. He rose up, roaring, to clear a space around him with savage pushes—to yell to the cashier to phone for an ambulance and the police. Through the front window, fleetingly, he saw Eve Tabor staring in at Izzy Bregoff's body. He saw the tall, dark, good-looking young fellow who ran up beside Eve and caught her arm. He saw Eve look up, startled, then grip the man's arm. It was Robert Orme, engraver, of Max Morgan, Inc. Mayhew dropped back to one knee beside Izzy One Eye; a glass of water, a napkin were in his hand.

He cleared the blood from Bregoff's mouth. He supported the dying man's head in the crook of his arm and said, "Izzy! Izzy—it's me—Stretch! Can you talk? Can you tell me who—"

IZZY BREGOFF'S eyes opened. But by the very look of them Mayhew knew he couldn't see. Izzy's mouth worked. Gurgling, grunting sounds came from his lips. Mayhew strained to hear, but could make no sense of it.

"I—" Bregoff said, "I—loop—fingers—" Then a mouthful of freshly welling blood strangled him.

Mayhew tilted his head, drained off the blood. "Finger—" Bregoff gasped. "Loop. Pearls—" Then he was dead. His eyes stayed open. So did his mouth, and the blood still ran out of it. But he was dead. Mayhew felt the muscular sag that told him when life departed. Gently he laid Izzy Bregoff down on the floor and rose.

A man who might have been the manager yelled after him. "Hey—wait! You can't go! Nobody can leave till the cops—"

"I'm a cop," Mayhew said. His bony, hard shoulder hit the man out of his way. He all but ran into Eve Tabor and Robert Orme as he came out of the revolving door. Eve started to say something, but Mayhew cut her off with a brusque, "Come on. My car's down the block a piece."

"But that man—the gunman!" Eve Tabor gasped. "I saw him! He went down that way—dodged into the alley. I tell you I saw him!"

"Good. Then maybe when you see him again you'll know him. Meanwhile, he got away. You said you wanted to talk. And me—I want to hear you now—plenty! Come on."

They got into Mayhew's car.

"Was he—killed? That man?" Eve asked in a small, trembling voice, from close beside him.

She was in the middle. Robert Orme was in the front seat with them. His arm was frankly, protectively, around Eve Tabor's shoulders.

Mayhew said, "He was killed. You wanted to speak to me?"

"B-but why?" Eve seemed not to hear him. Her voice quavered with horror, or with a very good act. "Was he—anything to you? I mean, connected with a case you might be working on, or something?"

"No," Mayhew lied. "The guy was a small-time crook. The usual finish caught up with him, and happened to when he'd stopped to say hello to me. Sometimes detectives have peculiar friends. Forget him. You had something else on your mind, didn't you?"

"Yes," she said after a pause. "My name is Tabor, Mr. Mayhew—Eve Tabor. Mrs. Paul Tabor. Does that name mean anything to you?"

"Seems it does. Paul Tabor's the one who stole the Morgan pearls, isn't he?"

Her voice hardened. "No! Paul Tabor is the man who is doing time for it, but he didn't steal those pearls!" She paused, and the ring went out of her voice when she said pleadingly, "That's what I wanted to talk to you about, Mr. Mayhew. Paul's innocent. He was framed. I *know* he was, and I want you to prove it and free him. And . . . Oh, excuse me, Bob!

"This is Mr. Orme, Mr. Mayhew. He was a friend of Paul's. He works for Max Morgan. He's known us—Paul and me—for a long time. And he's convinced that Paul is innocent, too."

"Hello, Orme," Mayhew said. "How? Why?"

Robert Orme said, "I'm glad to know you, Mr. Mayhew. Eve—Mrs. Tabor told me that she was going to try to interest you in Paul's case. She said you'd been eating at the restaurant lately—that she'd recognized you at once. Frankly, I've never believed in Paul's guilt."

MAYHEW drove on silently. Part of his by now all but intimate knowledge of Eve Tabor included the fact that Robert Orme seemed to be *her* close friend, at least. He knew considerable about Robert Orme, too. But he'd been forced to the conclusion that Orme, in common with all the other employees of Morgan, Inc., had not stolen the Morgan pearls. There was simply nothing to indicate it.

He said, "That's fine, Orme. Maybe Tabor isn't guilty. But your faith alone isn't enough to convince me, let alone a Court. *Why* don't you think he's guilty?"

Eve Tabor cut in passionately, "There isn't any reason, Mr. Mayhew, except that we both know that Paul just wasn't capable of it. Oh, I know all about that Reform School episode!" A note of defiance crept into her tone. "I knew it when I married Paul. He told me. But that was a mistake that he would never repeat. Believe me, Mr. Mayhew, I know!"

"But evidently," Mayhew cut in, "he hadn't told Max Morgan, when he went to work for him, that he'd been in Reform School."

"Why should he?" she demanded. "That was over and done with. Why should he damn himself forever with that label?"

Mayhew shrugged. Is this on the level? he wondered. It seemed so naive that he couldn't believe it. That they—or at least the girl—should think he'd be interested in springing a convicted thief, simply on her say so that the thief was innocent, strained credulity. No, there was something else behind it. Something that might lead him a step closer to the Morgan pearls.

And it came swiftly.

Eve Tabor opened the worn purse in her lap. Mayhew saw the glint of green folding money—a wad of it!—and she didn't take all of it out. She folded a batch of bills together and thrust them toward his hand on the wheel.

"There's five hundred dollars, Mr. Mayhew. Is that enough for a retainer? If it isn't, I can get more. I—I can pay your final bill, within reason, the minute my husband is freed. Will you take the case?"

And when he hesitated, set back on his heels by this newest development, she cried, "Please help me, Mr. Mayhew! You're the best private detective in town. I know—I've asked around. You've got a reputation not only as a good detective, but as an honest one."

This was crazy! A fifteen-dollar-a-week waitress peeling off five C retainers

from a wad that must have had that much more in it! Talking glibly of paying any bill within reason when her husband was sprung!

If she'd fenced the pearls (and how else explain the money?) why didn't she blow? Didn't she have sense enough to see that the last thing on earth she wanted prying into the Tabor case was a shamus who was not only good but honest? And if she hadn't fenced the pearls, if she didn't have them or know where they were, where'd she get green money in chunks of this size?

AS THOUGH she read his mind, Eve Tabor said huskily, "It's good. It's honest money—at least I got it honestly. But I wouldn't care where or how I got it, if it could only free Paul! Don't you see, Mr. Mayhew? Paul didn't steal those pearls. I haven't got them. I'm not selling them and using the money to get Paul out, if that's what you're thinking."

Robert Orme added, "I happen to know, Mr. Mayhew, that a friend is backing Eve in her fight to prove Paul's innocence. You can take this case in perfect confidence. I stopped by the restaurant tonight to see Eve and find out if you'd agreed to take it. And to—well, to add my word to hers, for what it might be worth."

"I see," Mayhew said finally. "All right, I accept. Would you, by any chance, be this *friend,* Orme?"

"Oh, no—" Eve Tabor began, but Orme's pealing laugh cut her off.

"Lord, no!" Bob Orme said. "I never saw five hundred bucks in one piece in my life, outside of a bank. But," and he sobered abruptly, "if I had it, I'd spend it just as Eve is doing. Aside from the fact that Paul Tabor is a friend of mine, I'd like to have this thing cleared up once and for all."

"What d'you mean?"

"Don't you see? Paul was convicted strictly on circumstantial evidence. And it could have been me just as easily as Paul. I was in the vault that night, checking the safe. So was Mr. Morgan. Oscar Blanchard knew the combination of that safe. Don't you understand that we're all under something of a cloud until those pearls are found and definitely tied to the actual thief? I may want to try for a better job sometime and this thing just might knock me out of it!"

"Ah—yes!" Mayhew grunted. Then he said, "Okay, you've got me sold. At least you've got me hired. Suppose we make a date sometime tomorrow to get together and go into things thoroughly. Tonight I've got another matter to take care of, a case to wind up. But tomorrow—"

"Swell!" Bob Orme said.

"How about after dinner?" Eve asked breathlessly. "You could pick me up at the restaurant—"

"Right. Can I take you any place now?"

It was Orme who answered. "Just let us out here. Eve lives on Butler Avenue, a couple of blocks from here. I'll see her home."

"And the number?"

"Four-eleven Butler," Eve said. "Apartment eighteen."

As he drove on, after he had let them out, Stretch Mayhew thought seriously, I'm either a sucker or a moron. Either this dame is sucking me into some fancy squeeze play, or I'm pearl-diving in the wrong place. Just what the hell is this?

Marty Baker—where did he fit in? His connection with the girl might be innocent; might be explained by the fact that he'd just been released from the same pen where Paul Tabor was. Baker and Tabor might have struck up a friendship—but that seemed pretty far-fetched.

Who was this *friend* who was prepared to spend a lot of dough to get Tabor out of stir? Robert Orme, even if he hadn't denied it so promptly, didn't fit in that niche. Marty Baker must be broke, or he'd not be living in any such roach-trap as the Eagle Hotel. So who else?

Mayhew could think of no one. He stopped trying as he turned the next cor-

ner and wheeled his car into the narrow alley that ran through from this street to the next, beside Izzy Bregoff's pawn shop. Cops were going to be here soon, and Stretch Mayhew had been anxious to beat them to it.

A BIG screw driver from his tool kit served efficiently as a jimmy. He got the door to Izzy One Eye's living quarters open with a minimum of noise and damage to the door. He slipped inside, stood for a moment listening, waiting for his eyes to focus to the dark.

He went to the front of the building, into the shop. Dim light still burned there, and there was risk of being seen by the cop on the beat, if he passed. But Mayhew dismissed that. He stood for a long while simply looking around. Seeking some detail that might give him some hint as to the meaning of Izzy's senseless dying remarks. *"I—loop—fingers,"* Izzy had whispered. *"Finger—loop—pearls."*

Finger and loop, both mentioned twice. And the word pearls. But before he was shot, Izzy had said he had something about the pearls.

Finger—loop . . . What the hell!

There was nothing extraordinary to be seen in the shop. Mayhew glanced at the big old safe behind the counter. But he knew that Izzy never kept much of value in that. He knew that there was another safe—a good, hard-to-crack wall job—behind the head of Izzy's bed, in the apartment in the rear.

Mayhew turned to retrace his steps. If Izzy had got the pearls, he'd have put them in the wall safe. The cops, no doubt, would get around to opening both safes eventually. And if Mayhew didn't beat them to it, there would go his ten grand reward—provided Izzy *had* got the pearls. Well, maybe later on, after the cops had made their preliminary search here, he could see about that wall safe. Meanwhile—

He stepped through the passage into the dark back room. And as he did so, the back of his head exploded like a bomb. Something hit him and he was aware of flaming pain, of stumbling helplessly forward, falling. But there was nothing he could do about it. Blackness claimed him. . . .

STRETCH MAYHEW opened his eyes to light, sound, movement. Then he closed them again. The glare was like a knife stabbing through his eyes into his aching head.

Simmons said, "I should've known it was too much to hope that the guy was croaked! Come on, Mayhew—quit stalling and get up! From the description, I thought you were the tall bird who ran out on the Bregoff kill."

Mayhew rolled slowly over, forced himself from hands and knees to an upright stance. He swayed a little, then made for the wash bowl in one corner. He ran cold water, splashed it on his face and eyes.

Simmons was a big, beefy man, almost as tall as Mayhew and forty pounds heavier. He was Captain Simmons now, a Homicide dick. But Stretch Mayhew had known him before politics, and it was his lack of scruples against taking credit for other men's work that had started him up the ladder. Simmons had no better reason for hating Mayhew than that the private op had always laughed at him.

Mayhew laughed now, not humorously, as he blotted his face and hands on a paper towel. He saw the scattered pile of the personal belongings that had been in his own pockets, lying on the floor where he'd lain. So he'd been searched!

He said, "Hello, Simmons. I thought you'd be along—late, as usual—so I waited. Must've dropped off to sleep. But why the frisk? Any special reason? Or is it that you just can't keep your hands out of other people's pockets?"

A dull flush stained the big cop's face a deeper red. His fists knotted up and he took a step toward Mayhew. Thought better of it and snarled, "Whoever bungled the chance to rid the world of you frisked you. Who was it, Mayhew,

and what'd you find here that he wanted?"

"Maybe Izzy's ghost, Captain. Maybe Superman. If he wanted what I found here, he's laid up trouble for himself and all for nothing."

"You're gonna talk, Mayhew," Simmons told him, "if not here then down at the Hall—for breaking and entering." He pointed to the jimmied door.

Mayhew drawled, "I got here second. The guy who sapped me broke and entered. I was passing, saw somebody in the store and came around to investigate—my simple duty as a citizen. Shall we go down to the Hall now?"

"I suppose you ran your car in the alley, there, for light. And got a screw driver out of your tool kit for a weapon."

"Why, sure, Captain. That's as good an explanation as any. Thanks."

"A-a-a-h—" Simmons breathed harshly. He turned away, thrust his hands into pants pockets and snorted around the room.

Lee Donlin, the long-suffering sergeant who'd never be anything else as long as he let Simmons use him said mildly, "Give us a break, Stretch. We've got a job to do, y'know. You're clean in the Bregoff shooting—we know that. But why'd you come here? Did you see the gunsel? D'you have any leads?"

"Izzy," Mayhew said carefully, "stopped at my table to say hello. He was gunned, and I was too busy trying to get under the table to see anything else. But Bregoff was a fence—" He stopped, his eyes questioning Lee Donlin.

The sergeant nodded. "Yeah. I've heard that. He was clever enough to cover up, though."

"Yeah. That's why I drove around this way. I figured that might be what was behind the kill—and there *was* a guy in here. I've got an egg on my head that says so. Now you can take over. I give it to you—gladly."

"Thanks," Donlin said dryly.

Mayhew went over and collected his things off the floor. He skinned his teeth at Simmons and the Homicide man muttered something and turned his back. Mayhew went to the door.

He looked back and met Donlin's eyes and grinned again, knowing that Lee Donlin wasn't satisfied. Stretch Mayhew quoted, " 'Parting is such sweet sorrow' " and went on out to his car.

But when he was in his car again, the mockery vanished from his eyes.

He roared out of the alley and set a course for Butler Avenue.

MAYHEW wasn't just sure whether he'd lied or not. It was possible, of course, that his unknown assailant had been in the pawn shop ahead of him. It was possible that he'd had a key. But it was also possible that Mayhew had been followed to Bregoff's store—that the tail had entered after he had.

But whichever it was, it was certain that there was something at the pawn shop that somebody wanted. It seemed certain, also, that his assailant hadn't got it, since he'd searched the op. And to Mayhew, it seemed equally certain that, whatever it was, Izzy One Eye would have put it in his back room wall safe.

If that were true, for the moment it was secure. Simmons would have to get some official order to open Izzy's safes. But Mayhew, if he could find a chance, wouldn't be so handicapped. Meanwhile, he wanted to see Eve Tabor again; wanted to drop in unexpectedly and see what happened.

He drove past the house numbered four-eleven on the first round. It was an old four-story walk-up, no different from any other house in the block. The street was dark and deserted.

But it wasn't deserted when Mayhew had parked around the corner and started back.

He ducked back into the shadow of a basement entrance. The man who came out of four-eleven looked carefully up and down the street before he ventured out. It was too dark to see who he was, but he turned Mayhew's way.

His hat was pulled low, and his overcoat collar turned up. Mayhew felt a stir of excitement in the similarity of this man's silhouette to the picture of the killer of Izzy Bregoff that was in his mind. But as the other passed close that excitement was replaced by disappointment.

The man was Marty Baker. And Marty Baker certainly hadn't gunned Izzy the One Eye. But on a sudden hunch Mayhew tailed him.

Baker went straight back to the Eagle Hotel.

When he was sure of that, Mayhew idled along, thinking. Why had Marty Baker been so hot to get out of the restaurant immediately after the shooting? *Finger,* Bregoff had said twice. Was he trying to say that he'd been fingered by someone? Baker? Or was it Eve Tabor?

I—loop—finger . . . The more Mayhew thought about it, the less sense it made. But somewhere in those three words was a clue not only to murder, but also—Mayhew felt it strongly—to the Morgan pearls. Loop could be a place. The Loop—in Chicago? But this wasn't Chicago.

Oh, hell! He threw away the cigarette he'd just fired and entered the dimly lighted, faintly malodorous lobby of the hotel. In almost any case where lots of people were involved, if you listened to them talk long enough somebody eventually spilled the beans, in one way or another. As long as he was here, he'd listen to Marty Baker.

MAYHEW had no difficulty getting upstairs. He knocked on the door of Baker's room, waited for the growled, "Come in," and turned the knob.

Mayhew closed the door behind him and stood leaning against it, smiling at Marty Baker. The ex-con sat in the only chair. A drop light spilled strong radiance on Baker's face, and Mayhew was surprised at the change in it. Marty Baker had been comparatively young when he went up. Young and with a hard, dark, sneering face. Twelve years isn't a long time, but it had done things to him.

His face was lined, grey-looking. There were streaks of dirty grey in his hair. His eyes had a furtive, beaten look, but they hardened when he saw who Mayhew was. Some of the old brittle contempt for the lawman came back into his face.

"Hello, Marty," Mayhew said. "Like to talk to you—about Izzy Bregoff."

"Okay." Baker's voice was hoarse, flat. "Okay, let's talk about Bregoff. I was inside the restaurant, Mayhew, the same as you. Izzy was shot through the window."

"That's right, Marty. But you were in one hell of a hurry to get out—the back way—after the shooting. Why?"

In sullen silence, Baker regarded him steadily. Then he said, "You're not that dumb! I'm an ex-con. I did time for murder. I'm on the spot where a ginzo is rubbed out and, even if I've got nothin' to do with it, I'm an ex-con. I know cops. Figure it out for yourself!"

"And suppose," Mayhew grinned, "I tell the cops how you beat it the hell out the back way?"

Baker shrugged; his lips twisted. "All right. They give me a going over. But that still doesn't tie me in to the Bregoff murder. What d'you want?"

"What are you and the Tabor woman cooking up?"

"Whatever," Baker said with slow, intense bitterness, "I say will be wrong. Whatever I say, you won't believe it." He paused and his eyes ran around the room aimlessly. Then he said, "Look, Shamus—the dame paid you, didn't she?"

Mayhew nodded.

"Well, go work for her! Find out who framed Paul Tabor and leave me alone! Paul Tabor was—well, never mind that. If I go to see his wife, that's my business. You've got nothing on me."

Mayhew said, "So *you* think Tabor was framed?"

Baker said nothing.

Mayhew heaved his shoulders off the door, opened it and said, "She wouldn't have the pearls, would she, Marty? Or know where they are? She wouldn't be feeding 'em to you a few at a time, to fence for her—through Izzy Bregoff?"

Marty Baker snarled, "She paid you to work for *her*. Who are you working for?"

"The Law, first," Mayhew said. "Me—Mayhew. I'm not for sale, Marty. I never have been, and you know it."

The ex-con relaxed in his chair. "All right. If that's how it is, I'm satisfied. That's all she asks. Now get out, Mayhew."

"Good night, Marty," said the op.

Whew! he whistled as he got back to the street. More and more something stinks! But he still wanted to talk to Eve Tabor. . . .

SHE didn't answer her bell. Mayhew stood thoughtfully tapping his front teeth with a fingernail when the inner door opened. A woman came out, glanced at him, then went on. He caught the inner door before it latched and went in.

Apartment 18 was on the third floor, right rear. The door was locked and nobody answered his knock. Mayhew went on down and outside again. A black hole-in-the-wall gave access to basement and rear court. He disappeared therein, emerged into an inky pit that was little more than an airshaft. There were fire escapes leading up. Eve Tabor's bedroom window was locked, buit it was a simple catch, easily forced.

She wasn't there.

It didn't take long to go over the small living room, and the kitchenette in a curtained-off corner. The bath was bare—just a bath. Her bedroom offered not a thing but a few clothes and the simplest of toilet articles. Everything was neat, clean, orderly, but Eve Tabor certainly didn't have much in the way of goods and chattels.

Yet she did have folding money in sizeable amounts!

Mayhew straightened up after his search—then remembered the bed. And there was something under the pillow!

He snatched it out eagerly; a small packet of letters, tied with a red ribbon. He slipped them out of their envelopes, one after another. They were all from Paul Tabor, and as he read them Mayhew was conscious of something like shame. He felt like a peeping Tom.

Whatever else he might be, Paul Tabor loved his wife. He missed her. In simple, stark language, Paul Tabor revealed those facts—revealed the hopeless misery that was in him. But as he read on, Mayhew detected something else. A new note crept into Tabor's letters, a guarded note of hope. And it began with Paul Tabor's mention of Marty Baker.

There was also more than one mention of Robert Orme. Paul Tabor referred to him as "a great guy"—a "true friend." Evidently Eve had told her husband in her letters that Bob Orme was doing what he could to ease her load. But it was the final reference to Marty Baker that held Stretch Mayhew's interest. Tabor had written:

> You can trust Marty, Eve. In only a few days he'll be out, and he's going to help us too. I was able to do something here for him, and while it was just a happenstance, he can't seem to thank me enough. I've told him all about us, and he swears he's going to help us.

The letter went on to its end, but Stretch Mayhew stopped reading. There was nothing in the last few letters. He replaced them all, retied them with the ribbon and put them under the pillow.

He went out by the door, the stairs.

I've got to sleep on this, he thought. Before I go nuts, I've got to get some sleep. My head aches!

STRETCH MAYHEW stood at the curb and looked up at the dusty second floor windows of the building in

front of him. It was late afternoon, almost dark. But there were lights behind those windows overhead. Lettered on them was the legend *Max Morgan Inc.*

The better part of a day had got away from him somehow. Not that he hadn't worked. But for all the good it had done him, he might as well have gone fishing.

He had gone back to the beginning of the Tabor case. He had searched news files, court records. He'd conferred with the head of the firm that handled the insurance company's investigations. And he'd been through reams of reports there.

Now he stood with his head tilted back to stare moodily at the facade of the old building on Jewelers Row that housed Morgan, Inc. Should he go up?

Shrugging, he tossed aside a cigarette and strode into the building's lobby. There was a guard at the door with a gun slung on his belt. The elevator operator also wore one. Hard, thought Mayhew. Hard as hell for an outside crook to crack one of these buildings. It had to be an inside job—and as the case stood now, it had to be Paul Tabor. There was nothing against anyone else.

He got in and up to the second floor without incident. It was getting out, he knew, that would be hard for a crook, after a robbery. He opened a door with Morgan's name on it and strode into a small, not very well furnished reception room. There was a desk for a receptionist, but no receptionist—nobody else but himself.

Ahead of him a door leading into what he judged was the work room stood ajar. Mayhew heard the whirr of some sort of small machinery—the light clink of tools. He looked in. Robert Orme was seated at a desk-like work bench, bent over it with a jeweler's glass in one eye. Mayhew recognized the others—Goldsmith, and the elderly man whose name he did not know, who had taken Paul Tabor's place. None of them seemed to see him.

He half turned to another door—also partly open—and stopped at the sound of voices. He went on again softly, glanced in and withdrew, listening. It would do no harm to listen, he thought. Max Morgan and Oscar Blanchard—the two men who knew the combination of the firm's safe—were together, talking. Morgan sat at the desk, a bracelet in his hand that flashed bright fire under the strong desk lamp. A diamond bracelet.

"Money!" he groaned. "Money! Lord, but it takes money, Oscar—more and more of it all the time. Where are we going to turn next?"

"That bracelet, Max," Blanchard said. "Frost told me today that he would take that whole line if—"

"Yes. Yes, I know, Oscar. He'll take them if I can manage somehow to get along with no profit at all—so that he can make more money. Damn him! Frost knows how I'm fixed!"

"But surely, Max, all of that sixty thousand—from the pearls—isn't—"

"Down the rat-hole, Oscar! Once you're behind, you never catch up again! We've got to think of something, Oscar!"

"I know, Max. It's tough."

"Well, put this bracelet in the safe with the others. No! Wait, Oscar! Maybe I have an idea. Leave the bracelet here. You go check up for closing."

"Okay, Max—sure."

Mayhew heard Blanchard go directly into the workroom from Morgan's office. Then there was a small sound behind him; he turned, saw Bob Orme watching him with breathless interest.

Mayhew's eyes narrowed. Orme smiled thinly, nodded. Barely audibly he whispered, "I heard. What are you going to do?"

Mayhew tilted his head toward Morgan's office. Again Bob Orme nodded. Mayhew turned and walked in on Morgan.

AT FIRST the jeweler didn't see him. Max Morgan sat hunched over his desk, that flashing bracelet held in the palms of both hands. One of his eyes was closed, the other was focused

through the black tube of his glass upon the bracelet.

Stretch Mayhew stared at him, a storm of sudden excitement in his mind. Suddenly, through no process of reasoning, no logic, Mayhew saw something, remembered something that hit him like a physical blow. *I—loop—fingers* . . . It could be the answer! He had to have a dictionary!

Simultaneously, Max Morgan sensed his presence.

Morgan jerked erect in his chair. He snatched the glass from his eye, his fist closed over the bracelet. Angrily he snapped, "Who're you? Who let you in here? What—"

"Easy does it, Mr. Morgan," Mayhew grinned. "My name's Mayhew—I'm a private investigator. I've been retained by Mrs. Paul Tabor to reopen the case of her husband—to try to prove he didn't steal—"

Max Morgan surged to his feet. "Didn't! Didn't steal!" He seemed near apoplexy. "Get out! This is too much! First the Police, then the insurance detectives. . . . Wait a minute! Where did she get the money to pay you?"

Mayhew grinned. "I expect that's her business, Mr. Morgan. Sure I'll get out. Sorry I bothered you."

He turned on his heel. He had to find a dictionary. He had to be sure about that sudden hunch of his. And if he were right, he had to find somebody who would crack a safe for him and get back to Izzy One Eye's pawn shop. If he were right—

In the hallway outside, Robert Orme stopped him.

Orme said eagerly, "That's something I didn't know, Mr. Mayhew! I was going in to see Morgan about a ring I'm working on, and saw you standing there. I couldn't help but hear. But I didn't know the firm was in financial difficulties! Do you suppose . . . Lord, I—I almost hesitate to think—"

"You mean," Mayhew asked, "that you hesitate to think that Morgan stole his own pearls for the insurance? And that he's thinking of a repeat job on that necklace?"

"Yes!" Bob Orme swallowed hard, looked grim.

"If we could prove that, it would be just dandy!" Mayhew grinned one-sidedly. "But that still wouldn't answer some of the angles. Listen, Orme. I've got a lead. That Bregoff killing fits into this case somewhere. Never mind how I know—I know. I'm going to be busy for a while. I may not get to the restaurant by the time Mrs. Tabor goes off duty."

"All right," Bob Orme said. "I'll tell her. I can eat my own dinner there as well as any place else. Okay?"

"Okay. I'll be at my apartment for a while. How long I don't know. Anyway, stick with Eve and I'll give you a ring when I can."

He left.

HIS PHONE rang. Mayhew glanced at his watch. It was five after eight. He set his highball on the dictionary, on the table beside him, and picked up the phone.

"Mayhew," he said.

Bob Orme's voice answered. "Look, Mr. Mayhew—I've been doing some thinking. To begin with, the boss didn't put that bracelet in the safe before we closed up. He must have taken it home with him."

Mayhew said, "Well, it was his bracelet, Bob."

"Yeah—sure. But look! Things seem to be in a bad way with the business. Suppose it was Morgan who stole those pearls. Suppose he's going to pull the same trick with that necklace. If we caught him at it, wouldn't that—"

"Dandy," Mayhew cut in. "But I don't think he would. Where are you now?"

"I'm home," Bob Orme said. "I told Eve you'd be late, and that you'd let me know when we could get together. She had an errand to do, but said she'd be home afterward and we could come around there."

Mayhew frowned. He still had an

hour to kill before his date with Tod Jenkins. He'd wanted Eve Tabor watched until he was ready to talk to her. But he hadn't quite been ready to tell Bob Orme that—and Bob had let her go somewhere unaccompanied.

Mayhew said, "Uh-huh. Well, Bob, I'm still tied up. I've got a date to meet a man at nine. Probably by ten I'll be free. But listen, Bob. What do you know about an ex-con named Marty Baker?"

"Baker!" Orme blurted. "An ex-convict!"

"That's right. He's been seeing a lot of Eve, Bob. Do you know why?"

There was brief silence. Orme's voice was unsteady when he answered.

"Lord, Mr. Mayhew, I—I didn't know he was an ex-convict! But I suppose it all adds up. Sure it does! I get it now. Marty Baker must have known Paul in prison. I guess that explains why Baker was giving Eve the money to—"

"*What?*" Mayhew blasted.

"Oh, my God!" Orme choked. "I—I wasn't supposed to tell anybody that. I promised Eve that I—"

"Listen, Orme!" Mayhew said. "There's a hell of a lot that hasn't been told me about this business. How the devil do you expect me to do you people any good if you won't give me the facts? What else did you promise Eve not to tell?"

"Nothing!" The answer came promptly this time. "I swear there isn't anything else, Mr. Mayhew!"

"Nothing between you and Eve?"

"Not a thing! It's just that I've known Paul and Eve both for a long time. And I like them both."

"Okay. You go over to Eve's place. I'll meet you both there when I can."

Mayhew hung up, scowling.

Again he glanced at his watch. Eight: eight. Still time to drop in on Marty Baker again before he went to Bregoff's pawnshop to meet Tod Jenkins. He slipped on his coat, took a .38 service pistol from the table drawer and slid that into his pocket. He left his apartment with that beetling scowl still creasing his forehead.

That scowl was erased when he stood over the body of Marty Baker and looked down at the four bullet holes that marred Baker's naked torso. Four holes scattered over his chest and stomach—just like Izzy Bregoff. Four small holes —.22, or .25 caliber. . . .

THERE was no expression whatever on Stretch Mayhew's face as he turned Captain Simmons' questions with even-toned, even-tempered answers. He was like a swordsman parrying the club-like attack of a broadsword with the thin blade of a rapier. And he stopped Simmons with his final parry—his alibi.

Another resident of the hotel—the only other guest on this floor who happened to be in his room—had heard the shooting. He had opened his door, had seen a man leaving Baker's room. The man wore his hat pulled low, his coat collar turned up. His face was invisible. He'd left hurriedly by the fire stairs, and the other had come and looked into Marty Baker's room. That's all he knew, except that the hands of the alarm clock on Marty Baker's bureau had pointed then to five minutes after eight.

Mayhew glanced at the alarm clock now. It said twenty-five of nine. His watch gave eight-thirty. He said gently, "At precisely eight-five, Captain, I was in my apartment talking to a man on the telephone. He called me. The name is Robert Orme. Check it. Good night."

Mayhew started for the door. Things were crowding him; he had to meet Tod Jenkins at the pawn shop in half an hour; he wanted to get a line on where Eve Tabor had been around eight. But Lee Donlin's hand on his shoulder stopped him at the door.

Donlin said, "Orme—you mean the guy that works for Max Morgan? The jeweler who had that bunch of pearls stolen some months ago—the Tabor case?"

"That's right," Mayhew said.

Simmons began, "Haha! So you—"

And Mayhew saw Lee Donlin shake his head at the captain, almost imperceptibly. Simmons stood with his mouth open.

Donlin said, "Okay, Stretch, we'll check it. If it wasn't an alibi you'd be too slick to throw it at us like this. But one of these days you're gonna be too smart for your own good. Better not leave town tonight."

Mayhew grinned. "If I had any place to go I might call that bluff. But I'll be around, Lee. So long."

He walked on out.

Eve Tabor still wasn't home when he thumbed her bell for the second time. Mayhew slipped into the tunnel-like passage that led to the rear. He was halfway back when he heard a car stop out front. He tiptoed back, saw Simmons and Donlin go in the front door. . . .

MAYHEW crouched on the fire escape platform. He worked the window catch again, put his pocket knife away. He tried to remember if the window squeaked when he'd raised it before, and couldn't. But he raised it again anyway and was pleased no end when it went up noiselessly.

Simmons and Donlin were in Eve's apartment, and she still wasn't there. Mayhew knew because he'd watched the two cops search the bedroom. The janitor had let them in. They were in the other room now.

Mayhew slid in through the window, thankful that the bedroom door was almost closed. He crossed to the door, stood behind it. He couldn't see them, but he could hear.

They'd found those letters. Simmons was reading one of them aloud. Donlin must be engaged in further searching, and when Simmons finished Stretch heard Donlin say:

"Well, that confirms our hunch. Al Baker and Tabor were friendly in the pen. Probably Tabor told Baker about the pearls. That explains why he was hanging around the Tabor woman. My hunch is that Baker, who knew his way around better than Mrs. Tabor, agreed to fence the pearls for a cut. Bregoff, who was a known fence even though he was never caught at it, was in on the deal and may have tried the doublecross. And the Tabor dame bumped Baker to save his cut. . . . Got any better answer?"

"What about Mayhew?" Simmons rumbled.

"Stretch?" Lee Donlin hesitated. "Al, I think he's just after the insurance gang's reward. Stretch Mayhew may cut a corner now and then, but he's always leveled in the end."

"That—"

"*Sss-sst!*"

Mayhew heard Donlin's sibilant warning and in the silence afterward he heard the key in the door, the faint noise of its opening. Then there was a sharp, choked cry from Eve Tabor.

"Wh-what is this?" she gasped. "Who are you? What are you doing in my—"

"Mrs. Tabor?" Simmons cut in heavily.

"Yes. B-but what—"

"Police, Mrs. Tabor."

"Police!"

"Homicide. What d'you know about Marty Baker?"

"Marty—Baker—!" Mayhew could all but see the color drain from her face in listening to the tone of her voice. "Marty—has—has anything happened to him? Tell me! Don't just stare at me! What—"

"He's dead, Mrs. Tabor, that's all. He was shot four times in the body, tonight, around eight o'clock. Where were you then?"

There was utter silence. Mayhew risked a glance. Eve Tabor stood swaying, deathly pale, staring into space. She didn't resist, or even seem to notice, when Lee Donlin took the small purse she carried.

Lee emptied it on a table. There was no gun. There was very little else: a cheap compact, handkerchief, comb, a bulging change purse. Donlin opened that and said, "Sweet damn!" Mayhew saw him straighten out folded bank notes and riffle through them. "Four hundred

and some odd bucks, Al!" Donlin announced.

"Where'd you get that dough?" Simmons snapped triumphantly.

SLOWLY Eve Tabor's staring eyes focused on Simmons. But her voice was still and dazed when she said, "From —from him. Marty. He was in the—penitentiary with Paul, my husband. Paul saved his life. There was a break planned—a prison break. Marty found out and reported it. They tried to murder him. But Paul—"

Suddenly she broke, sobbing. "Oh, no—no! He was good—he was helping me to prove my husband's innocence, in gratitude for what Paul did for him. And his—his death *does* prove it!

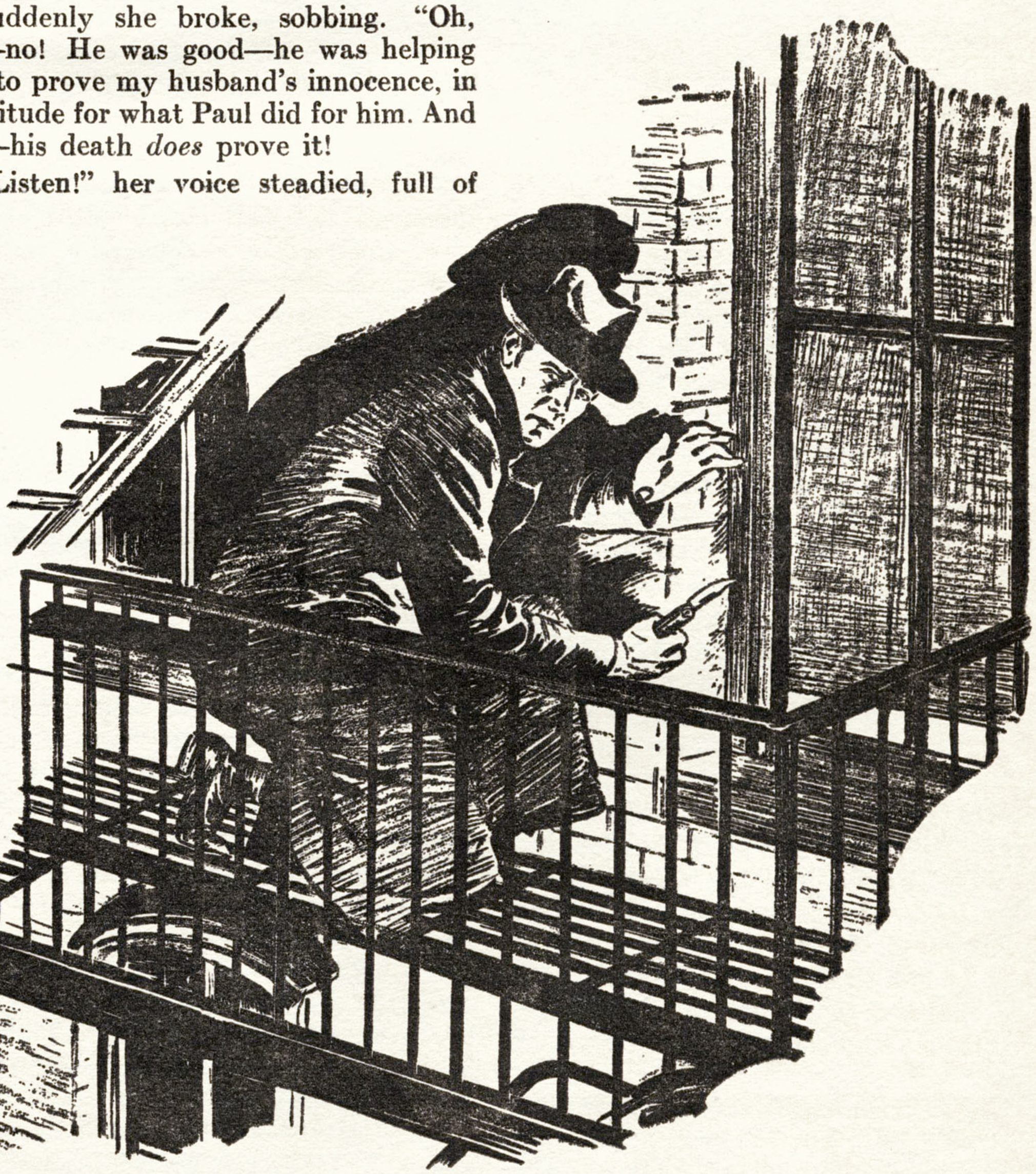
"Listen!" her voice steadied, full of intense pleading. "He—Marty ate dinner tonight at the restaurant where I work. He told Bob and me—"

"Who?" It was Lee Donlin who cut in. "Told who?"

"Bob—Robert Orme," she said distractedly, "another friend who's helping me. Bob's—"

"Go on," Donlin said.

"Marty said he had something on the killing of that man—Bregoff—that might lead us to the pearls. He said he'd heard something from a man—a crook he used to know when—"



Mayhew crouched on the fire escape platform and worked on the window again with his knife.

Outside in the hall a bell rang. Donlin said, "That's the telephone, Al. Might be—"

"Answer it," Simmons said.

Lee Donlin left the door open. From the angle at which he stood Mayhew could see Donlin at the pay phone fastened to the wall across from Eve Tabor's door. Lee Donlin talked in monosyllables, hung up, came back and closed the door. His eyes were narrow, smouldering. His voice reflected excitement.

"That key," he said, "that we found in Baker's pocket—it was to a deposit box at the Mechanics Trust. There was twenty-three grand, and some odd, in that box—in cash."

"Wha—"

"But look, Al—that's not the payoff! There was a will in the box, too. Baker's will. It was drawn last month, by a lawyer on Court Street—strictly legal and in good shape. It leaves every cent of that dough to—Eve Tabor."

Simmons said, "Hah! You're under arrest, sister. Come on—get your toothbrush. We're going downtown."

Mayhew made the window in three strides, was out and halfway down before he saw a light in the bedroom window. He left there swiftly, smiling.

There was light not only in that window but in his mind as well. Cr-ripes, he thought. I'm dumb! But it adds up now!

IT WAS just nine, on the dot, when he parked around the corner from the pawn shop. He walked back, his eyes keenly on the man who slouched past across the street. It wasn't Tod Jenkins. It wasn't anybody he knew, just a passerby, he decided as the man went on and disappeared. For the moment there was nobody else in sight and Mayhew himself vanished in the gloom of the alley mouth. He stopped beside Bregoff's back door.

Tod Jenkins hadn't shown up yet. But he would, Mayhew felt reasonably sure. Jenkins owed him a favor, and if the little safecracker's technique was still what it used to be, Izzy Bregoff's private wall safe was as good as open. *I—loop—fingers.* . . . Stretch chuckled. Bregoff was smart. If he'd done what Mayhew thought he had, if it had happened the way Mayhew had it figured, then Bregoff's wasn't the only thing that would be cracked. The whole case would be. Wide open!

There was a new lock on Izzy's back door, but it didn't trouble Mayhew long. He found a key that fitted on the ring of keys he took from his pocket. Master keys. They might land him in jail if he were caught with them. But he didn't worry about that.

The door opened and he went in, closing it after him, but not locking it. He'd told Jenkins to try the door when he came, and if it wasn't unlocked to wait.

Without light, Mayhew shoved aside the single bed that stood in the corner under the window. Feeling along the wall with his hand he located the door of the safe. Then he sat down to wait.

He smoked a cigarette. Ten minutes crawled away interminably. Mayhew began to be annoyed. He took another cigarette from his pack, lighted it—and with the glare of the match still in his eyes he heard the door creak open.

He flung both cigarette and match away and surged to his feet. "Tod?" he asked.

Gunfire answered him.

His rising saved his life. Clawing at his own .38, he kept on moving. He flung himself clear across the room, thudded into the wall and rolled along it. The flange of his gun's hammer was caught in the lining of his pocket.

He kept on moving. Like a frantic, darting finger, the flash from the other's gun followed him, sought him. Its sound was a light bark—it was a small caliber, .22—.25. Mayhew felt the tug of a bullet through his flapping coat. Then his own gun came clear and bellowed.

The doorway was empty.

Mayhew checked his next shot, cursed the dark. He couldn't tell if his assailant was down or if he'd stepped inside, out of that oblong of lesser dark that was the

door. For a split second Mayhew crouched motionless, his eyes searching desperately, his ears still full of the roar of his one shot. Then he heard the rattle of running feet on the cobbles of the alley outside. He heard, too, the shrill whistle of the cop on the beat.

He rushed the door. There was a dark blur of form and movement in the alley mouth. Mayhew snapped two shots at it, sprinted. But the patrolman on the street had the same idea. The two of them came together where the alley joined the street. The cop went down. Mayhew spun around, caromed off the wall of the pawn shop and staggered clear across the street before he got his balance. When he did, there was the snarl of a raced motor from down the street. He emptied his gun at the car, but it kept on going away. Mayhew turned to face the drawn gun of the beat cop.

THE patrolman yelped, "What in hell goes on? Just what the devil d'ya think . . . Mayhew! Stretch—what—"

Then suddenly Mayhew yelled, "Jenkins! Hey, Tod—wait! Damn it, if you don't stop I'll put a bullet—"

"Okay, Stretch—okay! Don't shoot!" The little man who had tried to slip unobserved from the alley shrank back against the pawn shop window with his hands high over his head.

The cop said dazedly, "Stretch, will y'tell me what—"

"Come on, Myers," Mayhew rapped. "We're going into the pawn shop. The fat's in the fire now, so you might as well be a witness. Come on, Tod—get going. Try to sneak out on me, will you!" He cuffed him lightly with his left hand.

"Naw, Stretch. I only got here when the shootin' started. I figured you wouldn't be needin' me after that, an'—"

"Okay. I need you, though. Come on!"

WHEN they were in Izzy Bregoff's back room again, Mayhew said grimly, "Open that safe, Jenkins."

Myers blurted, "But damn it, Stretch, you can't *do* that!"

"This says I can!" He waggled the gun in his hand, and even though it was still empty the cop didn't know that. Myers looked at Stretch Mayhew's cold, greenish-gray eyes.

Tod Jenkins looked from Mayhew to the cop, then said, "You heard him, Copper. He's makin' me do this against my will. He's got a gun on me!"

Mayhew laughed. "Get that box open, Tod!"

It took an hour and thirty-five minutes.

It took a broken nose for Myers and a mouse under Stretch Mayhew's right eye —both acquired when the cop decided Mayhew wouldn't shoot him and made a break for it.

It took a good hearty kick in the pants now and then to keep Tod Jenkins more afraid of the immediate vengeance of Stretch Mayhew than of future complications with the law. But finally the door of the safe swung back and Mayhew stabbed a hand inside.

There were a lot of things in that safe. But the items that brought back the grin to Mayhew's bruised mouth were six pearls, rosy and translucent and beautiful. And a jeweler's eye glass, carefully wrapped in a handkerchief.

Mayhew pocketed both and rose.

"All right, you monkeys," he ordered amiably. "You saw what these are and where I got 'em. We've got one more stop to make, then we're going down to the Hall. These—" he grinned, "are six of the Morgan pearls. I think I know where the rest of them are. Will you behave now, Myers, while I make a phone call?"

Dazedly the harness bull nodded.

Tod Jenkins yelped, "Morgan pearls!"

Mayhew called police headquarters. He asked for Lee Donlin.

EVE TABOR looked at him with trapped, hopeless eyes out of a dead-white face. That deathly pallor made the flaming red marks on her left cheek stand out even redder. Her hair was dishevelled. Her coat was off, and the white

blouse she wore was pulled down over one shoulder, revealing the bruise where she had been gripped roughly. The heat and light of the reflector over her head beat down pitilessly on her crouching, small figure.

Al Simmons was in his shirt sleeves. He was sweating, but it was the heat from the light and his own balked fury that drew the sweat out of him. Beyond that slap across the face, which was so evident, and the bruise on her shoulder, he hadn't manhandled the woman. But Mayhew knew that Lee Donlin's presence was all that kept Simmons from letting brute tactics rule him.

Donlin said, "Hello, Stretch," when Mayhew opened the door and came in.

Simmons wheeled around, rumbling, "Who let you in? What the hell d'you want, Mayhew?" Then his eyes flicked to Myers and Tod Jenkins. The little safe-cracker cringed back, but Myers grabbed his arm.

Simmons blasted, "What is this? What're you doing off your beat, Myers?"

The patrolman shrugged and pointed at Stretch Mayhew.

Donlin said, "I put through the order to pick him up, Stretch, right after you called. D'you stop there?"

Mayhew nodded.

"Find anything?"

"Plenty. There'd been a hole drilled in the leg of his bed. Lengthwise, so when the caster was put back in, it acted as a stopper. The pearls were there—must have been there—but they're gone now. You heard anything?"

Donlin shook his head.

Simmons yelled, "What am I? Who d'you guys think you are? Damn you, Donlin, I'll bust you! I'll—I'll—"

Wearily Lee Donlin cut in, "You were busy when Stretch called, Al. I tried to tell you but you were—questioning the dame. You said—"

"And so you took it on yourself to go over my head! To order a pick-up without consulting me! To—"

"How," Stretch Mayhew cut in with soft savagery, "do you like this for a pick-up, Captain?"

He opened his hand under Simmons' nose and the Homicide man stopped bellowing. His eyes went wide. He said hoarsely, "Gimme those! Where'd you find 'em?"

"Sure, Captain," Mayhew laughed. "And I found 'em just where I thought they'd be—in Izzy Bregoff's safe. Myers and Jenkins are witnesses. *I* found the Morgan pearls. *Me*—Mayhew! There's a ten-grand reward for that, and it's mine. And now that that's understood, here—take 'em."

He tilted his hand. The pearls dropped on the floor at Simmons' feet, rolled all ways. Simmons half crouched to pick them up and Mayhew threw back his head and laughed. Simmons straightened, loose-mouthed with rage.

"You dirty—"

"Don't say it!" Mayhew stopped him. "Don't say it, Simmons, unless you—"

"Oh, hell! Quit it!" Lee Donlin stepped between them. And for a second there was no sound except Eve Tabor's gasping whisper:

"You found them—you found the pearls! Thank God—thank God! Who took them? How long will it be before—" She was on her knees. She gathered up the pearls and held them in her cupped hands, staring at them. But her eyes—like those of the rest—swept to the door as it burst open. "Bob!" she cried. "Bob Orme!"

ORME stumbled into the room under a thrust from behind. His face was whiter than Eve Tabor's; his eyes were wild. Robert Orme staggered inside, ran into Stretch Mayhew before he recovered his balance. And then his clenched fists beat at Mayhew's face and he yelled hysterically:

"You're framing me! You knew Baker had all that dough cached in the bank! You knew he'd pay it all to get Tabor sprung, so he and Tabor could cash in on those pearls. You found 'em and you planted 'em in my apartment. But you

can't prove it! Damn you, you can't—"

His sobbing screams ended in the solid crack of Stretch Mayhew's fist on his chin. Mayhew slugged him and caught him by his coat front with his other hand. Robert Orme slumped back, his knees buckling, but Mayhew didn't let him fall. He held him until Orme's legs straightened, then shoved him backward. Lee Donlin caught him this time.

Mayhew said, "You're wrong, Orme—I *can* prove it. I can prove that you went to Bregoff and sold those six pearls. You needed money for something—needed it badly enough to risk selling some of your loot, even though you knew Marty Baker was backing Eve Tabor with money to prove her husband's innocence. What was it, Orme? Gambling? Were you gambling against future profits from the sale of the pearls?"

"No," Orme yelled. "That's a lie! I didn't have the pearls. I never heard of Bregoff before he was killed!"

MAYHEW'S hand came from his pocket. In it was a white handkerchief. Carefully he unfolded it, revealing the small black object that had been wrapped in the handkerchief. It was a jeweler's eye glass—a small black tube with a high-power lens set in one end. Without touching the glass, Mayhew laid it on Simmons' desk.

"I found that," he said, "in Izzy Bregoff's safe, too. Donlin, Myers and Jenkins are witnesses to that. It was Izzy's glass. Somehow, when Orme came to Izzy to sell those pearls, Izzy got him to touch that glass. Orme left his fingerprints. Izzy had him cold, and Orme killed him when Izzy came to me. Orme knew Eve Tabor was going to retain me, but he didn't know I had already been looking for the pearls for some time. He didn't know I'd offered Izzy a cut in the reward if he gave me a lead to the pearls.

"You've got the fingerprints of everybody in the Morgan firm. You got 'em when you first began the investigation. Well—check this glass against Orme's fingerprints!" He whirled on Robert Orme. "D'you still say it's a lie, Orme?"

Robert Orme seemed to slump still further. Lee Donlin held him up. Orme's arms went around Donlin, and suddenly he shoved Donlin away. Donlin's gun was in Orme's hands.

"All right," he panted. "All right—you've got me. But by heaven, Mayhew, you won't live to—"

Eve Tabor screamed. Two guns merged in the thunder that rocked the small room. Orme fired, and simultaneously the dick who'd brought him in let go with a .38. Robert Orme missed. The City man didn't. Orme swung around, almost fell—recovered and stood looking stupidly at his bleeding right hand. The blood was bright. It came in jetting spurts from a severed artery. Robert Orme grabbed at it, gasping frantically:

"I'm bleeding—*do* something! Somebody help me!" Gradually his voice rose to a terrorized scream again. His left hand was tight around his right, but still the blood oozed out from between his fingers. It dripped to the floor. Nothing else was said; they all looked at him.

"I—I'll bleed to death!" Orme screeched. "I—you can't let me die like this! Help me! Please!"

"Where are the pearls, Orme?" Mayhew said. "The rest of 'em—the ones you hid in the leg of your bed?"

"Public locker," Orme panted. "Union Terminal. Mailed the key to—John Turner—me—General Delivery. Help me *now!*"

"Why'd you sell these six?" Mayhew was inexorable.

"Had to have money. You figured it—gambling. Horses. A bookie had me for a grand. Now—please—!"

"Take him out of here," Stretch Mayhew said.

THE PRINTS on Izzy Bregoff's jeweler's glass matched with the thumb and index fingerprints of Robert Orme.

There were cops there who were higher up than Al Simmons who were interested now. But Mayhew still talked to

Lee Donlin, as though nobody else were around but himself and Lee. The rest of them sat and listened avidly. Simmons sulked at his desk.

"It was simple," Mayhew said, "once it dawned on me that Orme was the answer to everything that happened, and the only one who fitted all the angles."

"Nuts!" Simmons growled. "Orme was talking to you on the phone at the time Baker was murdered. If you say he wasn't, your own alibi blows up in your face, damn you!"

"I'll come to that later." Stretch Mayhew didn't even glance at him. "To begin with, Orme was friendly with the Tabors—had been for some time. He was in a position to know about Tabor's reform school record. Whether he did or not, though, doesn't matter. What does is that it was easy for him to plant the one pearl that was found in Tabor's apartment. Orme also knew about the projected purchase of the fur coat for Mrs. Tabor. So when he and Tabor were checking the safe that Saturday night, Orme had a substitute box all ready. After the box that held the pearls had been verified, he switched boxes. That's the only way it could have happened."

Donlin nodded, said, "Don't stop."

"Last night," Mayhew went on, "things started to happen. Orme sold Bregoff enough of the pearls to stave off the bookie who was into him. Just to be on the safe side, Orme hung around and tailed Izzy—and Izzy came right to me. I've told you why.

"Izzy was shot. The killer got away. But not three minutes later Orme turns up there at the restaurant. Why? Because he had to know if Izzy had spilled anything to me before he died, and what it was.

"As it happened, Izzy did. I couldn't figure it out at first. What he said, just before he died, sounded like *I—loop—fingers*. And he mentioned the pearls. See?"

Again Donlin nodded. Mayhew said:

"All right. I picked up Eve Tabor and Orme. Eve had already told me she wanted to see me when I'd finished eating. That was when she retained me. But I wanted to get a look at Izzy's shop right away, knowing Izzy'd just come from there about these pearls. I shook Orme and the girl—as it happened, only a block or two from her apartment. Orme, still not sure, also wanted to go to Izzy's shop and make certain he hadn't left anything that'd tie him in. He took Eve home and hot-footed it for the pawn shop. I was already there. He slugged and searched me. See? There, again, Orme was on the loose with nobody to check up on him."

"I see," Donlin said.

"Still I didn't tumble. I didn't because I'd already spent a lot of time on the Tabor case. There just wasn't any reason to suspect Orme, or anybody else except Tabor, of that theft.

"All right. Tonight, at five after eight, Orme phones me. I've already told him I'm sure the Bregoff kill ties in with the pearl theft. I've got my doubts about Eve Tabor and I've told Orme to meet her when she gets through work and keep an eye on her. But he doesn't. Still, I don't see that it's because *he* wants freedom of action.

"So he phones me at eight-five. He says he's home, and he's full of an idea that Morgan stole his own pearls for the insurance because the business is in bad shape financially. He lets drop that it's Marty Baker who's paying me, through Eve—he slips that to me apparently by accident. I go to see Baker about that—and Baker's dead, *at eight-five!*"

"But that phone call is no alibi for Orme. Only for *me*. Orme says he's home, but that doesn't prove he is. I checked that alarm clock in Baker's room against my watch, and it's five minutes fast. So at eight-five by the clock, it's really only eight by my watch. That gives Orme five minutes to get away from the hotel, find a phone booth and call me, to set up a makeshift alibi.

"Still I don't tumble. What does it is when Eve Tabor says—there in her apartment when you and Simmons were

questioning her—that Baker *told her and Orme that he had a lead on the Bregoff kill that might lead them to the pearls!*

"Orme knew that, see? He lost his head. Instead of waiting to find out what it was, he killed Baker, followed me to Izzy's place and tried to kill me. When he failed, he got panicky and moved the pearls, planning to blow. But the only thing on earth that would, or could, constitute direct evidence against him, both as to murder and theft, is that jeweler's glass of Bregoff's. Orme saw that as soon as he saw that glass and knew where it had come from. He remembered he'd touched that glass in Izzy's shop—knew that his fingerprints were on it. He didn't know that there wasn't anything else against him, but he'd already lost his nerve—and was through."

MAYHEW paused, grinning expectantly, and Donlin said patiently, "Okay, I'll be the stooge. Somehow Bregoff got Orme to handle that dingus and then put it in his safe, knowing Orme's prints were on it. But what made you so sure it was there?"

"Because of Bregoff's dying statement. Izzy said I—loop—fingers. *I,* the personal pronoun. *Loop,* a bend, the bight of a rope. At least that's what the words sounded like, and what I thought he'd said. But that wasn't what he meant at all.

"A jeweler's eye glass is called an eye loupe! E-y-e l-o-u-p-e. While I was in Morgan's place this afternoon and saw two or three of them in use, it came to me all of a sudden. I remembered that technical name. Then it was plain that what Izzy was trying to tell me was that he had somebody's fingerprints on his eye loupe. Simple. So there it is. . . .

"And now, Mrs. Tabor, part of my service consists of taking you upstate to see your husband and tell him the good news in person. Ready?"

"Am I ready!" Eve Tabor faltered, seemed about to cry, but smiled tremulously instead. "You—oh, you're swell!

"Let's go. That is, is it all right for me to go, Mr. Donlin?"

For once Lee Donlin forgot himself and acted like an Inspector. And nobody said him nay.

"Go ahead," said Donlin.

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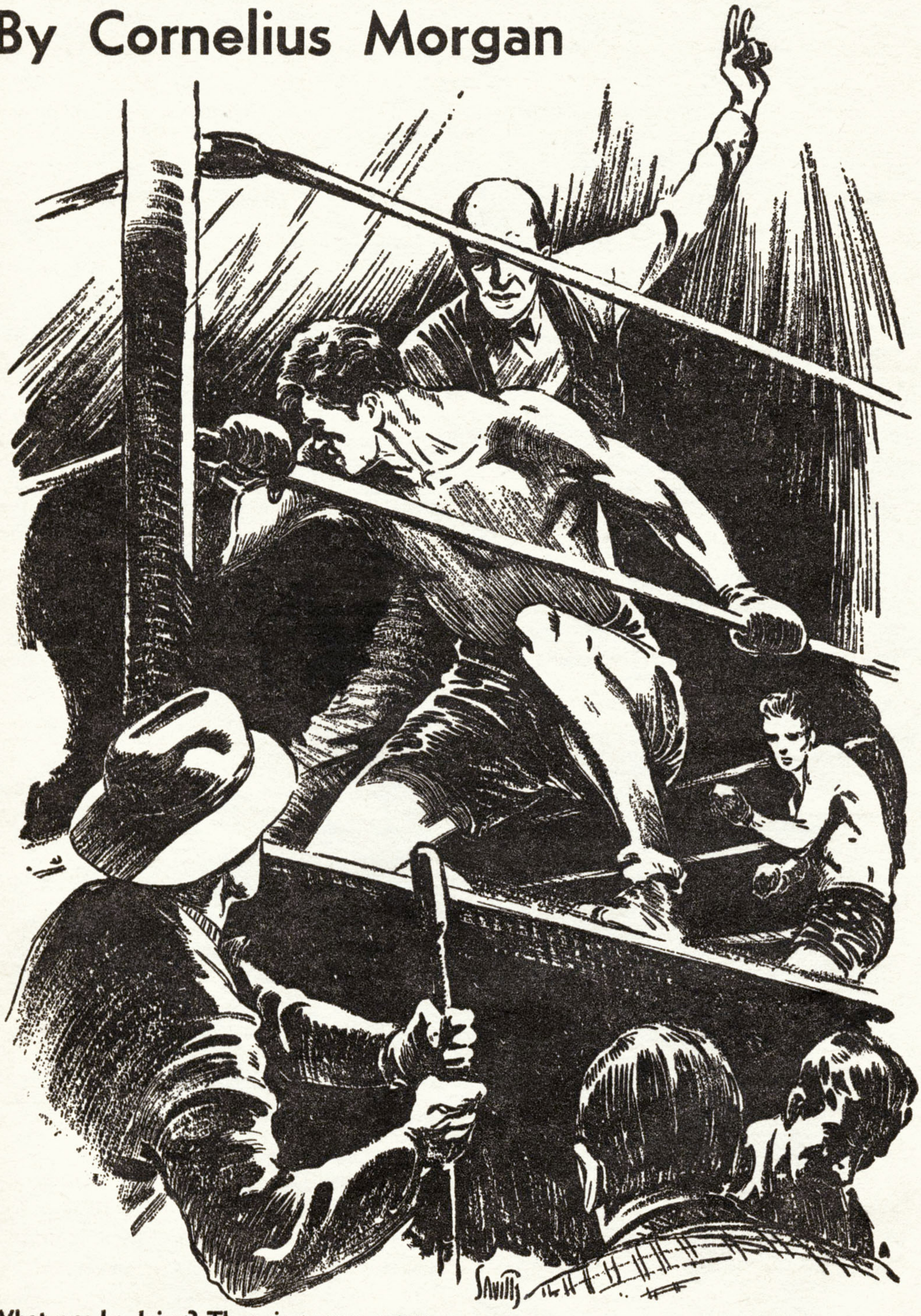
By Cornelius Morgan



What was he doing? Throwing away everything he had worked for and been proud of!

ABOUT five o'clock one spring afternoon, a tall, broad-shouldered young man dragged his feet wearily along unfrequented trails in the Adirondacks. In his gaunt face were the rugged looks of a youthful Abraham Lincoln, a lock of his thick brown hair falling across a high forehead. In his eyes, however, there was a hunted look, which the grim line of his mouth accentuated.

That all was not well with this young man of twenty or so, any thoughtful student of human nature could readily observe. Something was greatly troubling his soul. Even the less discerning eye could see that he was famished. You would not be far wrong if you said he hadn't eaten a morsel of food for two or three days. His shoes were down at heel and out of toe, suggesting much traveling on foot. His clothes were tattered and stained. He carried no pack over his superb shoulders, and quite obviously his pockets held nothing but emptiness.

There was something very likable about the kid. Anyone who saw him, affected by his down-and-out plight, would gladly have helped in whatever way they could. Usually he passed them by in a furtive manner.

Now and then in the Adirondacks he stopped to let his gaze take in the splendor of the mountain solitude. Here were some of the highest mountains in New York State, crystal-clear lakes reflecting the blue overhead, streams in which trout could be caught if you knew how and carried a license, the finest scenery in the East. Jack Wilson had not seen the equal of it, even in his own great state of California.

He was not hiking for pleasure. Far from it. But on the other hand he had a keen eye for natural beauty, and he wished he could live in this majestic paradise forever, in fact burrow in it, like a fox, hide in it.

Through the pine-studded slopes, a net-work of grassy log roads led back into the forest basin where the peak of Mount Dix and Mount Nippletop reached up to the fleecy clouds. Down below, Elk Lake was like an enormous sapphire, and in its waters, its inlets, one could paddle for miles. The water slowly was beginning to warm, and in another week or so the fishing season would be in full swing. Since the ice had gone out early this year, the mountain trout were ravenous. So was Jack Wilson.

He walked on, tightening his belt another notch with big, powerful hands. The log road forked in two directions, and he hesitated a moment, debating with himself which fork to take. He chose the one leading to the right, and by so doing the course of his life was changed.

He could see the treads of automobile tires on the pine-needle road, and about a quarter of a mile farther on he came to a gate stretched across the road. On a sign post was written:

MACOMB CAMP

Training Quarters of Ray Ballinski, Light-heavyweight Champion of the World.

The camp itself wasn't to be seen, but Jack could smell the fragrant odor of wood smoke and it drew him onward like a magnet, despite the message in his brain cautioning him. Soon an old log cabin came into view, blue smoke rising from its stone chimney. And now, actualy paining his stomach with its tantalizing call, came the delicious smell of frying bacon. Mingled with the freshness of the air, the odor made him dizzy.

Jack stood still, only his strength and youth saving him from fainting. Men in red and black-and-white checked flannel shirts were bustling about. The main log cabin, with smaller ones around it, looked like a wood-cut out of the past. It was a man's scene; thoroughly masculine.

JACK studied the situation carefully, half-inclined to turn back. A boxing ring was pitched in the clearing, two automobiles were parked in the lee of the main cabin, and a short, stumpy man in hunting boots and woolen mackinaw was coming through the pines carrying a bucket of water.

He stopped short when he saw the stranger, turned from his path and came straight toward him.

"Hello, kid!" he said. "What you doing here?"

"I—I just happened to be passing by."

"Passing by?" The man's face, shrewd, pimply, didn't seem complete without a cigar stuck in the corner of his small mouth, a cigar cocked upward at an oblique angle. "How'd you get here?"

"Walking. I'm fond of the mountains —only my pack fell down a ravine, taking my blankets, food, and stuff."

"When was that?"

"Day before yesterday."

"Holy smoke!" The man laid down his bucket of water. "You've been wandering around these hills since then?"

Jack tried to smile. "Oh, I'm used to it. It's losing my grub that bothers me. I feel kind of empty inside."

The little man kept studying him. "Where you from, kid?"

"I started out from Burlington, Vermont, about four days ago. Mountain climbing. But I'm from Grand Island, Nebraska, originally. I mean that's where I was born. Name's John Calahan," he continued to lie.

"Well," the man said, "you are twenty miles from Wood Junction, the nearest village, and that's one hell of a hike with them shoes you got. I don't know if any of the boys figure on going to the village this evening, but we'll find out about it, and if anyone's going down, why I guess you could ride in the car with 'em. You can get a train back to Burlington from there."

That was the last thing the kid wanted to do, even if he had the money for it—which he hadn't.

"You know what camp this is?" the man asked him.

"Yes, I saw the name on the sign post down the road."

"Well, I'm the champ's manager, Billy McCarron."

"Glad to know you, Mr. McCarron. Is there any chance of staying over and watching Ballinski train? He sure put O'Malloy away in jig time, and I don't think Matt Dakers will have any chance with him when they meet in Philadelphia two weeks from now. I've done some boxing myself," the kid said.

"Yeah?" McCarron's knowing little eyes measured him according to ring standards. "You've got the build for it, and the hands. You ain't fought professionally, have you?"

"No, just amateur bouts back home and elsewhere. I wouldn't mind turning pro, if I could make the grade. I haven't been able to find any other work to do."

ONCE AGAIN Billy McCarron took in the tattered shoes and torn clothes. "So that's how it is?" he commented. "Well, follow me. I guess the cook can dish up some chow for you."

They entered the log cabin with its warmth and rich smell of food. The main room was a cheerful sight, bathed in the soft rays of kerosene lamps. Under one of the lamps two men, dressed in the comfortable clothes of the woods, were playing checkers. One of them, a slight scowl on his ring-battered face, undoubtedly was Ray Ballinski; Jack Wilson vaguely recognized him from newspaper pictures he had seen. But there were other men equally formidable in build, probably the champ's sparring partners.

"You manage to beat him yet, Ray?" the stumpy little manager inquired of the champ.

"Naw! It's a lousy game!" Ballinski swept the board away with a savage swipe of his hand, the checkers rattling like hail against the floor and sides of the cabin.

Billy McCarron laughed. "Keen this evening," he said. "That's how I like to see you, Ray. That's fine!" He addressed the room at random, speaking to no one in particular. "This kid lost his way in the mountains—lost his pack, blankets and grub, so he says, two days ago. Been wandering around." He turned to Jack. "What did you say your name was?"

"Jack Calahan."

"Boys, this is Jack Calahan. Says he's done some boxing himself, and he wants to meet the champ. There he is, kid, right over there." He pointed.

Jack Calahan went over to him, holding out his hand, which Ballinski took. "Gee!" the kid grinned, even his hunger now forgotten. "This is a great honor —Ray!"

"Think nothing of it," the fighter said, going out into the thickening twilight. Billy McCarron had also disappeared, but his high-pitched, Irish voice could be heard in the kitchen.

"Sam!" he said. "Got a cup of coffee handy? There's a kid here who hasn't eaten for two days. Lost his way and stumbled in on the camp. Give him a sandwich of some kind. It'll tide him over till our supper time."

They were the sweetest words Jack Calahan had heard for a long time.

"Here, kid!" McCarron called. "Come in here. Help yourself to some coffee. We'll be having our regular supper in an hour or so, and you can eat all you want. See them plank steaks over there? Get one of them into you and you'll feel better."

"Oh, gee!" Jack Calahan felt like crying, felt like thanking the manager on his knees. "Oh, gee!" he said again, his eyes shining.

HE DRANK two cups of coffee, ate three sandwiches made of whole wheat bread with slices of cold lamb in between, and could have eaten a dozen more. Then he went back into the cabin and, without making himself conspicuous, edged near the log fire.

Including the champion, there were eight other men in the room, sparring partners, manager and trainer, seconds, and camp attendants. Some were playing cards, others reading. The kid was surprised to see whiskey bottles and cigarette butts around, for he had always understood that in training for a fight, liquor and smoking were rigidly banned.

However, Ballinski was neither smoking nor drinking. The kid couldn't keep his eyes off him.

There was a lot of talk going on, racy, crude, colorful. A little guy with a Fritzie Zivic nose was recounting some of his memories of the late Harry Greb.

"That guy was a wonder," he said in a voice sounding like the quacking of a duck. "I fought on the same card with him once or twice—and s'help me he goes into the ring with a quart of champagne in him and knocks the stuffings outa the guy.

"Ray!" he called, trying to get Ballinski's attention. "Here's a Harry Greb story that's a pip. Harry liked to barnstorm, and he also liked the dames. They liked him, too. I'm with him one time in some tank town, and on our arrival a swell blond, very much interested in him, steals him away from us. We don't see Harry till he's climbing into the ring about ten o'clock that evening, and I jump in to second him.

"Greb is giving the local sucker a hell of a going-over, and is setting him up for the knockout when I look out over the ringside and see this swell-looking blond crying her eyes out. I shout to her, 'You ought to be cheering—Greb is murdering this palooka.' The girl friend sobs back, 'That's my brother he's beating!' Holy Moses! I jump back to Greb's corner and whisper in his ear, and for the rest of the rounds Harry let the other feller stay and even let him take a few feeble clouts at him!"

The story, told in a quacking voice, brought genuine laughter from all except the champ. As McCarron had said, he was keen.

As unobtrusively as possible, Jack Calahan ate ravenously at supper, putting away a big steak, potatoes and gravy, several helpings of string beans, salad, pie, and three glasses of milk.

"You better stay here until morning," the manager told him. "Hey, Joe!" he called to one of his men. "See if you can find this kid a couple of blankets and a place for him to sleep."

In the morning, Jack Calahan piled a breakfast of bacon and eggs into him, and more milk, preferring it to coffee. He felt considerably better. The man called Joe, one of the champ's handlers, yelled to him to get in the car, as he and two other men were driving to the village.

The kid went to the manager. "Listen, Mr. McCarron," he said. "I've got no place to go when I reach the village, and no money. I'm not asking you for anything, but—"

"Ain't nothing for you to do here, kid."

"Well, I was thinking—maybe I could earn my grub by sparring with the champ a little."

"What's that?"

"I could give him a good work out, Mr. McCarron. Don't forget I told you I always wanted to go in the ring."

ONCE again the little manager noted his shoulders, his neck, his big hands. He opened a door leading off the main cabin room. It was a makeshift gym, a mat covering the floor, exercising paraphernalia around the walls, and a suspended punching bag in the corner.

"Take your coat off," McCarron said, "and let's see what you can do with the bag."

Jack Calahan stripped off his ragged coat, then his shirt, displaying a lean, finely muscled body and powerful arms. He started the bag going, and soon it was beating a furious tattoo in perfect rhythm against the board under which it was suspended.

"Pretty good," McCarron said casually. "Hey, Tom!" he called to one of the champ's sparring partners. "Come and look at this kid!"

The kid quickened his punching, every blow accurate. At this moment Sam Walsh came tearing into the cabin, using picturesque language to the effect that he wanted to get started for the village. "Where's that so-and-so kid!" he kept hollering.

"He ain't going," McCarron told him. "He's staying here for a while. I might be able to use him. All right, kid," he said to young Calahan, "tell you what I'll do. We'll see how you shape up in the ring, and if you're any good I'll pay you twenty-five dollars a week for the rest of our stay here."

"Oh, thanks, Mr. McCarron. You—you don't know what that means to me." Jack spoke gratefully, in an even tone, his breathing under perfect control, despite his fast bag-punching.

IT WAS about three o'clock in the afternoon, and Ray Ballinski had gone two rounds with Tom Mathison, and had just finished one round with Sam Walsh when McCarron called the latter fighter out of the ring.

"Hop in there!" he told the kid. "And Ray," he shouted to the champion, "this kid is trying to earn his keep around here. See that he does earn it, and don't go too hard on him. All right, let's go."

Jack Calahan was wearing fighting shoes and trunks, eight-ounce gloves on his hands, but no head protection such as Ballinski had on. The light-heavyweight champion, barely sweating and fresh as a daisy, let him have two or three rights first to the mid-section, then to the chin. The kid threw a long left, closed, swung Ballinski around, and broke clean. He went in close, as the champ led with another right, and drove several rights and lefts to Ballinski's body.

They sparred in the center of the ring for a moment, the kid catching a hard one right on the cheek before he got in a left to the champion's lips, the blow knocking out the fighter's mouthpiece!

"That kid can fight," McCarron said, chewing on an imaginary cigar. "Some day that kid's going to be a fighter. If that's what he can show us just from boxing in amateur bouts—"

The expression on Ballinski's face plainly told the kid that he was playing with dynamite. He closed in, feinted, and brought over a hard right to the head. The kid took the blow very well indeed, his eyes merely blinking. In his zeal, laughing a little to show he wasn't hurt, trying to make himself worthy of his keep, he tangled up with the champion. He wasn't the least bit sore, as Ballinski appeared to be with him.

And then it happened!

In a sudden burst of quick fighting, the kid, trying to protect himself, brought across a crisp left, caught Ballinski clean on the chin, and dropped him. Of all those watching, the kid himself was the most surprised, as the expression on his gaunt young face plainly showed.

"Gee!" McCarron gasped, ringing the bell in the corner. "Get in there!" he hurried one of the seconds. "Get a stool under him! I'm damn glad Jones of the Globe-Herald didn't get up here today like he promised. We don't want that to appear in the papers!"

Ballinski was shaken, though not as much as the kid was. Jack was petrified. What had he done? Knocked down Ray Ballinski with a left jab! Hurt him, too! He must have been on the canvas for three seconds!

Meantime, the kid was left alone, leaning against the ropes. Nobody was paying the least attention to him. Everybody had gathered around Ballinski's corner, talking in undertones, so that Jack couldn't hear.

"All right," McCarron suddenly announced, "one more round. Then we hang up the gloves for the day."

Jack Calahan watched Ballinski leave his corner, coming out with his hands down, his well trained body relaxed, and knew that Ballinski meant to punish him for that lucky, ill-advised left jab. One look at those eyes told the story.

THE light-heavyweight champion met him with a solid smash above the belt, making his knees buckle, although he didn't go down. A terrific right hook seemed to explode his left ear-drum. Another hook caught him in the same place, spinning him to the ropes.

Ballinski glided in for the kill, cool, confident, angry. A left cross opened a cut on the kid's eye, and then the champion measured him and sent in a hard right to the face. It caught the kid on the nose, breaking it, sending the tang of leather down his throat and into his diaphragm, where it would remain to his last day. Blood ran down his face, coming from his eye, his nose, his mouth, his ear. He caught about a dozen hooks, jabs, and left and right crosses, as his knees buckled under him again.

"I won't go down," he told himself. "I won't go down! I must earn that twenty-five—"

"Stop it!" McCarron was yelling. "Stop it! Quit it, Ray! Don't hit him again!"

Two or three of Ballinski's seconds sprang into the ring, shoved a stool under the half-unconscious Jack Calahan and went to work on him. They had plenty of work to do, for the lad's once ruggedly handsome face was an unholy mess. Billy McCarron got in the ring to have a squint at him.

"How you feel, kid?"

Jack tried to look at him. "Do I earn my keep?" he managed to say between cut lips.

He didn't hear the manager's answer, for suddenly he lost all consciousness. fainted dead away.

The situation and its consequences blew up right in McCarron's rough and yet kindly face. It mattered little now how fortunate they had been that Marvin Jones, sports writer for the New York Globe-Herald, hadn't been present to see Ballinski cleanly floored by that left jab to the jaw. An amateur's left!

Oh, no—Jones didn't matter now, anyway. For if anything happened to the kid—if he happened to die from the

punishment he had taken—all the papers in the country would have the news in blazing headlines and the championship go would be called off. $150,000 was going up in smoke!

McCarron cursed the day he had spoken to the boy, cursed himself for being kind to him and letting him stay overnight in the camp, cursed himself for giving him the opportunity to step in the ring with the hard-hitting Ballinski. He also cursed himself for giving way to the champ at the end of the first round, permitting him, despite all advice to the contrary, to continue the bout and "teach the kid a lesson!"

THEY CARRIED Jack Calahan to the log cabin, phoned Saranac Lake and ordered an ambulance to meet them halfway to pick up the severely beaten youngster. McCarron was sparing no expense and taking no chances. The kid had said he hadn't eaten for days! How much strength did he have left? Could they get him to the hospital in Saranac Lake before he—before—? McCarron was tearing out what few remaining hairs he had on his head!

The kid known as Jack Calahan recovered consciousness before they tenderly lifted him into one of the cars. He was in pain, but he didn't say a word. He knew they were taking him away from the camp, he knew that the job with the twenty-five dollars he had hoped to earn was a thing of the past, but he had greater worries on his mind than that. He realized that there was nothing he could do to prevent his discovery now.

His jig was up at last. In the hospital they'd want all particulars about him, and take all records of identification!

The ambulance from the hospital at Saranac Lake met them halfway, and the sorely beaten youth was transferred to it. McCarron got into the ambulance with him, intending to see things through, whatever way they went.

The examining doctor said that Jack Calahan's nose was badly broken, and without surgery would remain so all his life. His left ear was injured and might cause trouble. Otherwise, the cuts and contusions on his face would soon respond to treatment, the boy's heart was sound, his pulse normal, and he should be up and around again in less than a week.

McCarron was tickled pink. He directed that all expenses be sent to him personally, congratulated the Kid on his stamina and punch, put fifty dollars in the pocket of his torn coat and told him to see him in his New York office when he got out of the hospital. Then the relieved little manager hurried back to camp.

Two weeks later, in a Philadelphia ball park, a huge crowd saw Ray Ballinski, light-heavyweight champion of the world, successfully defend his title. In one minute and twenty-eight seconds in the second round, in what was to have been a fifteen round bout, he knocked out the challenger, Matt Dakers of New Orleans, Louisiana.

The kid known as Jack Calahan, needing rest and nourishment, took advantage of his haven in the Saranac Hospital, staying there as long as he could. He would have liked to stay there indefinitely, but the medical authorities had different ideas, informing him that he was quite able to go out and abroad at the end of a week. By duplicity and persuasion—all the nurses favoring him—he managed to hang on for slightly over two weeks. On the day after he had radio-listened to the light-heavyweight go in Philly, he was practically dumped willy-nilly out of the hospital, hale and hearty, the world ready to receive him and buffet him around.

Young Calahan—he had decided to stick to that name—looked at himself in the mirror. He was shocked, having difficulty in recognizing himself. He didn't seem to be the same person. His broken nose completely altered his face, and his left ear had thickened, giving his forehead and his eyes a different look. He was homely as mud!

BUT this discovery gradually delighted, rather than discouraged him. He realized at once that this painful accident, this strange turn in his life, was to his benefit. Even his mother and his stepfather would have difficulty in knowing him! This was all to the good, and in his youthful and not altogether ex-exemplary way, he thanked his stars that Ray Ballinski had aided him in a further and much more reliable cheating of the law.

Fifty dollars in his jeans! It was the most money, in a single sum, he had ever possessed. The kid was resolved to take care of it, not to waste a penny. Instead of buying a train ticket, he spent the money for a pair of new shoes—cheap—and a second-hand suit. He hitchhiked his way to New York, and one afternoon presented himself in the hectic headquarters of Billy McCarron, manager of the light-heavyweight champion of the world.

"Who?" said the office girl, noting his broken nose and cheap-looking clothes.

"Tell him Jack Calahan would like a word with him."

"Mr. McCarron is very busy and can't see anyone today."

Jack, unversed in the ways of Broadway, turned his broad back on her and regretfully went to the door. But at this moment Billy McCarron, a cigar turned up at a forty-five degree angle from the corner of his dyspeptic mouth, came into the room.

"Hello, Mr. McCarron."

"Who are you?"

"Jack Calahan. Remember what you said about coming to see you when I got out of the hospital? Well, here I am."

"Hello, kid—didn't recognize you at first. How you feel?"

"Swell, Mr. McCarron. Say! I listened to that fight over the radio. Ballinski sure gave Dakers the works, didn't he! Gee, I was rooting for the champ from the opening bell!"

McCarron looked him over with his customary managerial appraisal. "Come into my office," he said.

JACK CALAHAN stepped in there. Slumped on a couch was a man with a fallen-away chin, narrow shoulders, watery eyes back of gold-rimmed spectacles, a man who was a dead ringer for the syndicated character of Caspar Milquetoast.

"Marvin," McCarron said, trying to rouse this man's interest, "meet young Jack Calahan, future heavyweight champion of the world. Jack, meet Marvin Jones, sports editor of the New York Globe-Herald!"

Jack, thrilling to the introductory words, grasped the flaccid hand which the well known sports writer offered.

"Gee whiz!" he said. "I'm sure glad to meet you, Mr. Jones!"

The sports writer ignored him. "Billy, what's that you said about the future heavyweight champion?" he asked languidly.

McCarron re-lighted his cigar. "How much you weigh, kid?"

"One seventy-nine, sir."

"Height?"

"Six feet one."

"O.K., Marvin," he said to the sports writer. "I've said my piece, and you can quote me. Now I want to talk to the kid alone. See you later."

The languid Mr. Jones, who wrote so vitally about prizefighting, trickled out of the office without a further look at young Jack Calahan.

"Sit down, kid," McCarron said, and for a long time was silent as he puffed on his cigar. "There's one thing that troubles me," he began. "That story about you being a mountain climber and losing your way—that was phony, wasn't it?"

"No, sir."

"Well, have it your own way. I can make a lot of money for you, kid, but I don't want anything wrong. Get me? When you set Ballinski on the seat of his pants, I could see right away that you had a future. So if you've anything to hide, kid, you better come clean right away. Otherwise I don't want to manage you."

"I've got nothing to hide, Mr. McCarron."

"Kid, I don't want you to get a swelled head or anything like that, but I think you're a natural born fighter, and with care—with careful nursing along—I've a hunch you're going places."

"Oh, gee, Mr. McCarron. That's swell!"

"Tell me about yourself—where you were born—all about your folks."

The kid hesitated. "Well, like I told you, I was born in Grand Island, Nebraska. My mother married the second time and I never could get along with my stepfather, so I ran away. But I couldn't seem to find anything to do, except digging ditches and stuff like that. My father," he said proudly, "was middle-weight champion of the U. S. Navy before he married my mother."

McCarron brightened as he once more re-lighted his cigar. "That so?" he said. "What was his name?"

Jack was momentarily stumped. He had spoken the truth about his father and stepfather, yet he knew he must be on his guard. "Mike Calahan," he said. "Petty officer on one of Uncle Sam's warships."

Billy McCarron chewed on this reflectively. "O.K.," he said shrewdly, "we'll stick to that story. Now I'll tell you what I'll do. You need schooling. We'll bring you along slowly—plenty of gym work and maybe a couple of prelim bouts out of town. I'll stake you in the meantime, nurse you along, and when we're ready we'll spring you in the Garden. That left jab of yours will take care of things from then on. How you fixed for cash?"

"I've still got thirty-one dollars, Mr. McCarron."

"Fine. That'll hold you for a while. Report to Stillman's Gym tomorrow morning around ten o'clock. I'll see you there. S'long, kid—and take care of yourself."

HIGHLY elated, Jack Calahan walked back to the four-dollar-a-week room he had taken on Lexington Avenue. There he sat down on his bed and reviewed everything Mr. McCarron had said. "Meet the future heavyweight champion of the world!" That was a thriller! But there was something that pungently took the edge off it. Mr. McCarron, inquiring about his background, had looked suspiciously at him. "O.K.," he had said, "we'll stick to that story."

The kid's magnificent shoulders suddenly slumped as his big hands spasmodically covered his face. "Oh God!" he whispered. "Why did I do it?"

His thoughts turned back to a morning four months before.

It was true that his mother had remarried, true that his stepfather had abused and ill-treated him, true that his own father—Mike Wilson—had been middle-weight champion of the U. S. Pacific Fleet. But that was as far as the truth would stretch.

Jack Wilson (now Jack Calahan to the sporting fraternity) hadn't been a model youth exactly. He continually played hookey from his school in San Bernardino, California, frequented pool rooms, gravitated into bad company, lied, fought and participated in petty theft, stealing fruit and cigarettes from locked-up stores, which they sold for pocket money.

And then one afternoon he drove a borrowed car down the main street, miraculously avoiding a collision with a sedan carrying a New York license, the two men in it blocking his path. At first he thought they were policemen, and he worried about the consequences, for he had no driver's license of his own.

The men, to the contrary, seemed to approve of his driving, and during their talk with him they made him an amazing proposition. One hundred dollars to guard and drive their car while they paid a short visit to the bank.

A hold-up! It flashed into the kid's mind instantly. He wanted nothing to do with it. But the two gangsters, small of stature though they were, scared him. $100! It was a fortune! All he had to do

was keep the motor running for them, and drive them out of town.

THE ROBBERY, a failure, resulted in murder. One of the guards at the bank was shot down, and Jack witnessed it with horrified eyes. Scared stiff, he was unable to get out of the car as the two killers tore down the sidewalk. They saw his intention to quit, but needing their guns to save themselves, they menaced him, forced him to step on the gas as they directed him to the border.

The hold-up had been carefully planned, the gangsters knowing just what they wanted to do. Avoiding the main routes, they took dirt roads, winding around the San Bernardino Mountains and into the neighboring state of Arizona.

Their cabin in the Papago Indian Reservation near the Mexican border had been prepared by them in advance, evidently used by them, and before by other members of their gang. They had food and liquor there, extra guns and a radio. Reaching there around midnight, they changed the license plates on the car, then listened in for any information coming over the air. An account of the attempted robbery was included in the one o'clock news report, and the kid heard the dread mention of his name.

"Young Wilson, twenty years of age, according to his parents, did not, so far as is known, do any of the shooting which killed one of the bank guards and a bystander. But he drove the killers' car, and he was clearly recognized at the wheel by Martin Amory, a friend of his, as the thugs sped wildly through the town."

The situation paralyzed him. He couldn't eat or sleep. He realized that he was a fugitive from justice, and never again could he enjoy the advantages of freedom. By his unwitting participation in the hold-up and murder he had cast in his lot with gangsters and was now at their mercy.

By their talk they were members of a powerful gang in the East. One of them, called Len, also had the nickname of Silver Dollar. In some way or other, this Silver Dollar guy, dark, swarthy, made use of the actual coin itself in order to intimidate and threaten his enemies. For example—according to their conversation—a certain person had been bumped off in a New Jersey rooming house some months ago, but not before his eyes had bulged out at the sight of something tossed on his bed. A silver dollar!

They expressed no regret at having dragged the kid into the mess. Instead, they took his enforced presence with them with complete indifference, seldom talking to him except to make it plain that he was their prisoner. The kid fully believed they meant to kill him before they went East, for they would never give him a chance to talk.

They had remained there in hiding for five weeks when Silver Dollar returned in the car from a Mexican town across the Border. He had received a letter containing money and instructions from one of the gang members in New York.

"O.K., Max," he said to the other man, "I guess it's stopped raining. We can light out of here tomorrow morning."

"Swell," Max said. "This life is driving me nuts. What about the kid here?"

Len (Silver Dollar) Bradman looked the youth over between dark, half-closed eyes. "What you got on your mind, kid?" he asked.

"I'll never go back home. I'm the only one they recognized, and that means the rest of my life in prison. I don't want that. If I had a little money—like the hundred you promised me—I'd make my way to Guaymas or some place, ship on a boat, and go to South America. I won't do any talking. I'd be a chump to do that, handing myself twenty years or maybe worse."

"There'd be no *maybe* about it," the man called Max told him.

The kid knew that and eyed the killers calmly.

EXCEPT that they were armed, constantly on their guard, the kid felt that he could take care of them in a fight. Several times he had been on the verge of attempting to escape, only to have his plans foiled. In truth he was so wretched in mind and soul, that he faced the prospect of a parting bullet from them without much regret. It would put an end to troubles that would otherwise haunt him all his days.

On the morning of their departure, the two gangsters crowded everything but their extra guns and ammunition into the car—having thrown this evidence into the river at the bottom of a ravine—leaving the cabin practically bare. The kid wondered what they were going to do with him, as he stood outside the cabin, watching their preparations for going away.

Finally Len (Silver Dollar) Bradman walked up to him and peeled twenty-five dollars off a roll.

"Here, kid," he said. "Here's some dough that'll take care of you. Keep your nose clean." He turned, got in the car, and without another word the men drove away.

Jack Wilson could see a long vista of hardship and concealment ahead of him, every step of it dangerous and uncertain. But his stout heart took up the challenge of adventure. He was young, strong. He'd get along.

In a week's time he reached the Mexican fishing town of Guaymas and shipped on a freighter sailing for Costa Rica. He crossed that country on a pack train to Colon, shipped aboard another vessel to New Orleans, worked in the dockyards there for a while, and eventually took another boat to Montreal, Canada. From there he worked as deck hand—using the name Jack Calahan all the while—on the Great Lake trade.

Three months after the San Bernardino bank outrage, he found himself in Burlington, Vermont. Going into a post office to take shelter from a sudden rainstorm, he saw his photograph posted up under a WANTED sign, with a reward of five hundred dollars for any information about him.

That flaming indictment, printed in black and white, was like an accusing finger pointing straight at him, yelling to the world his real name. It seemed to the kid that the clerk behind the stamp window had already recognized him. So had the woman buying a postal order, and the little girl beside her, looking up into his face.

With the thumping of his heart also threatening to drum his guilt into all ears, he went out into the pouring rain, sought the less frequented streets and walked on and on into the country. Three days later he stumbled into the camp of Ray Ballinski, light-heavyweight champion.

Once more he studied himself in the small mirror of his four-dollar-a-week room. Ballinski had done him a service in giving him that ear and that nose.

"We can operate on the nose for you," the doctor in the Saranac Lake hospital had said. "I think we can straighten it."

"No, thanks," he grinned. "What's the use? I'm going to make boxing my profession, so it would only get broken again, probably."

He sparred daily at Stillman's, saw and sometimes met some of the boxing "greats." He was training one day, boxing a lad called Grosso, when Ray Ballinski came into the gym, causing a momentary halt to proceedings as everybody turned to look at him, resplendent in a white polo coat, fawn trousers.

"Hello, kid," he said to Jack Calahan. "I want to talk to you in a minute, but first let's see you go."

GROSSO was a lanky welter-weight, and Jack was using him to work up his speed. They went a fast two minutes or so, then Ballinski strolled to the lockers, stripped, and laced a pair of gloves on his hands. He took the Kid aside, looked at his broken nose and thick ear, made no comment about them, but with his glove suddenly ruffled the kid's brown hair.

"Gonna tell you something," he said. "Never forget that every fighter has his own peculiar style. None of 'em—in his own weight—fights exactly like any other guy. And all of 'em—including Gene Tunney, if a guy was to study him carefully over a time—has his weakness. They ain't going to advertise it. You gotta find it out for yourself, by observing 'em, studying 'em, the way a baseball catcher gets to know the opposing pitchers. That's lesson number one, kid. Now let's go—and maybe I can give you a few more pointers."

Jack was more than grateful. In that moment Ray Ballinski became his idol, every word he spoke seeming the acme of wisdom. From Ballinski he learned how to ride with a punch, how to offset a left lead by closing in, how to balance himself for a one-two punch, bringing his left or right up from the belly to the chin, and the intricacies and pugilistic art of foot-work.

One afternoon after his third workout with the light-heavyweight champion, Ballinski said, "Meet me around nine o'clock tonight outside the Garden. I'll have a ringside seat for you for the Barney Ross-Jimmy McLarnin go."

"Swell! Thanks a lot. Gee, that's great!"

Jack was almost down to his last dollar about this time, conserving his money, not wishing to ask Mr. McCarron for more, consequently not eating as well as he wanted to. In his room he drank a quart of milk, ate a can of cold beans with several slices of unbuttered bread; then borrowed an iron from his landlady, pressed his suit, shirt-collar and tie, gave his shoes a good cleaning, and carefully brushed his hair.

When he returned the iron he was surprised to note that it was 8:45 p.m., giving him only fifteen minutes to reach the Garden. His first thought was of taking a cross-town bus, but a nickel was a nickel, and his long legs would get him across to Eighth Avenue almost as soon. Not for anything in the world must he keep Ray Ballinski waiting.

On Madison Avenue his eye challenged the green light. He decided that with a sprint he could beat the ready-to-move traffic. Trying for it, he ran smack into a girl!

The impact staggered him, yet he kept his feet. Not so the girl. Knocked off the sidewalk, she was flat on her back, the parcels and handbag she had been carrying flying everywhere. In that same instant death bore down on her, and by some miracle Jack Calahan snatched her away from the shriek of the braked wheels.

Pandemonium broke loose, men shouting, women screaming. Jack, on his knees beside the girl, was being pushed and buffeted around by a gathering crowd. He could only gasp out staccato words.

"Gee, that was close! I didn't see you —didn't even notice you—"

He lifted her to a sitting position. Her hat had been jolted off and the softness of her hair brushed his cheek. But her eyes remained closed, and against his arm and shoulder her body seemed boneless.

"Somebody get her a glass of water," he begged hoarsely.

THE bus driver took his name and address, then a cop came along asking for particulars, jotting them down in his notebook, the retributive arm of the law clutching at Jack Calahan like a tentacle. The bus driver said:

"I saw it and it wasn't his fault. He bumped into her, but he sure saved that girl's life."

A little water was poured between her lips, and her large brown eyes slowly opened. Jack gently helped her to her feet, his arm still around her. "Are you all right now?" he ventured timidly.

She tried to stand by herself. "I still seem to be in one piece."

Someone had picked up her hat and handbag. Another person was holding two paper bags, one of which was split open, disclosing a loaf of bread and a mess that looked like the remains of potato salad. "Get a cab for her," someone said.

"No, I—I don't want a cab. I haven't far to go. If you'll find my handbag—"

The policeman gave it to her.

"You better take this cab," Jack said. He went to the driver, gave him his last remaining dollar. "Do me a favor, will you?" he whispered. "This is all the money I've got. Drive her where she wants to go, will you please?" The driver took the bill, and Jack went back to the girl. She permitted him to help her inside the cab, where, with hat, handbag and parcels clutched in her arms, she sank back against the leather upholstery.

"Sure you're all right?" he inquired, still worried about her.

Again she smiled at him. "I think so. Please drive to the corner of Fifty-first and Third Avenue," she told the driver.

AS THE taxi moved away Jack suddenly remembered his appointment at the Garden with Ray Ballinski. He was about to leave the scene when a voice said, "Hey, mister, this belongs to her."

A telegraph boy was holding out a folded sheet of paper. It contained the typewritten words and chorus of a song, and at the foot of it, written in pencil was a message. "For Caroline Mayland. Memorize for audition by tomorrow afternoon."

Jack put the paper in his pocket, then set out with long, swift strides across town to Madison Square Garden. There was no sign of Ray Ballinski in the lobby, the time being 9:47 p.m. He asked at the ticket office if anything had been left for him, giving his name. A piece of paper was passed out to him, requiring $1.43 tax charge. He said he didn't have the money, and such was the disappointment in his eyes that the ticket seller gruffly waved him on, told him to go inside.

The semi-final bout was just over, the crowd roaring, Joe Humphreys, famous silver-voiced announcer, lifting his arms for silence.

"The win-nor—the win-nor—"

Jack went down the aisle to the third row, ring-side. He spotted Ray Ballinski instantly, Mr. McCarron seated on his left, the seat to the right of him vacant. Jack edged past several unknown notables and took the empty seat.

"Gee, I'm sorry not to show up before now, Ray," he said breathlessly. "I had a little trouble."

"Sit down," the fighter growled. "Take the weight off your feet."

"Hello, Mr. McCarron."

"Hello, kid. I got a match for you a week from tonight."

"Honest?" Jack was so excited by the surrounding scene and his part in it ("future lightweight champion of the world!") so elated, that he became all feet and hands.

Mr. McCarron was saying, "Prelim bout in Brooklyn, four rounds, fifty bucks—"

"Pipe down!" Ballinski ordered the two of them. "I can't hear what Joe Humphreys is saying."

Joe was calling some of the "greats" into the ring, to be introduced to the crowd before the main bout. Gene Tunney, the heavyweight champion, had taken a bow, and Jack Calahan was fascinated by him.

Then Humphreys called attention to Ray Ballinski's presence at the ringside, something the light-heavyweight was expecting, waiting for. "Come up here, Ray!" he was invited, and the crowd yelled lustily. Ballinski seemed a trifle awkward as he rose from his seat, and in moving to the aisle he stumbled over Jack's legs.

"Get them big feet of yours outa the way!" he said peevishly, his breath giving out a distinct odor of liquor!

That floored Jack. His hero drinking, dissipating the gifts given him. He hated it, and in that moment the grandeur of the Garden, the pageantry of pugilistic contest, came down to cold, earthly reality, everything taking on the aura of a glorified saloon!

"What's the trouble, kid?" McCarron inquired, looking at him keenly.

"Nothing, sir."

"You look kinda pale. You eating right? Here, grab this." And he passed along two twenty-dollar bills.

"Thanks, Mr. McCarron." He was grateful for the money, but the savor had gone out of the evening.

IT WAS almost eleven o'clock when he reached Lexington Avenue, and only then did he remember the girl he had knocked down, and the destination she had given the taxi driver. Third Avenue at Fifty-First street. He went into a drugstore and found the name Thomas B. Mayland, 213 East Fifty-First Street. That would be it! He walked over there.

Number 213, adjoining a Chinese laundry, was an old brownstone house turned into apartments. He pressed the button against the name Mayland, pushed open the door when the buzzer sounded and went up the stairs. The girl, dressed in a soft-blue house coat, peeped out of her third floor door.

"I guess this dropped out of your purse," Jack said nervously, looking at the luxuriant hair that cascaded over her shoulders. He gave her the sheet of paper.

"Oh, thank you very much. It was kind of you to go to the trouble."

His feet were getting tangled up. "My name is Jack Calahan. I'm just starting out in the ring. I sure hope everything's all right. I mean that you weren't seriously hurt or anything."

"Who's there, Carol?" a man called from somewhere inside the apartment.

"The person I told you about," she replied. "He brought the lines of my song, which I lost." She looked at Jack. "My father," she explained. "He's an invalid."

Jack found it difficult to look at her directly. "Well, goodnight," he stammered, turning away. "I'm glad you—glad everything turned out all right."

She noted his shyness and smiled. "Goodnight—and thank you."

THE four-round bout at the Lenox Club in Brooklyn, first preliminary on a card of six, was won on points by Jack Calahan. Billy McCarron kept in the background, not yet wishing to show his interest in the boy, but Marvin Jones of the Globe-Herald was there, wanting to have a look-see at this "future heavyweight champion of the world." This is what he wrote:

> In one of the opening bouts, Jack Calahan, weighing 173½, showed a nice left jab that twice put his opponent on the floor. Calahan should be watched. If he's handled carefully, he may be a comer.

Marvin Jones could have been more positive. In a little over three years time, in a phenomenal rise to the heights of fistiana, Jack Calahan was crowned light-heavyweight champion of the world.

By that time much resin had been stamped into ring corners, many a boxing glove laced on, and many another one hung up for good. The latter situation went for the once hard-hitting Ray Ballinski who, once he lost the title in a return bout with Spike O'Malloy, tobogganed to obscurity.

And much in the interim had happened to Jack Calahan. Under McCarron's careful management he made money and saved it. On the way up he learned that the boxing profession was like any other—banking, commercial business, the theater—in that they were all governed by strict rules which must be rigidly observed. Jack Calahan obeyed these rules. A surfeit of money was the prizefighter's downfall in nine cases out of ten. Defeat was less his enemy than success. Jack Calahan was resolved never to let down the Goddess of Luck who had given him his new start in life. The ring, and the Marquis of Queensberry, made a man of him.

Meanwhile he had married Carol Mayland and they had a baby daughter. Carol never attended Jack's fights. He didn't wish her to attend them. But as he developed as a challenger, she lis-

tened to the broadcasts of his fights over the radio, and was rigid with suspense and fear during his battle for the championship.

It took place in Detroit, O'Malloy's home town. Jack Calahan's great fighting and punching ability entitled him to the match. He had had thirty-one bouts in almost three years, winning twenty of them by a K. O., nine on decision, and losing two on points, a great record for a kid only twenty-three years old.

JACK went to work on O'Malloy as early as the second round, driving home some punishing blows to the midsection, and clipping the champion with a stiff right to the chin. O'Malloy came back in some furious in-fighting, for which he was famous, pinning Jack on the ropes. With a few seconds to go before the bell, the young challenger, cool as a cucumber, brought over his dynamic left and O'Malloy went down, only the bell saving him.

The third round was even, Jack faithfully obeying orders from his corner. O'Malloy had an edge in the fourth, and possibly the fifth, Jack still pacing himself over the fifteen-round championship distance. The champ lost the sixth on a low blow.

The seventh saw the most thrilling round of the fight, O'Malloy battling furiously to save his title. Jack pumped two hard rights to the champion's heart, rocked him with a right to the chin, and then his left jab—coming with lightning speed and traveling no more than eight inches or so—connected cleanly, and the referee began waving his arm up and down. He counted up to nine before O'Malloy could get up. Jack, breathing easily, magnificently trained, straightened him up with a left uppercut, brought over his right—and the fight was over.

"The win-nor—and new champion—Jack Calahan!" Joe Humphreys announced.

The Nebraska Wildcat he was called at this time, because he was born in Grand Island, a town in that state. Oddly enough, nobody in Grand Island seemed able to place him, or his family, and the story about his late father, Mike Calahan, having been middle-weight champion of the Pacific Fleet couldn't be verified. The U. S. Navy had no record of such a man.

But in all other respects the Nebraska Wildcat justified his name and was popular with the fight fans wherever he showed his wares, for he always gave his customers their full money's worth, never dodging a challenger. He fought cleanly in the ring, and lived cleanly out of it.

On his return to New York from Detroit, he received an ovation when introduced from the Garden ring. McCarron, his manager, was disappointed because he couldn't seem to gain weight. The most he ever went on the scales was 176, which was too light to challenge the heavyweight champion, Gene Tunney. Still the boy was young, and maybe in a year's time—

Jack bought his wife a house in Scarsdale, gave her a fur coat, and sent his mother some money, carefully hiding all traces of where it came from. Devoted to his wife and daughter, he often worried about the past, debating with himself whether he had been unfair to Carol in asking her to marry a man with an assumed name. In fact, he considered telling her the whole story, but he couldn't bring himself to do anything that might worry her, or lessen her love for him.

About four months after he had won the light-heavyweight championship, McCarron matched him for a ten-round fight in the Garden with Hans Schurman, a German rated tenth in the list of world's best heavies.

AT THE weighing-in on the afternoon of the bout, Jack tipped the scales at 176½. Schurman went 197.

The Garden was packed, and the betting—that sordid side to professional boxing and other sports rampant in big cities like New York—was 6 to 5 and take your pick. Those who picked the

German hardly got a run for their money, Jack Calahan knocking their man out in the very first round. Everybody now thought that Jack had a chance with Tunney, believed that his blinding speed, and the T.N.T. he carried in each hand, would bring the heavyweight down to his size. But Billy McCarron was not ready to throw him in there with Tunney. He wanted to wait a year longer.

After the fight with Hans Schurman, Jack hurried things in his dressing room, so that he could drive out in his car to Scarsdale and get home early. As a rule he tried to leave the Garden secretly to avoid the press of hero-worshippers and the demands made upon him for signatures and money. But even so, in leaving by a side entrance, he was usually flanked by his attendants, until he reached his car.

This evening, he left the Garden on his own, walking quickly to the garage where he parked his car. Among the people who passed him was a man wearing a pulled down fedora, a fellow who looked like a cop off duty, or a detective. Jack eyed him as he went by, further noting that he was a stranger. The man, slightly brushing his shoulder in the press of the sidewalk crowd, pronounced two words with a rising inflection.

"Jack Wilson?"

Jack thought fast, but not fast enough. For one second he was caught off his guard, and that second spelled his doom.

He should have kept on walking, not paying the slightest attention to the half-whispered name. The man couldn't have been quite sure! He was just making an inquiry!

Unfortunately Jack gave a start, then swung around to see who his questioner was, a look of alarm on his battered face. The man only wanted this sign from him, and he grinned as he glanced back, then turned and walked away.

Driving home, and all that night, lying sleepless in bed, he fretted and worried about what that recognition might mean. He had never seen the man before! What import might that incident have? Somebody knew that Jack Calahan was, in reality, Jack Wilson. And if they knew that, they also knew he came from San Bernardino, California, and that he was wanted by the police in connection with murder!

Day after day he worried about things, until Carol, his wife, began asking him if anything was wrong. Billy McCarron noticed the strain in his eyes and mentioned it. But as the days turned into weeks, the weeks into months, without any visitation from the police, Jack's brain became less tortured, and finally he tried not to think about it, tried to dismiss it from his mind as a bad dream.

BILLY McCARRON, while keeping matters from the press, quietly informed Jack that Gene Tunney's crowd were not averse to making a match with him for the heavyweight championship of the world. But first he had to defend his own championship at least once, before relinquishing it. Tony Martina, an Italian boy from Newark, New Jersey, had earned a shot at the title.

The match was made for a Friday night in the Garden, fifteen rounds to a decision, for the light-heavyweight championship of the world. From the first, Jack Calahan was the favorite at odds of 3 to 1, but as the date of the fight grew near he was that price to win by a knockout, and around 10 to 1 to win the decision.

Despite these odds, Jack had trained carefully, as he always did, leaving nothing to chance, keenly looking forward to victory and the future match for the heavyweight crown.

On the night before the fight, he called up his wife from a New York hotel, not having seen her for several weeks.

"Hello, honey," he said. "You've got nothing to worry about. I'll be home tomorrow night. How's the baby?"

"She's fine. Everything's all right, Jack, and—Oh," she suddenly remembered, "a man called you twice yesterday, and once again today."

"What about?"

"Said he wanted to get in touch with you on business. He didn't give his name. I got your letter just before he called this morning, so I told him he could get in touch with you at the hotel."

"Well, that's fine, honey. Take good care of yourself. Don't bet on fights, and don't cross streets."

She laughed.

JOE WESSER, his trainer, was in the hotel suite with him, and McCarron was on his way upstairs with some out-of-town sports writers when the phone rang.

"Yes?" Jack said, answering it.

"Jack Calahan?"

"Speaking."

"Hello, kid. You've done pretty well for yourself since I last seen you."

The voice was starkly familiar, and every muscle in Jack's body quivered to the sound of it.

"Who's this?" he inquired.

"An old playmate of yours. Listen, we want you to do us a favor. In the fourth round of the fight tomorrow night—get that, the fourth!—you get knocked out!"

"Why, you—!"

"Make it look like the goods, kid! We ain't figuring on losing our dough. Catch one on the whispers, and fold! Otherwise the cops are going to get wise to that phony name of yours. This is Silver Dollar talking—and the gang ain't fooling!"

The cold reality of that threat crashed into his brain and paralyzed his thinking. Vaguely he heard Wesser, his trainer, talking to him, but couldn't understand a word he said. The boxing ring and its precepts had cleansed him of wrongdoing, fashioned and re-shaped his character, so that he could take pride in himself, not so much as a champion fighter, but as a man, and an example to the nation's youth. To violate the very profession that had given him these moral standards, to be a traitor to the rules by which he had attained success, was unthinkable.

And yet there were his wife and his daughter, there was kindly old Billy McCarron who had nursed and guarded him into the championship! There was a host of people, friends and neighbors who liked and believed in him—

As the world came shattering about his ears, half a dozen men burst into the room, boisterously greeting him by name, patting him on the back, plying him with questions, Billy McCarron beaming behind his cigar. With a herculean effort, Jack tried not to show his anguished condition of mind.

He'd go through with the fight as he had intended. Betting on him to lose by a K. O.! He'd spike their guns! He'd give himself up to the police, make a clean breast of things! But it would mean jail, a long sentence. Sensational headlines! Disgrace, heartbreak, loss of wife and daughter! He couldn't escape the charge of complicity in murder!

Jack Calahan never knew what happened to him the rest of that evening and all through the next day. It was a complete blank. Around ten o'clock, when he walked down the Garden aisle wrapped in his dark blue bathrobe—preceded by policemen to clear the way! —his body was ice cold. He was walking to his doom. To avoid a jail sentence, he was going forward to the executioner's block!

The Garden, jammed to capacity, gave him a thunderous ovation as he went to his corner, wearing black trunks. Black! The customary ring introductions were made, the weights announced, the referee gave his instructions to break clean, and the fight was on.

SPORTS WRITERS and others at the ringside saw at once that something was wrong with the champion. His timing was badly off. He missed with his left, missed by a mile—something he had never done before. Tony Martina, the challenger, reached him with several rights and lefts, and he seemed to have no defense for them. The huge crowd, settling back to wait until he opened up

McCarron said, "You're through. You're washed up!"

on Martina, were rewarded just at the bell, when the Italian boy's knees buckled up after a right to the jaw.

"What's wrong with you, kid?" Billy McCarron asked him with anxious eyes between rounds.

"I'm not warmed up yet, I reckon." The answer came between clenched teeth, as Jack sought to conceal his inward shivering. "Can't seem to get started," he said.

In the second stanza he crossed two lefts to Martina's face and the crowd began yelling, but the blows didn't carry any steam. Then he missed completely with his right, leaving himself wide open for Martina's right to the jaw. A terrific roar of surprise went up, every man in the Garden brought to his feet. Martina's corner was yelling instructions, and the Italian boy, fighting very well, was gaining confidence. He stung the champion with another right to the jaw, punished him about the body, and the crowd went wild.

Jack Calahan's fighting instincts suddenly got the better of his cold heart and brain and he savagely rocked the challenger with a solid belt to the ribs, cutting his left eye with a vicious jab. The Garden was a bedlam of excited shouting.

The third round was tame, the challenger wary of the champion's punching power, but the champ himself apparently unable to do much damage. Again his left went around Martina's head. And now, from the gallery, a few boos made themselves known—boos that changed into cheers for the Italian boy when he got over two rights to Jack Calahan's face. The round ended with the champion bleeding from the mouth.

"Phooey!" someone yelled from the gallery.

Jack had slumped on his stool. His color looked bad. His legs didn't seem to have any spring in them.

"For Pete's sake, kid!" his manager whispered to him. "What in hell's wrong with you?"

"I—I don't know. I can't get going!"

THE bell rang for the fourth. Jack went forward like a beaten man, and fifteen thousand people were hushed as they looked on. There was one brief flurry of in-fighting, the referee breaking the boys. Then Martina stepped in with a stiff jab to the chin—another and another—and brought over a right to the jaw. The champion went down on his knees and pitched over, his legs seemingly trying to lift him off the canvas. Pandemonium broke loose.

"One—two—three—four—five—"

Jack felt sick. What was he doing? Playing right into the hands of gangsters, throwing away everything he had gained, everything he had worked for and been so proud of!

The huge crowd, stunned into silence for a moment, now began to manifest disapproval. The boos swelled into a great chorus. Policemen ran down the aisles to the ring.

"—eight—nine—" The bell rang, ending the fight!

The scene in Madison Square Garden became indescribable, men shouting and yelling derisively. Fights broke out all over the place. The attendants and seconds in Martina's corner had gone raving mad. Police had entered the ring. The bell was clanging for order as Jack Calahan, former light-heavyweight of the world, was carried to his corner, carried like a dead man—which, in a way, he was.

The disapproving roar of the crowd surged and thundered through the Garden like a relentless flood, threatening to tear down the walls.

Joe Humphries was trying to make himself heard, but even his vocal powers failed to reach very far.

"The win-nor—and new world's champion—"

"Boo! Boo! Boo!"

"The time at the bell, one minute and six seconds—fourth round."

The sports writers couldn't hear the click of their typewriters as they frantically tried to find words that would adequately describe the scene and the

sensational reversal of form shown by Jack Calahan. Could it be that Tony Martina was that good? Incredible! In his record were six K. O.'s, one of them administered by Patsy Ryan, a third-rater.

Marvin Jones of the Globe-Herald tapped out his lead for the story, then got down to business:

Tonight the Garden witnessed what must be set down here as *one of those things*. This writer visited Jack Calahan in his Adirondacks camp during the final day of his training. The Calahan who came out of his corner tonight for the opening round wasn't the same man. What was the matter with him? Was he ill? If that was the reason, then for the sake of boxing and its best interests—nay, the very future of boxing in New York State—the truth should be told. The writer, having known Calahan since the time of his first professional fight in Brooklyn, is loath to suggest any reason other than illness for his deplorable failure in the ring tonight. This writer has never failed to underline Calahan's modest behavior and strict rules for living.

No cloud of suspicion has ever been attached to him. No dirty mark of the gambler's finger has ever smudged his name. In every way, by every sign, Jack Calahan could be called a credit to the ring. As a fighter he was magnificent. He had every equipment, the lethal punch in each hand, speed, boxing ability, coolness, and a friendly word for his opponents.

But tonight he had nothing! Somewhere between his training camp and the Garden, the Nebraska Wildcat had all his claws removed. Tonight he fought like a kitten. He passed out of the picture with no more than a feeble protest, and it is this writer's belief that we shall see no more of him. At least not in the ring. Brother, don't bet on fights!

IN HIS dressing quarters, nothing that Jack Calahan said brought any consolation to his distressed manager and handlers. Nor did his half-hearted excuses satisfy the cynical and suspicious reporters.

"I couldn't seem to get going," he kept repeating. "Martina's a good boy—I guess I underestimated him."

"He won't hold the title six months!" someone said.

"I left my real fight in the training camp," Jack said stoically, sheer agony in his brown eyes.

"Listen, Jack," a reporter said pleadingly. "You've surely got a better excuse than that! What went wrong? Give us the dope! You acted in there as if you were poisoned or something. You were O. K. this afternoon when the doctors examined you."

"I just didn't have my regular stuff, that's all."

The reporters turned away from him. Even Joe Wesser, his trainer, seemed to take no interest in him as he rubbed his limbs on the table.

"Listen, Billy," the reporters asked McCarron, "give us a line on the fight, will you?"

"I've nothing to say—at present."

"You've tied Martina up to a return match, haven't you?"

"Yes, that was in the contract. But the fight won't take place with me as his manager."

"What? *What?*"

"You heard what I said!" Billy McCarron, his face redder than ever, suddenly exploded. "Get outa here—all of you!" he shouted. "Go on now, or I'll see that you're put out!"

Regretfully, sensing a story they could spread under sensational headlines, they filed out of the dressing room.

McCARRON angrily bit the end off a cigar, kept chewing it between his teeth, as he waited for Jack to get

dressed. The room was silent, thick with gloom.

"Well?" he said, as the former champion put on his overcoat.

Jack looked at him without speaking for a while, his face working, tears stinging his eyes. "I'm sorry—I'm plenty sorry, Mr. McCarron," he said.

The manager had a definite amount of scorn in his eyes. "I'm sorry, too," was his terse reply, the cigar wig-wagging between his teeth. "Sorry that a grand kid like you—"

"I tried my best, Mr. McCarron!"

"Like hell you did! It beats me *why* you did it!" he continued, walking up and down the room like a caged animal. "You were comfortably well off as it was. And you had a purse of forty-five thousand coming to you tonight! You won't see a damned cent of it now. They'll withhold it from you. This'll raise a stink from one end of the country to the other!"

Jack Calahan was fighting now as he hadn't fought in the ring. "I did the best I could, Mr. McCarron," he lied, desperately trying to save himself from the accusation of taking a dive. Defeat, yes—though that was bitter enough. But at all costs, his moral degradation to the contrary, he must avoid the other charge, that he had surrendered his title to the gamblers. "Martina hurt me in the second round—that punch he got in to the jaw. I never recovered from it. He hurt me again in the third.

"It isn't right," he insisted truthfully, "that anybody should take the credit away from Martina. Maybe he caught me on an off night, but he floored me cleanly with that punch."

"You're lying, and you know it!"

"Have it your own way, Mr. McCarron."

"I'm sorry for the clean looking kid who came to me in the Adirondacks three years ago!" McCarron growled.

"You haven't got the right slant on that, either," Jack blurted out.

"I'm sorry for the passing of one of the grandest guys, and the best fighter, I ever managed. One who could have been heavyweight champion of the world! I'm sorry for the sudden collapse of a man who lifted the sport of boxing to the topmost heights. And I'm sorry for your wife and for your—"

Jack Calahan's brain felt crazed. "Shut up!" he suddenly shouted. "Cut that, or I'll sock you!"

Billy McCarron stared contemptuously at him. "You couldn't hurt me," he replied. "Not half so much as you hurt me back there in the ring!"

"Let me tell *you* something," Jack continued shouting. "Tonight I fought harder than I've ever fought in my whole life! You won't understand that, but it's the truth. I hope I'll never have to go through such a battle again."

"You won't," McCarron told him. "You're through, Jack. You're washed up. From now on, I'm not your manager."

"I'll get another one, then. I'll win back that title—you see if I don't!"

"Unless I miss my guess," McCarron said, "you'll never set foot in a ring again—not in this country, anyway!"

THAT was substantially true. The once popular fighter known as Jack Calahan was destined to suffer the anguish of the damned. Only a man possessing a great heart could have stood up under it at all.

He dreaded the meeting with his wife when he drove home that wretched night, fearing to meet her eyes, knowing that she would be worried about his hurts (completely unaware of the bitterest hurt of all) while he equivocated about the fight, lied to her as he had lied to Billy McCarron.

It was hard, bitterly hard. But he had committed himself to defeat, and now to tell her the truth would only add cruelly to her suffering.

"Poor Jack!" she said, appalled by his grief. "Defeat isn't incurable. You'll go back and hit the top again. Nothing can put a man like you down, Jack. Not for long. Don't take it this way."

Jack thanked God for her love and loyalty, but his fears for the future wouldn't down. He wasn't fitted for any livelihood other than fighting, at least nothing that would pay much.

THE newspapers openly hinted that the championship fight hadn't been on the level. They pointed to the 10 to 1 odds against the challenger, a juicy bait to the gamblers. While it seemed incredible that Jack Calahan should have sold his title down the river, and while the actual knockout looked genuine enough, nothing else, the sports writers agreed, seemed to jell. The fighters' purses should be held up until a thorough investigation was instituted and the findings were made public.

The New York Boxing Commission went into action, calling the principals of the fight before them, also their respective managers and handlers. Here, behind closed doors, Jack Calahan steadfastly repeated that he had had an off night, had tried his best, and that Tony Martina had been too good for him. It was noted by the keen-eyed Boxing Fathers that the boy was not the same Jack Calahan they had known and admired. His forthright attitude was gone. He acted with evasion, his eyes no longer looked you in the face.

When Billy McCarron was questioned he had little to say beyond one damaging statement. He said tersely, "In my opinion, the fight wasn't on the level!"

This produced a storm of criticism and denial from Martina's crowd. They protested violently that if anything had been wrong with the fight they were unaware of it. McCarron, still in the dark as to what actually had happened, gave Martina the benefit of the doubt, white-washing him. The Boxing Commission then retired to consider all the evidence in secret.

The findings were made known the following day. Jack Calahan's share of the gate, amounting to $41,531, was forfeited, the money to be given to the Red Cross. Furthermore, the former light-heavyweight champion was permanently disbarred from appearing in pugilistic contests in New York State. Martina was given his share of the purse, and ordered to defend his title against the best challenger within six months or forfeit it.

The ban on Jack Calahan was picked up by Pennsylvania, Illinois, California, and a dozen other states. As Billy McCarron had told him in his dressing room after the fight, he was washed up. Finished.

Only one person rallied to him, his wife, Carol. With courage, with fight all of her own, she took shrewd stock of the situation. She discerned that something far more serious than physical blows had beaten her husband. Despite his superb physique, he was crushed by something beyond defeat in the ring. She therefore persuaded him to sell the house in Scarsdale and move to Florida for the winter, where he could rest in the sun and build himself up again.

They took another beating in the sale of the house, put their remaining possessions in the back of the car, and motored to a small town below St. Petersburg.

It is one of life's little ironies that when one trouble hits you it is often followed by another, like the second and third temblor of an earthquake. Jack's three-year-old daughter took ill almost as soon as they were modestly established in a small bungalow overlooking the Gulf. To save her life she was rushed to a specialist in New York where she was slowly nursed back to health. Jack paid out staggering sums for the child's care. His bank accounts dwindled to nothing.

They returned to Florida, Mrs. Calahan selling her mink coat to provide funds. Jack struggled with himself under this continued ignominy, and realized that he must do something to take care of his family.

For a while he worked as a gas station attendant. After that he was a doorman at a St. Petersburg night club. In the

daytime he fished, kept himself in physical condition, while Carol occasionally found singing engagements. But it was tough going. Very tough.

JACK wasn't banned in Florida, and in the hope of making a little extra money he approached Marty Feldman, who operated a boxing hall in St. Petersburg. There was a local boy named Red Sanders who had made quite a showing for himself in these parts, fighting as a heavy. Jack offered to go in there with him.

Feldman rubbed his fat hands at the prospect, his greedy eyes shining like the big diamond on his finger.

"Sure!" he said. "We're outside the jurisdiction of the New York Boxing Commission, and I'll be glad to bill you for my principal bout. Six rounds. But don't get any fancy ideas for yourself. Some of the kids I got working for me fight for peanuts. We only charge a dollar and a half tops. If fifty dollars means anything to you—"

"Fifty—!"

Marty Feldman grinned. "That's all I can afford to pay."

Jack wanted to knock the grin off his fat face. But he saw exactly how matters stood. He was in a spot where promoters like Feldman could take advantage of him, and he had no comeback—none whatsoever.

"You're on," he said.

"Two weeks from next Friday. And don't think this Red Sanders is any pushover!"

Jack said nothing to his wife about it. He had little opportunity for training, other than swimming on the beach, shadow boxing. He had wanted to fight under a different name, but the wily Feldman would have none of that, knowing he could pack the house with the name Jack Calahan, Former Light-Heavyweight Champion of the World.

Jack went into the ring weighing one seventy-eight, Red Sanders tipping the scales at one ninety-nine. Ordinarily the twenty-one pounds disadvantage would have made little difference to Jack, for he figured on flattening the local boy in jig time.

But Sanders could fight, and while he would have been no match for the former champion when he was at his best, there was now a second opponent in the ring against Jack, and a deadly one. Want of confidence in himself!

JACK realized it in the very first round. He no longer had the real stuff. His brain wouldn't trust his fists. His brain kept hammering thoughts of defeat into him. There was nothing phony about his efforts this time, but now he really couldn't get going.

In the third round, Sanders saw this. He lost his fear of the once great Calahan and sailed into him. Jack took a thorough going-over, his boxing skill alone saving him from a bad beating. In the sixth and last round he was cut about the eyes and mouth, and the crowd yelling for the local boy to put him away. The decision went to Red Sanders.

Jack left the hall with fifty dollars in his pockets, his great shoulders slumped, his face bruised, his body sore, the line of his lips grim. You're washed up, Jack Calahan! his brain tortured him. You're through!

He fought again for Marty Feldman, earning a draw in six rounds. Then he received an offer of one hundred dollars for an eight-round go in West Palm Beach. He lost the decision on points. A Miami promoter wired him an offer of two hundred dollars and expenses for a semi-final bout against Charlie Brett of Chicago, a heavyweight.

Semi-final! He was losing top billing now, going down the scale. But he accepted gladly.

The fight proved to be terrific. Twice in the third round Jack got up from the canvas, swinging like a demon, blood pouring from his mouth, people screaming their heads off as they cheered him on.

They were rooting for him! The sudden realization of it was nectar to his

agonized heart. And then, flooding him with new confidence, his brain became calm. Coolly, his muscles once more obedient to his will, he brought over his left to Brett's chin. The heavyweight pitched forward, his legs writhing. They could have counted a hundred over him!

It was the sweetest victory Jack Calahan had ever won, for it was victory over himself. The crowd gave him an ovation.

He fought at the same club again, this time in the finals, sensationally winning by a KO in the second round. Following that, he had offers to fight in Atlanta, Georgia, and Memphis, Tennessee. One day when he had managed to save a thousand dollars, he had a talk with his wife.

"It's getting too warm to stay South, honey. What say we pack our things and go back to New York?"

"But you—you know how the situation is there."

"Leave all that to me. I've learned my lesson. I'll never lose confidence again. I'm going to win back that light-heavy title, as I said I would."

IN New York he first tried to get an appointment with the Boxing Commission. They kept him waiting for days, but he persevered, and finally they gave him a hearing.

"I didn't fight strictly on the level against Martina," he said. "But if it comes to that, he floored me cleanly with a straight to the jaw, because I didn't have the courage to fight back.

"Now I'm going to tell you why. On the night of the fight, my life was threatened if I didn't fold up in the fourth. The guy who threatened me said he represented a bunch of gamblers who had taken advantage of the odds, and they didn't mean to lose their money.

"I should have told them to go to hell, but I didn't. I kept thinking of my wife and kid. The guy made it plain that his gang meant business. And I knew it. I knew they'd plug me if I—"

"Who was it who threatened you?"

"I don't know."

"Didn't even know his name?"

"No, sir. Just a voice on the telephone."

This didn't seem to set very well with the Commissioners, though they made no comment.

"After the fight, I told Billy McCarron, my manager, that I never fought harder in my life. He didn't understand what I meant. I was fighting my best instincts, my heart, the real me that boxing and clean living had developed. The false me was fighting the true, and the false won. I hated what I was doing. I realized I was about to drag in the mud the very thing I was proud of, my profession, the very thing that had made me, the title I had won.

"That was the real battle I fought, and I lost. I didn't get any of the gamblers' money. I wouldn't have touched a cent of it. And I wouldn't have accepted my end of the purse even if you had offered it to me. I lost to myself in a moment of weakness, knowing that the threat was directed only not at me, but also at my wife and daughter."

They listened to him in silence, moved by his evident emotion as he appealed to them.

"I've had a hard battle with myself ever since. How hard it's been, nobody but myself will ever know. But now I've won that battle, and I want you to give me another chance. I promise you, here and now, that never again will I injure the name of boxing."

THE aged Commissioners promised to think things over, and at the end of a week, despite some protests in certain quarters and newspapers, Jack Calahan was reinstated as a boxer in the State of New York.

He went to see Billy McCarron, asking to be taken back under his management, telling him the same story he had related to the Boxing Commission.

"Joe Wesser was in the hotel room when they threatened me over the phone," he said.

"I remember that call," the trainer

said. "I see you go white about the lips, and I ask you what is the trouble, but you don't seem to hear me."

"I didn't know if I was standing on my head or my feet, I was so worried," Jack said.

McCarron, chewing on his cigar, was studying him. "There's more to it than that," he said shrewdly.

"Yes, Mr. McCarron, there is. Much more! If I told you the whole story, you'd know how hard it was for me—how bitter. Right then, I wished I were dead."

"Did you know who the guy was?"

"I had an idea."

"Something out of your past, Jack?"

"I can't tell you, Mr. McCarron."

"Why not come clean, kid? Why protect a lot of rats?"

"There are only two people in the world I wanted to protect. My wife and daughter."

"Does Carol know about things? Have you told her the whole story?"

"No. I couldn't tell her. And of course she doesn't even know what I've told you. What I did has shamed me from that day to this."

"Well, I don't know, Jack," McCarron said. "If these rats can threaten you once, they can do so again."

"No."

"Why not?"

Jack pulled a deep breath into his lungs. "Never again," he said. "Listen, Mr. McCarron. They've got something on me, and I can't tell you why. But I'll say this. I did something for them in all innocence when I was only twenty years old. I've no guilt on my conscience. I did nothing wrong, nothing I was ashamed of, and that's the absolute truth."

The little manager threw his chewed cigar away. "All right, kid, I'll believe you. What's your weight now?"

"About the same, Mr. McCarron. Around one-eighty."

"Well, you've been through a lot of hell, I reckon. A good mental condition is every bit as important as being in physical shape. We'll have to see how you go. I don't know if Tunney's crowd can ever be brought into line again, but in the meantime we'll fight you out of town, up-state, maybe in Boston. Meet me at Stillman's gym tomorrow morning around eleven o'clock."

"Swell."

"How are you fixed for cash?"

"I've enough to tide me over."

"O. K., kid. I'm sorry for the way I spoke to you in the Garden."

"I had it coming to me, I guess. It'll never happen again. S'long—and thanks."

ONCE again the noted little manager brought him along slowly, not permitting him to fight too often, billing him out of town, yet seeing that his notices reached the New York newspapers. He had ten bouts before his twenty-fifth birthday, winning seven by knockouts, and earning the decision in three. His success was too brilliant to be ignored.

As one reporter had prophesied after the championship go in the Garden, Martina didn't hold his title more than six months. Wayne Murdock was the reigning light-heavyweight now, a game, punishing fighter with a good record behind him. He had flattened Tony Martina in the fourteenth of a fifteen-round title go.

Jack was matched with the Italian boy in Chicago—two former holders of the crown pitted against each other! A big crowd saw Martina knocked out in one minute and thirty seconds of the first round. It was sensational, Martina having no chance from the moment of the opening bell.

In October, coinciding with the World's Series at the Polo Grounds, the fight for the light-heavyweight crown was to take place in Madison Square Garden, between Wayne Murdock, the champion, and Jack Calahan, challenger, and former holder of the title.

They never come back! That sound advice to the contrary, the betting gentry

installed Jack Calahan, a two-to-one favorite on account of his explosive punching ability. But he would be fighting with the jinx of a Garden fiasco hanging over his head, and a number of sports writers, including Marvin Jones of the Globe-Herald, didn't believe the odds in his favor were justified. Jones wrote:

> I was present at the ringside when he had no more backbone than a concertina. I said at that time that Calahan was through. Subsequent events have made me swallow them there words, but I've still got the taste of them in my mouth, and my fingers remain crossed.
>
> I can't see how any fighter could display such a colossal reversal of form as Calahan did that time he stuck his chin out, the championship hanging on it, and the man not be fundamentally at fault where he digests his lamb chops. Once a wildcat is turned into a kitten, there's no coming back. I may be wrong, and if I am I'll be the first to congratulate him. But until that miracle occurs, I've got to string along with Murdock, the present champion. Don't bet on fights!

AT THE weighing-in ceremonies Jack showed up in perfect condition, his skin tanned, his eyes clear. He weighed 173½ in his trunks. He shook hands with Wayne Murdock, the champ, who had stepped off the scales after registering 175 even. The Garden was sold out, speculators asking fifty dollars for choice seats.

Something was brewing, because the odds on Jack Calahan had suddenly jumped to 3 to 1, then 4 to 1. The Boxing Commission got wind of it, called the two boys and their managers before them and laid out the axe. If there was anything of a suspicious nature about this fight, the axe would fall. Extra precautions were being taken to see that the boys fought strictly on the level.

Flanked by Mal Roberts, his trainer, and two of his seconds, Jack returned to the hotel. As he crossed the lobby, a big guy rose from his seat, a forced smile on his unshaven face.

"Hello, Jack," he said. "I guess you don't know me?"

"Why—"

The man's face and his tough-sounding voice were familiar.

"Ray Ballinski," he said.

"Why, sure! How are you, Ray? It's swell seeing you again." But Jack was shocked by the change in him, by his down-and-out appearance and the lines of dissipation on his face.

"You're looking in great shape, Jack. You'll take that boy tonight, I know you will." He glanced at Mel Roberts and the seconds. "Say, Jack," he said, "lemme have just a word with you in private."

Jack nodded, walked into the writing room with him. "Go ahead, Ray. What's on your mind?"

"You are sitting on top now, Jack, and I'm down. I gave you your first start —remember?"

"Up against it, Ray?"

"I ain't got a dime on me."

Jack gave him all the money he had in his waistcoat pocket, bills amounting to around ninety dollars. "I can't talk to you now, Ray. You know how it is the day of the fight. I'll see you sometime again."

He moved away, was just entering the lobby, when two short, thick-set men blocked his path. Jack recognized them instantly. Len (Silver Dollar) Bradman and the thug he knew only as Max.

"Hello, kid—remember us?"

"Get out of my way!"

They didn't move. "In the fifth round, kid—like you done for us before." Silver Dollar spoke quietly but with deadly effect.

"I'll see you in hell first!"

"Get wise to yourself, Wilson," the man called Max said.

Every instinct in Jack now urged him to bash these guys. He struggled des-

perately to control his murderous rage. "Get out of my way," he warned them again.

"In the fifth," Bradman said with diabolical calm, "or else!"

"Or else what?"

"If ever you see a silver dollar lying around loose, pick it up. It will help pay your funeral expenses!"

Jack's right caught him on the cheek, splitting it open, and knocking him head over heels. He drove a left at Max, but Mel Roberts blocked the blow as he and the two seconds rushed in to prevent further bloodshed. The lobby seethed with excitement, as Roberts led Jack to the elevator.

"What was the trouble back there?" Roberts asked. "Who were those guys?"

"Just a couple of punks."

"What were they saying to you, Jack?"

"Forget it!"

IN New York, and probably in other great cities as well, people who attend fights can sense in advance a contest that will go down in fistic history as a thriller. That's how they figured the Murdock-Calahan match.

Long before the principals entered the ring there wasn't an available seat in the Garden. Men were paying five dollars plus tax for standing room. Jack was the first to climb through the ropes, his name in white letters on the back of his blue dressing gown. He was given a good reception, but among the cheers were a few boos and cat-calls from those who remembered his last appearance there.

The gong was clanging in fire-engine fashion as Joe Humphries called for attention.

"In the feature attraction—fifteen-round contest for the light-heavyweight championship of the world, wearing purple trunks—a boy known to all of you—"

Cheers, mingled with boos!

"—weighing one seventy-three and—" Characteristically, Humphries swung his arm from right to left, and the crowd yelled:

"A half!"

"One of the hardest punching boys the ring has known, the Nebraska Wildcat, Jack Calahan!"

This time the spontaneous cheering drowned out the boos as Jack rose from his corner, clasping his gloved hands above his head.

"Introducing the popular hard-hitting boy from Fort Worth, weighing one seventy-five even, game, never-say-die champion of the world, Wayne Murdock!"

Thunderous applause!

The referee called the two boys together, gave them their instructions, made them shake hands, sent them back to their corners, and told them to come out fighting.

The gong rang.

THEY sparred in the center of the ring, then Jack Calahan sent a light left to the head as the champion stepped out of range. He came back fast with two blows to Jack's ribs and they clinched. Murdock seemed to be the stronger as he wrestled the challenger to the ropes, the referee breaking them. Little damage was done, the two boys feeling each other out, then Jack Calahan cut loose with a right to the body and sent the champion's head back with a stiff left jab.

The pace quickened, the boys being evenly matched, trading blows until Murdock caught the challenger with a hard blow to the nose. Jack took it without blinking, but was jolted by three lefts to the face before he retaliated with a right to his opponent's heart. The bell sounded as they were fighting in Murdock's corner. It looked like the champion's round.

The two boys picked up where they had left off in the second, both watching each other carefully, Jack looking for an opening to explode the dynamite in his left, the champion being the better boxer, having perhaps a shade the better of it so far.

The packed house got its first thrill

when Murdock, after a withering body attack, crossed the challenger with four lightning-fast lefts to the face, and Jack, missing with his right, ran into a stiff uppercut.

Both boys remained unmarked at the end of the third, although there was a slight swelling over the champion's eye. He seemed to have respect for Jack's punching, but was a master on defense, and several times he tied up the Nebraska boy easily.

In the fourth, people sitting on the edge of their seats with excitement as the tempo of the fight increased, Jack Calahan got in his first hard punch of the evening. It was a left cross to the champion's mouth, and it shook him. He closed instantly, trying to clear his head, and Jack punished him severely about the mid-section. The referee broke them, and then Jack, pouncing forward like the wildcat he was, rocked Murdock with two rights to the face and a left to the chin. The bell ended the round as the vast crowd roared approval.

It was evident that Jack carried too much artillery for the champion to trade punches with him, and while the boy from Nebraska, evidently on instruction from his corner, went out in the fifth to bring his man down, Murdock came to life again. Boxing superbly, he kept the challenger away with a rapier-like left, and fired several rights to his face, drawing first blood from Jack Calahan's mouth.

Jack, however, continued to stalk his man—and suddenly the crowd yelled as a crisp right found the champion's chin, making his knees buckle. Two more rights followed to the same place, Murdock now fighting back desperately, a lump prominent over his right eye. He managed to cross Jack with a hard right to the face—his best of the fight so far—but took a left hook in return and a right over the heart. At the bell, Murdock went to the wrong corner, showing that he was dazed. He laughed when the mistake was pointed out to him.

The pace slackened in the sixth, and Murdock, with his flashy left and greater speed, carried the battle to the challenger, rocking him with his best blow, a right to the chin. But the crowd obviously felt that it was only a question of time now before Jack Calahan went to work on him in real earnest.

IN THE seventh, the champion giving ground as the challenger followed him, waiting for an opening to put over his left, something happened that was not immediately observed by Murdock nor the referee. But Jack Calahan saw it.

Where it came from he had no idea. It seemed to spring up from the canvas like a mushroom, but unquestionably it had been thrown into the ring by someone either at the ringside or in the gallery.

It was a silver dollar!

For a second or so it bewildered him, worried him, and in that short space of time a thousand thoughts and fears flashed through his brain.

"Pick it up! It'll help pay your funeral expenses!"

Jack Wilson! Jack Wilson! $500 reward for any information leading to the arrest of—! "Get wise to yourself, kid!"

Only a second or so—but Jack's guard had dropped, his brain refused to function. That silver dollar lying at his feet!

A terrific roar went up to the rafters of the Garden, men at the ringside scrambling to their feet, standing on their chairs, yelling like maniacs.

Jack Calahan was on the canvas from two terrific rights to the button! Badly dazed, he listened vaguely to the referee's count. Good Lord! It had reached seven!

"Eight—nine—"

Jack got up, closed with his adversary, and tried to hang on. The referee tore them apart. Jack braced himself on spread legs, trying to recover his strength. From his corner his seconds were frantically shouting out instructions, Billy McCarron's high-pitched voice reaching his ears. He couldn't understand a word they were saying to him.

Murdock put over two hard lefts, then crashed home another right to the chin. Jack went down, resting on one knee, his eyes glassy.

"He can't knock me out!" he said to himself, trying to stiffen his spine. "I'll prevent those dirty rats from—I'll stop them if I die for it!"

He rose at the count of six, swung desperately at the champion and staggered him. The Garden had gone stark raving mad. The roar of the crowd surged in his ear-drums like the ceaseless roaring of the sea as he took several more lefts to his bleeding face, another right to the chin—another and another—five in all before he went down again.

He thought, "Mustn't let the ref stop it! Must tell him I can fight all night."

In the pandemonium, the shouting that didn't let up for an instant, the screaming, instructions from his corner, he got up at the count of four. The referee was about to step in between the two boys, ending the fight, when the bell rang, saving Jack from defeat by a breath!

MEL ROBERTS, one of the best in-between-round men in the business, went to work on his cuts, the seconds working on his legs and stomach. While they did so, the referee saw a silver dollar in the center of the ring and picked it up.

"How in hell did this get here?" he said to the timekeeper, looking at the coin before putting it in his pants pocket. He then walked over to Jack's corner to examine the badly damaged fighter.

"How is it, Jack?" he inquired dubiously.

"Don't stop it," he muttered. "My fight's still in me."

The bell rang for the eighth round. Murdock sprang across the ring and was met by a jolt to the ribs. Jack crossed him with a left, knocking his black mouthpiece flying out of the ring. More than sixteen thousand throats were sore from shouting, voices hoarse with excitement. A hard right from the challenger had the champion reeling, and now, considering the punishment he had taken and the gallant stand he was making, the huge crowd was behind Jack Calahan to a man. Their shouted instructions were varied:

"Hold him, Jack! Keep away from his left! Keep punching! Oh! You beauty!" they shrieked, as another left rocked the champion to his heels, cutting his eye.

But Jack, against orders from his corner, continued to tear after his man, spending all his strength in an effort to bring him down. Murdock rallied gamely, came back with lefts to the challenger's bloody face, sent over another right—and Jack Calahan was down again, the referee bending over him as he counted, noting his condition and the expression in his eyes.

"Stop it! Stop it!" some of the ringsiders were shouting.

"I'm all right, ref," Jack sputtered. "I'm—I'm taking a nine count, that's all."

He was up at nine, wobbly on his legs, but now the champion was breathing hard, his arms weary from punching. They wrestled around the ropes, both seeking to gain time. The bell ended the round.

AS THEY came out for the tenth, Jack despite his bruised and puffed face, his cuts closed by Mel Roberts' skilful application, seemed to be the fresher of the two. As he tangled with the champion in some furious battling, it seemed incredible that those watching the fight could still shout with such volume of sound. A hard left to Murdock's cut eye practically closed it.

"Oh, you Calahan! Oh, you beauty!" the crowd yelled.

The champion's legs were rubbery as he sought to protect himself from the savagery of Jack Calahan's attack. A vicious right caught him on the left cheekbone, and another left to the stomach brought his chin down. Jack threw another right to the face and a terrific left cross to the chin.

The champion was down!

The Garden now became a madhouse, a sea of white strained faces, feverishly bright eyes, and open mouths. Above the noise, the referee was shouting out the count.

"—three—four—five—six—"

Here the champion stirred, got to one knee, trying to shake the fog out of his head.

"—seven—eight—"

Murdock, struggling to rise, slumped forward to the canvas again, hitting the resin with his face.

"—Nine—ten!" The referee went over to Jack Calahan, raising his right glove in the air. Jack then ran to the center of the ring, helping Murdock's seconds as they lifted their beaten man and carried him to his corner.

"A great fight, Wayne," Jack said to the still unconscious man.

All around the ring, men and women, still cheering, slumped back in their chairs, exhausted. Joe Humphries got in the ring, holding up his arms for some semblance of order. Nobody seemed to give a damn for what he had to say. It was a mere formality.

"The win-nor—and *new* world's champion—Jack Calahan!"

Sometimes they do come back.

In the dressing room after the fight, Jack was congratulated by his handlers and all the sports writers the jubilant Billy McCarron permitted to enter. Gene Tunney came in to add his praises, shaking Jack's hand as he lay stretched out on the table, Mel Roberts and Joe Wesser rubbing him.

When the room had been cleared, Jack called his wife on the phone. "What do you think of your old man now?" he laughed.

"I died a thousand deaths," she said. "Oh, Jack, if you only knew how I felt, sitting here listening to it over the radio—"

"I'm not hurt. Maybe it sounded bad, but I'm all right. Only I'm taking myself to the beauty parlor before I come home, so I can look pretty for you."

"The hospital?" she said, startled.

"No, no," he laughed. "Mel Roberts will fix me up in my hotel room. Just a couple of days. I'll be at the Ansonia in case you want to phone. Aren't you going to congratulate me?"

"Oh, I do—I do, Jack!"

"That's swell. Goodnight. And don't cross streets!"

It was almost midnight before he left the Garden, Mel Roberts and Joe Wesser going along with him in a taxi. For reasons of his own, and to avoid the annoyance of crowds, he changed his quarters over to the Hotel Ansonia.

FOUR days passed before his swollen face became fairly presentable again, the cuts and bruises beginning to heal. During that time money began to roll in. His share of the gate receipts amounted to $17,561, and McCarron had booked him for personal appearances on the stage, radio programs, and for advertising endorsements, which would net him plenty more.

He was on top again, a bigger attraction than ever. He moved to Dobbs Ferry.

About six weeks after the fight he drove home, after appearing on the Fred Allen broadcast. It was a clear moonless night, the sky brilliant with stars. Jack honked the horn as he drove up to the garage, and Carol came to the front door to greet him.

As he left the garage on foot, a short, thick-set man, his coat collar pulled up about his face, stepped from behind some shrubs. Two shots rang out, and Carol saw Jack stagger. She screamed as he slithered to the ground. The gunman ran down the road, and vaguely, as she bent over Jack, crying bitterly, Carol heard the distant sound of a car driving away.

After her first moment of panic, Carol acted with great presence of mind. She knew Jack had been wounded, perhaps fatally. Running back to the house, she sent her maid to ask the neighbors for help, then telephoned the hospital and the police.

Her swift actions did much to save his life, for the ambulance responded at once, and she rode in it as they rushed him to the hospital.

One bullet had penetrated the chest, the other slug going through the shoulder. The surgeons operated immediately, giving him two blood transfusions, Carol staying in the hospital until morning, her face drawn and white.

"We believe we can save him," a doctor told her, "and his career too."

The police were anxious to question her, but the doctors wouldn't permit it until she was rested.

MEANWHILE, the morning newspapers carried blazing headlines to the effect that Jack Calahan had been shot. Reporters crowded about the hospital and at the fighter's home. Police, waiting to question Mrs. Calahan, tackled Billy McCarron instead, and also the fighter's trainers and seconds.

Word of threats to him by New York gamblers leaked out. Mel Roberts told of the incident in the Surrey Hotel when Jack had knocked down one of two men who seemed to be annoying him. Roberts gave a description of the men. Carol, when the doctors finally permitted her to be questioned, could supply no information whatsoever. Jack, still in danger, said he hadn't seen the man who shot him.

Billy McCarron went to visit him in the hospital. "Kid," he said gently, "speak out. You owe it to yourself and your wife."

Jack nodded. "I've sent for her. She'll be here any moment now."

When she arrived, and the nurse had left the room, he told them the full story. Afterward he told the story to the police, and he was placed under protective arrest.

It produced more sensational headlines in the newspapers.

JACK CALAHAN ARRESTED. FOUGHT UNDER ASSUMED NAME. WANTED IN CONNECTION WITH CHARGE OF MURDER.

The story of the gunplay during the attempted bank robbery in San Bernardino, California, was again recounted, also the part played in it by the twenty-year-old Jack Wilson, alias Jack Calahan. His suspicious fold-up when he lost the championship to Tony Martina was reviewed in a new light. The episode of the silver dollar thrown into the ring was played up for all its colorful worth.

By this means, gamblers had sought to intimidate Calahan, who had been ordered to take a dive in the fifth round. That talisman—a silver dollar—had almost brought about his defeat in the seventh and eight rounds. But Calahan had defied the men who were threatening him, so they had shot him for not letting Wayne Murdock win.

About this time Len (Silver Dollar) Bradman and Max Bensen were picked up in Kansas City. Extradited to California, they were placed in a lineup and picked out by three witnesses of the shooting, whereupon they were charged with murder. On his recovery, Jack Wilson was likewise extradited to his home state, where the case came to trial.

One of the damaging questions put to the light-heavyweight was this:

"Why didn't you tell your story long ago? Didn't you realize that by keeping silent, you were evading the law and giving protection to men you knew to be gangsters and murderers?"

"I was afraid I wouldn't have a chance. I guess nobody saw them make me drive that car at the point of a gun—otherwise they wouldn't have had a reward out for me."

"I suppose they also forced you to drive them to the bank?" the prosecuting attorney asked sarcastically.

"No, sir. I'd have hopped out of the car quick if I'd known what they were doing in the bank."

"You mean to say you didn't know they intended to rob it?"

"Only when I heard the shooting. I was too scared to move then."

The other witnesses came up, dozens testified.

THE hut where the gangsters had stayed in the Papago Indian Reservation was discovered, and an Indian youth testified that Jack Wilson appeared to have been kept a prisoner there. It was stressed by the defense that young Wilson could not have had the least inkling of the gangsters until the day of the attempted robbery, for he had not left his home for any length of time, and Bradman and Bensen had been seen in the town for the first time on the day of the shooting.

So there could have been no premeditation on Wilson's part. Bradman and Bensen had taken him along for just what they sized him up to be—a simple country boy, a stooge.

He had already been punished, the defense claimed, suffering all the agonies of having unwittingly become mixed up with crooks. In the end he had been shot down when he defied their threats, wanting to go straight and fight clean.

The jury found him innocent and brought in a verdict of murder in the first degree against Bradman and Bensen. Other members of the gang had been arrested in New York.

Carol threw her arms about her husband, kissed him.

"Who am I?" she tried to laugh. "Mrs. Calahan, or Mrs. Wilson? I guess we'll have to get ourselves married all over again darling."

"That suits me fine, sweetheart," he smiled. "We'll have another honeymoon. But I lost Jack Wilson years ago. Jack Calahan stands for things that Jack Wilson didn't have in him, I reckon. For one thing, Jack Wilson would never have found you."

He laughed as he hugged her.

"Sure, let's get married again, so we can straighten everything out. But you'll be Mrs. Jack Calahan to the end of our days, honey, because my lawyer says that name is going to be my legal one from now on."

She clung to him. "Don't bet on fights," she cried happily, "and—don't cross streets, darling!"

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Where There's Gold

By
L. P. Holmes

Jim flipped the lead rope of his relay bronc before the luckless animal crashed. Leaning low, he spurred headlong up the gulch.

THE JUSTICE of the Peace at Collinsburg was a little, shriveled, rat-eyed weasel of a man, and now as he looked Jim Rudd over, his mean little mouth pinched tighter than ever and he straightened his bony shoulders in hypocritical righteousness. And he gave Jim Rudd a 'floater.'

Jim Rudd was hardly listening, for his mind was hazy and dazed. The beating they had given him the night before had been a savage one. The filthy little jail they had thrown him into had not helped matters any. The bunk in the jail had been nothing more than a bare board shelf, devoid of any vestige of mattress or comfort. They had not bothered to bring him any water, and the fever that followed the beating had built up a raging thirst which was sheer agony. That thirst, still unquenched, so consumed his consciousness he was barely aware of what the official was saying.

Jessup, the town marshal, took Jim Rudd by the arm, jerked him around and headed him out through the door of the place and into the early morning sunlight beyond.

"You heard what Judge Fleet said," growled Jessup. "You're not wanted in this town, now or ever. You've got until noon to be gone. If you're still around by then, it will be just too bad. Get going!"

A wave of nausea engulfed Jim Rudd. He fought it out, swaying dizzily, a tall man, spare and sinewy and saddle toughened. His face was swollen and black with bruises, his eyes puffed and bloodshot and glazed with suffering. Dried blood scabbed all one side of his face, and his lips were split and swollen from hammering blows.

"Where's my bronc—my guns?" he mumbled.

Jessup gave a short, savage laugh. "Where do you suppose? You didn't have a cent on you to pay your fine and Judge Fleet confiscated your bronc and riding rig and guns to make it good. On your way!"

Simmering rage began to stir through Jim Rudd again, but some inner consciousness warned him it would do him no good. He shook his head as though to clear his eyes, looked Jessup up and down as though to build and cement a memory. Then Jim turned and started up street, weaving as he walked.

The only place where he knew there was water he would not have to ask for was at the freight and livery corrals at the west edge of town. At the corrals was a watering trough and a spigot that was always trickling moisture. And despite everything else, the only thing that really counted with Jim Rudd just now was water—and more of it!

At the corrals, two different freight outfits were making ready to roll. One outfit was made up of three separate wagons, the other of a wagon and back action. Mules were being swung into place along the chains and harnessed there. A swearing mule skinner was working over a stubborn jughead with a trace end. The watering trough lay beyond the wagons.

As Jim Rudd staggered past that back action, lurching unsteadily, he bumped into a girl in jeans and hickory shirt who was coming around from the other side. Jim got a hazy impression of crisp chestnut hair curling under a floppy old sombero, of red lips, softly sun tanned cheeks and a pair of wide, startled grey eyes.

The girl recoiled as if he was something unclean and he heard her scathing words. "Filthy, drunken brute!"

Jim Rudd did not pause to put her right, for out there ahead he could glimpse the cool and dripping trough.

HE TOSSED his Stetson aside, leaned on the edge of the trough and buried his head shoulder deep in the trough. The water, still chilled from the night, hit him with a shock, but an exhilarating shock. He kept his head submerged as long as he could and then, when he came up dripping, put his lips to that dripping spigot above the trough and drank and drank.

This inward and outward application of that cold, blessed moisture did miracles. It cooled the fever in his blood, drove the aching mists from his brain, cleared his eyes. Strength and balance and coördination came back. And when Jim sat on the edge of the trough and mopped his streaming face and head with his faded neckerchief, he felt half-way human again. He even became conscious of stirring pangs of hunger.

That wagon and back action were ready to roll. A stocky man with a short, square beard had climbed to the skinner's box. And climbing lithely up beside him was that girl Jim had bumped into. Jim smiled crookedly. Couldn't blame the lady for thinking that he was drunk and disorderly. He had probably looked just that way.

A new flurry of cursing broke out over at the center one of the three other wagons, where the skinner was still fighting the wayward jughead. And now, even as Jim Rudd's glance swung that way, the badgered, frantic mule whirled sharply and lashed out with both hind hoofs. There was a thud, a muffled snap and a bawl of agony. And then the skinner was rolling on the ground, grabbing at a broken leg.

The rest of the team began to spook somewhat, and the luckless skinner was altogether too close to those stamping, lashing hoofs. Jim ran over, caught the fellow by the shoulders and dragged him well clear. Then he went down the line of mules, quieting them.

From one of the other wagons a man came running, a big, raw-boned man with a shrewd but honest trader's face. "Hood!" he yelled. "What in hell happened?"

The skinner groaned. "Damned jughead kicked me, broke my leg. Broke it clean. Snapped like a pipe stem. I heard it."

The raw-boned man looked around and shouted, "Stallings—come here! Hood's got a broken leg. We've got to get him to the doctor."

A grizzled old fellow came hurrying up, and between them, he and the raw-boned man carried the injured skinner off down the street. And Jim Rudd, for want of anything else to do, went up to the mule that had delivered that kick and began quieting it. By the time the other two men got back, Jim had the animal calmed and harnessed in place.

THE raw-boned man stopped and looked Jim up and down. "Who the hell are you?" he demanded.

Jim shrugged. "Rudd is the name—Jim Rudd."

"You saw Hood get it?"

Jim nodded. "He had it coming. He was working that jughead over with a trace and had the brute half loco. Hood must have been on a drunk last night and was working off his meanness on that mule. That sort of thing never does any good."

The raw-boned man nodded in agreement. "These damned skinners!" he exploded. "All alike! Always doing something to leave a man in a lurch! Me, I'm Charley Bonham. These wagons and the loads they pack are mine. I've got to get 'em into Gold Run as quick as I can. And now Hood goes and leaves me short a driver for one wagon. How about you? Could you tool a team and wagon to Gold Run for me? Worth twenty dollars to you."

"I'm interested," said Jim slowly. "I've got to get out of this flea-bit town, anyhow. Something they call a judge gave me a floater this morning. I've got until noon to clear out."

Charley Bonham looked at Jim with new interest. "Say—you must be that gent I heard of last night! The one who combed the kinks out of a crooked gambler over in the High Spot. That right?"

Jim nodded, touching his bruised face. That crooked grin pulled at his lips again. "I was doing a pretty good job until the town marshal and four or five others sided the gambler. Then I caught hell."

"Jessup is a rat," said Charley Bonham bluntly. "So is Judge Fleet. There's

a tight clique in this town, friend—a bunch of petty larceny thieves. The fact that you got into trouble with them is a recommendation for you in my eyes. Well then, you'll skin this wagon for me?"

"I'm a cowpuncher by trade," said Jim. "But I can handle a jerk line. I'm your man. Only one thing—that gang not only cleaned my physically last night. They cleaned my pockets, too. Took everything I owned but these clothes I've got on. Horse, riding rig, guns—everything. Said it was to pay the fine the judge slapped on me for disturbing the peace. And I had no supper last night and no breakfast this morning."

"The dirty whelps!" said Bonham, reaching into a pocket. "Here's a dollar. Go over to the hash house and throw some grub into yourself. Bill Stallings and me, we'll wait for you."

Twenty minutes later Jim Rudd came out of the hashhouse, pretty much a whole man again. There had been enough left from the dollar to buy a supply of smoking and he was licking a cigarette into shape before going back to the corrals and his new-found job.

Jessup, the town marshal, swarthy and thick, with the high cheekbones and coarse black hair which bespoke Indian blood, came swaggering up. "I said noon and I meant noon, fella," he growled. "You better be gone."

Jim Rudd inhaled deeply, looked Jessup over with quiet contempt. "I'm going," he said. "A white man gave me a job skinning a freight wagon for him as far as Gold Run. We pull out right away. But get this, Jessup. Some day I'll come back. When I do, it will be somebody else who will do the traveling. That's a promise."

With that, Jim turned his back and headed for the corrals. And Jessup stared after him, scowling.

IT WASN'T half bad, up there on the box of the big freight wagon, with the trace chains jangling in cadence and the wagon rolling the slow miles back. The team of eight out ahead was well trained and Jim had little use to touch the jerk line. The sun beat down on his slouched shoulders, but Jim Rudd was used to it and liked it.

Charley Bonham was driving the wagon ahead, and old Bill Stallings was at the jerk rein of the one behind. As the hoofs of the mules clop-clopped steadily in the muffling dust, that dust came up, acrid with the smell of sweating mule flesh. And far back in the shimmering sun haze, the town of Collinsburg was dropping from sight.

Jim Rudd soberly reviewed the events of the day and night before. On the drift when he hit Collinsburg, he had sat into a stud game in the hope of fattening up his meager bank roll a bit. The third time the tinhorn running the game slid one off the bottom, Jim had called him. And when the tinhorn went for a gun, Jim climbed his frame with gusto. He'd pretty well civilized the tinhorn when Jessup, the marshal, and several others had bought in. The combination had been a little too much for Jim.

He didn't give a damn about the floater, and he wasn't particularly grieved over the licking he had absorbed, for that was over with. But that they should have euchered him out of his horse, riding gear and guns irked him plenty. The horse was a good one, the best parting out and roping bronc Jim had ever ridden. The saddle was one of Sam Henderson's best. And the guns—well, they had been a present from John Rodney when Jim left the big R 7 spread to see a little of the world.

Jim spat the coating of dust from his lips, turned and looked way back. "Yeah, Mr. Jessup," he muttered. "I'll be back! No set of chiseling, small-change crooks, including that peanut judge and the rest of your crowd, can rob me and make it stick. I'll be back!"

THE SLOPE of the country was steadily up, climbing toward a backbone of country far to the west, which loomed

sear and grey brown. All day long, with only a short pause now and then to breathe the teams, the three wagons rolled on until the sun went down and the backbone of country ahead became a sharp line of deep purple with the blazing sunset sky beyond. And now, at twilight, the wagons rolled into a series of flats along a little stream which twisted down out of the folded slopes.

Ahead loomed the bulk of a wagon and back action, with hungry mules unharnessed and munching at the fodder racks on the wagon sides. And a little campfire, pale in the swelling dusk, gleamed off to one side.

Charley Bonham rolled his three wagons to a flat just beyond, swung in beside the creek and stopped. Bonham called back, "Night camp, Rudd. Water your team and put 'em at the fodder racks."

It was fully dark by the time the mules were cared for. Bonham broke a grub box out of his wagon, threw together a little fire and began cooking supper, which was eaten in hungry silence. Just as they finished, two shadowy figures moved in from the darkness and up to the firelight. Jim Rudd recognized the mule skinner and girl who had pulled out of Collinsburg ahead of them that morning.

"Expected you in a little earlier than you arrived, Charley," said the bearded man. "Something happen to hold you back?"

"Yeah, Abe," nodded Bonham. "Right after you left. Pat Hood was packing a grouch and taking it out on one of his team. The jughead spooked finally and kicked him. Broke his leg. Had to leave him back with Doc Sperry in Collinsburg."

"Too bad," said the bearded man. "But then, Pat always was a mite rough with mules. You were lucky to pick up an extra skinner."

"Plenty," Bonham agreed. "Which reminds me—Abe, Betsy, meet Jim Rudd. Jim, Abe and Betsy Stent."

Jim had been squatting on his heels just at the shadowy rim of the firelight, his hat obscuring his face. Now he came erect.

"Happy to know you both," he drawled.

ABE STENT shook hands, but the startled girl, as she recognized Jim, colored in confusion and barely nodded.

"They'll be yelling for this stuff we're hauling, over in Gold Run, Charley," said Abe Stent. "Gold Run is a boomtown all over again. We ought to do a landslide business as long as the new diggings hold out."

"They'll hold out for quite some time," said old Bill Stallings. "First boom Gold Run had, it was all pan work and surface sluicing. When the Comstock lode discovery broke, everybody hightailed for the big money country. And all the time there was big money waiting to be dug down against the bed rock at Gold Run. Now that they've finally found it there, they won't get it all in a hurry. And it is rich enough to keep 'em wild and crazy. Yeah, we'll be hauling grub and supplies to Gold Run for a long time."

"Last time in, I heard of a miner named Haslam who hit a pot hole in the bed rock and took out close to five thousand in coarse gold in one day," said Stent. He laughed. "If I thought I could do as good, I'd quit freighting and go to digging myself."

"Not me," said Bonham. "Freighting may be slow, but it is steady business. And digging for gold—well, more men have starved to death at it than ever got rich. And many a poor devil who's slaved his heart out to build up a poke will be found with his throat cut some fine morning. This part of Nevada is plumb wild and there'll be plenty of rough ones flocking to Gold Run to loot the fat pokes. On the other hand, they won't bother us. For who ever saw a mule skinner worth knocking on the head for his poke?"

Abe Stent chuckled. "Lot of truth in that, too. Well, Betsy, what say we turn in? It will take an early start to get us

over Purgatory Pass and down into Gold Run by dark tomorrow."

The Stents, father and daughter, went away. Bill Stallings cleared his throat and said, keeping his voice low, "Was I in Abe Stent's boots, with a pretty lass like Betsy, I'd sure see to it that she got nowhere near a town like Gold Run, 'specially the way it is now. Gold Run is bound to be a hell bender until the first craziness wears off and a few miners' courts and lynchings are held. I've seen these gold boomtowns before. And so long as they're wild, they sure ain't any place for a handsome girl like Betsy Stent."

"Now, now Bill!" Charley Bonham scoffed. "Betsy Stent can take care of herself. Shucks! That girl was born in a freight wagon and she's been eating road dust alongside her Dad ever since. Don't worry about Betsy!"

Bill Stallings wagged his grizzled head.

"Maybe so. Just the same, a pretty lass is a pretty lass and a wolf is a wolf. There'll be plenty of the last and hardly none of the first in Gold Run. But Abe Stent's right about one thing. It'll be a long day tomorrow. I'm hitting the blankets."

"Pat Hood's soogan roll is in your wagon, Rudd," said Bonham. "Help yourself."

Jim Rudd had no trouble in going to sleep, not after the night of hell he had spent in the jail at Collinsburg and the long day on the wagon. His last impressions were of the dew falling in his face, the weary stamp of a mule and the faint, lulling murmur of the stream waters, singing in their restless, never-ending scurrying.

THEY WERE in the gut of Purgatory Pass by mid-afternoon. Here the country was bleak and lonely, a country of stunted sage and juniper with twisted rock rims thrusting jagged arms toward the sky. And here a rim swept in on either side until there was barely room enough for the freight road to twist through. And here Jim Rudd, looking out past Charley Bonham's wagon, saw the Stent outfit drawn to a halt.

For a moment Jim thought Abe Stent had merely pulled up to give his team a breather. But as he stood up on the box to stretch his cramped muscles, Jim saw something else. Standing so he could look down and across the Stent outfit and what was out there brought him up taut and alert.

Across the road, blocking it completely, each end resting on a pile of rocks, was a long, heavy pole. Behind that pole was a little group of men, four of them, each with a Winchester rifle cradled across his arm. And the Stents, father and daughter, were down there afoot, in evident argument with them.

Even as Jim watched, Abe Stent flung angry arms above his head, stepped forward, grabbed the pole, started to push it aside. And one of those four men swung the barrel of his rifle in a short, sweeping cut. The barrel caught Abe Stent alongside the head and he went down in a heap.

Jim dropped swiftly from his wagon and loped ahead. Charley Bonham hit the ground and ran forward with him. Betsy was on her knees beside her father, holding his head in her arms.

"What the hell is this?" roared Charley Bonham. "You — Ludlum! What do you think you're pulling off?"

A rifle swung so that the muzzle covered Bonham and Jim Rudd. Behind it was a man of medium height, slender and cat-like. He had hard, pale eyes and a thin line of a mouth that wore a faintly mocking smile.

"Far enough, Bonham," he said, his voice low and purring. "Far enough. There's a limit to my patience. I'm not going to put in the whole day arguing with a bunch of thick-skulled mule skinners. Stent wouldn't listen to reason, so one of the boys belted a little sense into his thick skull. You can have the same, if you want it."

Charley Bonham stopped, Jim Rudd beside him. Neither was a coward, but it was their bare hands against those

poised and ready rifles. Bonham's neck cords stood out with anger, but he held on to himself. His voice sounded almost mild. "All right, what's the play? This looks like a hold-up. Is it?"

Ford Ludlum smiled, tight and sure. "No hold-up. Just a little matter of legitimate business. I happen to own this section of the pass. This road cuts through my property and I'm entitled to some revenue from the wagons that use it. From here on, Bonham, Purgatory Pass is a toll road. The levy is one hundred dollars for a wagon that's loaded. Fifty for a wagon that's empty. If you can't or won't pay, I take the wagons and the loads. It is that simple."

"It's robbery!" snarled Charley Bonham. "You can't put that sort of steal over, Ludlum. You've got no more right to block this road than I have. Which is none at all. I'm taking my wagons through."

Ludlum shrugged. "That's exactly what Stent said. And you see—"

For a moment Jim Rudd thought Bonham was going to launch himself right at the muzzle of that steady rifle and Jim caught his arm. "Take it easy, Charley," he drawled. "You wouldn't have a chance. They've got us where the hair is short."

"Now there is the truth," purred Ludlum. "You can't turn around, for the pass is too narrow. You can't go back, and you can't go ahead unless you pay. I might add, that if you argue too much, I'll hoist the ante another fifty dollars per wagon. Make up your mind, and do it quick!"

CHARLEY BONHAM was a shrewd individual. This thing was raw, but Bonham knew all too well the value of his wagons, his mule teams and the contents of the wagons. Against them, three hundred dollars was a small sum.

"I'll pay," he said hoarsely. "But next time, Ludlum, it'll be your turn to pay."

Ludlum smiled mockingly. "I'm willing to gamble on that, Bonham. Let's see the color of your money."

Jim looked down at Abe Stent. The mule skinner was still out. Betsy was white and stony of face, but her eyes were all aglimmer with tears. There was a dusty canteen hanging from the box of the Stent wagon and Jim fetched it.

"A little of this would probably help a lot, miss," he said, holding it out.

He was amazed at the girl's reaction. "Men!" she flared. "You call yourselves men—and you make no move to even up for—for Dad. Men! It should be coyotes!"

Dark blood beat up Jim's brown, corded throat. "Have your say," he drawled. "But a man is supposed to have brains, too, and not try to deal with four rifles stuck down his throat and him with nothing but his bare hands. You saw what going proddy did for your Dad. Now show some sense yourself and use a little of this water."

He thought she was going to come at him like a little wildcat. Then her lips trembled and the tears flowed anew, and with trembling hand she took the canteen, sloshed some of the contents over her father's face, then held the canteen to his lips.

The water got swift results. Abe Stent stirred, grunted and opened his eyes. He got up on one elbow and peered dazedly around. Remembering, he staggered dizzily erect. Jim Rudd caught his arm and steadied him. And Bonham, who had just finished counting three hundred dollars into Ford Ludlum's outstretched palm, came over and took Stent's other arm.

"Get hold of yourself, Abe," he growled. "You've got to pay. Yeah, I know it's raw robbery, but right now there ain't a thing we can do about it. I've paid, and you might as well stop your bull-headedness and do the same."

Jim could feel Stent's muscles harden and swell. Then, of a sudden, he nodded. "You're right, Charley. We're stuck. But this gripes me as nothing else ever did." He reached for his pocket. "All right, Ludlum, I'm paying. But you know you're a damned thief!"

Ford Ludlum's tight smile went a trifle cruel. "Easy on the lip," he rapped, "or I'll double the ante. Pay up and shut up!"

Jim Rudd glanced at Betsy. Her head was lowered and she was dabbing at her eyes. One of Ludlum's crowd was watching her, also. A big, uncouth blob of a man, with ruffian written all over him. And at the sight of the leer on the fellow's face, Jim Rudd had to grit his teeth. Never had he wanted a pair of guns as now—and never did he feel more helpless and empty-handed.

Ludlum pocketed the money Stent handed over and rapped a short command. "All right, Gault—swing that pole out of the way!"

The big ruffian locked an arm around the pole and swung it to one side. Abe Stent and Betsy climbed to their wagon. Jim and Charley Bonham went back to their outfits. And Ford Ludlum and his crowd stood aside, rifles still ready, while the line of wagons creaked on through the pass and began the downward slope toward Gold Run. . . .

THERE was a creek, muddy and roiled. There were straggling flats, pocked with the raw scars of shaft holes, dotted with the ugly muck of tailing dumps. There were crude windlasses creaking and groaning. There were picks chugging, and shovels scratching and scraping. There were men everywhere, muddy, unshaven, laboring feverishly to use the last of the fading light of another day. There were tents and shacks and dug-out hovels all along the flats. And beyond, up the low slope, there was a sprawling town, some of the buildings old and weatherworn, most of them new and garish, crude and ugly.

And all this was Gold Run, newest boomtown gold camp in the lonely Nevada hills.

Abe Stent rolled his wagons straight into town, but Charley Bonham swung his team to the right and crossed well up the flats, to draw in finally on a little shelf above the stream.

"No use taking the loads into town tonight," he said. "Too much of a madhouse. Tomorrow will be plenty of time. We camp right here."

With everything ship shape and supper over, Bonham produced a gold double eagle and handed it to Jim Rudd. "There's the pay I promised, Jim. I could use you steady, if you're interested. Probably be a week before I'm ready to head back for another set of loads. You've got a job, if you want it."

Jim nodded. "I'll think on it, Charley. I'll let you know in time."

"What you aiming to do in the meantime, Jim?" asked Bill Stallings. "Dig for color, maybe?"

Jim shrugged. "Hope to run this twenty dollars into enough to get together another outfit—horse, riding rig, a pair of guns. Mainly guns."

Bill Stallings swung his grizzled head, peered at Jim sharply. "What would you do with those guns?"

Jim built a cigarette, stared into the fire. "I don't take kindly to being held up," he said, a brittle note creeping into his tone. "I was held up back in Collinsburg. I was held up today, coming through Purgatory Pass. I'm not forgetting any of those things."

"You don't need to feel anything about today, Jim," Bonham said. "My wagons, my outfit. You were just driving for me. Not that I enjoy being held up by that damned Ford Ludlum, understand. But you don't need to feel that you owe anybody anything about that."

"When I work for a man," Jim said, "his interests are my interests. One way or another this Ludlum hombre is going to have to make good that three hundred dollars he robbed you of."

"You expect to see Ludlum again?" asked Stallings.

Jim nodded. "He has to headquarter somewhere. It wouldn't be Collinsburg—too far away. So it must be Gold Run. What happened at Purgatory Pass today is only a flea bite to what will probably start to happen before long. There's a lot of easy money running

loose in this camp, lots of fat pokes. If a guy like Ludlum is willing to gamble his neck by running that toll road fable for a few hundred, he's not going to back away from a more dangerous game where there are thousands to be had. Oh, yes—I expect to see a lot of Ludlum in this camp. The hombres he had with him today are tough ones. Anybody could see that. An easy-money crowd, willing to pull hold-ups, throat cuttings or what have you, for easy dinero."

BILL STALLINGS heaved up to his feet, went off to his wagon. Soon he was back, and into Jim's lap he dropped a pair of worn, but well kept old Frontier Colt .45's, with belts and holsters. The loops of the belts were filled with fat, stubby, yellow cartridges.

"Mine," said old Bill succinctly. "Been packing them in my soogan roll for a long time. Loaning 'em to you, Jim. Good guns. Perfect match. Weigh the same to a split ounce. Hang the same, shoot the same. You're welcome to 'em until you are able to get your own weapons back."

One after the other Jim drew the big guns from the leather, spun the empty cylinders, tried the action. Everything was smooth, velvety. "They *are* good guns," he murmured, and Bill Stallings beamed with pride.

"Wear 'em," said Bill. "Use 'em if you have to. They've been over the jumps in their time. They won't lay down on you. With a clean sight, they shoot center—and I *mean* center!"

Jim stood up, buckled the belts into place, adjusting them until he got just the right hang. He tried a draw or two, his hands flashing. And Bill Stallings, watching, widened his eyes at what he saw. "They sure won't get into an argument late," he mumbled. "You're fast, Jim—awful fast!"

Jim smiled grimly. "So far, I been fast enough."

He thumbed cartridges from belt loops, plugged gaping chambers, flipped loading gates shut and reholstered. "See you later, gentlemen," he said. "I'm going to town."

JIM RUDD paced the roaring street of Gold Run with a long, casual stride. Aside from the still present bruises of the beating he had taken in Collinsburg, Jim was physically as good as ever. And in this wild town, a few bruises about the face were nothing to draw even a passing glance or comment.

Jim elbowed his way through the usual mixed crowd of a gold camp. Miners from the diggings, bearded, blotched with mud, smelling rank of sweat and grime. Mule skinners, freighters, gamblers, promoters, a stray cowboy or two. And plenty of just plain roughs, eyeing the sagging pockets of miners and wondering greedily at the weight of the gold poke they carried.

There were five saloons to each more solid, more permanent house of business, and gambling hells and even more sordid dives walled every inch of the street on both sides. From one side of the street to the other spread the crowd, going, coming, milling aimlessly in an atmosphere feverish and hectic. Sudden scuffles, brawls, bursts of cursing broke out here and there, but received scant attention from the crowd. A late arriving freighter kept swinging his whip in vicious, searing cracks to open a way for his snorting, tired team and groaning wagon. A drunk tumbled under the wheels and just missed being crushed, only to drag himself up from the churned dust and wander away, grinning vacuously.

As he moved along, Jim Rudd's eyes were busy, moving back and forth across the crowd. He had marked well the features and appearance of Ford Ludlum and the tough fellows with him at Purgatory Pass, and now he was looking for one of them.

Before a big, square, barn-like building a freight wagon and back action were drawn up and being unloaded. Jim saw a stocky, bearded figure shoulder a hundred-pound sack of flour and carry

it through the gaping door of the building. Abe Stent. Another man appeared at the back of the rear action, shouldering a case of 'air-tights' and followed Stent in. And as Jim drew even with the wagons, he saw a slim figure in jeans and hickory shirt and floppy old sombrero standing by the open tail gate, a merchandise list and pencil in hand, evidently checking off items as they were unloaded.

Jim paused, building a smoke, watching Betsy Stent guardedly. She was intent on her task and did not see him. She looked very tired, her red lips holding a drooping, almost childlike seriousness. A rough, lurching from too much whiskey, came along, stared owlishly, then broke into a coarse laugh.

"Woman," he blurted. "Woman in britches! Don't think I'm seeing things. Ain't that drunk. Pretty woman—young, too! H'are you, sister?"

JIM saw the swift aversion which flooded the girl's face and she stepped back a little from the flare of yellow light coming from the door of the building. It was an instinctive move, and the rough turned ugly.

"One of them high and mighty ones, huh?" he growled. "Think you're too good for a hard working miner! Well, I'll show you!"

He started for the girl, only to find Jim Rudd blocking the way. "On your way," said Jim curtly. "Git!"

The drunk squared off in clumsy belligerency. "Sa-ay, who're you?" he blustered thickly. "You can't tell—"

"Git!" Jim cut in.

The chill in Jim's eyes cut through the fog of the fellow's consciousness. He blinked, shrugged and weaved away.

And Jim, without looking at Betsy Stent again, moved on down street.

Two slow, watchful turns of the crowded street failing to turn up a face he was looking for, Jim began canvassing the saloons and gambling dives. And in the largest one, garish with light and noise and jostling humanity, Jim saw his man.

Ford Ludlum was at a table, playing stud. He had a huge mound of chips in front of him, and that tight, satisfied smile was on his lips. The big, coarse ruffian, Gault, was at the same table, but his stack of chips was almost gone. Further survey of the room showed the other two tough ones who had backed Ludlum's hand at Purgatory Pass seated at another table across the room, bucking faro. Jim elbowed his way to the back of Ludlum's chair and, in the brief pause while a deal was being made, tapped Ludlum on the shoulder. Ludlum looked up and back, saw who it was and froze.

"Been looking for you, Ludlum," said Jim gravely. "I'm collecting that money you owe Charley Bonham and Abe Stent. Three hundred for Bonham, two hundred for Stent. By your stack, you're in the money. This is a good time to square up."

FORD LUDLUM'S smile held, but it was merely a tight grimace now. "You can't put this kind of thing over, mister," he purred. "You better travel while you're all in one piece!"

Jim dropped a hand to a gun butt. "I can throw a gun and blow your thieving brains all over the place before you can move, Ludlum. And I will if I have to. You—Gault!" Jim's voice cut like a whip lash. "Stay put! Both your hands on the table top, flat down. Keep 'em there. This is a rough town and nobody is going to care a damn if I smoke down a couple of cheap thieves. For the benefit of the rest of you gents around the table, Ludlum and Gault were a pair of four who held up a couple of honest freighters in Purgatory Pass today and relieved them of five hundred dollars. Now you know what this play is all about. All right, Ludlum—fork over!"

Ford Ludlum stared around the table, around the room. Beyond those at the table, no one was paying a bit of attention. He did not have a chance to catch the attention of his two men at the faro

table. They were too intent on the game. And Ludlum knew that no one else was going to interfere. In a camp like this, it was up to every man to skin his own cats. Ludlum shrugged, shoved his pile of chips across the table.

"Cash 'em," he said to the gambler who was running the game.

The gambler, poker-faced, obeyed, paying off in gold double eagles. Ludlum racked off twenty-five of the glittering coins, and with his left hand Jim Rudd scooped them up and dropped them into a pocket. "You and Gault stay exactly put," warned Jim. "It will be healthier."

"This affair isn't finished, of course," rasped Ludlum, his eyes hard and bright as agates.

"No," agreed Jim, "it isn't. You're just the kind, Ludlum, to push your luck until it buys you a hole in the ground. You other gents—sorry to interrupt your game."

Jim stepped back, was swiftly in the crowd and on his way to the door. The player at the gambler's right, a brawny miner with grizzled hair and a broad, blunt, honest face, stood up. He slid his chips to the dealer.

"Credit me with these, Jack," he said. "I'll sit in tomorrow night."

The dealer nodded and began counting the chips. The miner pushed his way through the crowd, trying to keep Jim Rudd's head and shoulders in view.

Once in the street, Jim headed straight for the big store and trading post. He saw that the back action of Stent's outfit was unloaded now and no one was around. Jim went into the store and saw Abe and Betsy Stent standing back beside the long, raw-boarded counter, talking to a bald-headed, jolly looking man whose hands and bared forearms were white with flour dust. They looked around at Jim's approach.

"Got something here for you, Abe," said Jim. He dropped ten twenty-dollar gold pieces in Stent's hand.

Stent stared. "What's that for?"

"I just saw Ford Ludlum and persuaded him that he owed you two hundred dollars. I got three hundred for Charley Bonham, too."

Stent gulped, amazed. "What did you do, knock Ludlum's ears off?"

"No. He listened to reason. Good night."

THE MINER who had followed Jim from the saloon, stood in the doorway of the store and as Jim passed said, "A word with you, friend."

Jim was instantly wary, for he recognized the fellow. The miner laughed softly as he saw Jim's guard spring up. "Not what you think, at all," the miner said. "I'm Dan Roscoe. I've got a claim above Discovery. Seeing as I was one of the first in here, the other boys at the diggings have sort of selected me to look after their interests in certain things. And in their behalf and my own, I have a proposition for you."

"Depends," drawled Jim, still wary. "I'm Jim Rudd. And right off the bat I'm not interested in any proposition that can't stand the light of day."

"Let's walk and talk," said Dan Roscoe. "Then you can decide. It's like this: A lot of the boys have built up pretty fat pokes. They're beginning to worry about them. This camp is ripe for an outbreak of thievery and worse. The boys would like to see their dust in a safe place. I would myself. Now, there is a stage route being opened up between here and Collinsburg. There is a Wells Fargo office in Collinsburg, but I doubt if Wells Fargo will open a branch here. Too uncertain. The camp may peter out in a week, or it may be going strong a year from now. Nobody knows, and Wells Fargo ain't going to gamble.

"Had they a branch office here, we miners would send our dust out in their box via the stage. As it is, Wells Fargo will accept dust on deposit at Collinsburg, but will assume no responsibility for it from Gold Run to Collinsburg. So I've been looking for a man who will act as a gold messenger for us miners, taking the dust to the Wells Fargo people in Collinsburg. There is a lot of responsi-

bility and danger in the job and we're willing to pay five per cent of each shipment to the messenger. How'd you like the job?"

Jim did a little silent arithmetic. It listened good. But he said, "Why pick me, Roscoe? You never saw me until tonight."

Dan Roscoe laughed. "I liked the way you handled Ford Ludlum, and why you did it. And the proof of your honesty was the way you just went straight to that freighter and gave him his money. I'll be glad to take a chance, if you are."

"I've got twenty dollars to my name," said Jim. "To handle that job, I'd need an outfit. A couple of high class horses, saddle, saddle bags, a rifle—"

"Me and the boys will stake you to that," said Roscoe. "We know and expect to pay for this service. Take me, for instance. I've got between seven and eight thousand dollars in dust. I figure that it would be cheap at the price of say, roughly, five hundred dollars to get the rest of that dust into a place of safe keeping. Most of the boys feel the same. This is a fair, straight proposition, Rudd, and I hope you'll take it on. Think on it, sleep on it, if you want, and let me know tomorrow. Anybody at the diggings can direct you to my claim."

"Don't need to think," said Jim in sudden decision. "I'm your man."

He put out his hand and they shook on it.

"Of course," Jim said, "it'll help a lot if we don't spread the word."

"That's understood," nodded Roscoe. "We'll keep everything as secret as possible. See you in the morning."

When Jim got back to Charley Bonham's wagon he found Charley and Bill Stallings just about to turn in.

"Well," grinned Bill, "I didn't hear any shooting. Town must be pretty tame."

Jim smiled back. "Didn't have to shoot. The coyote came to heel without any gunsmoke. Charlie, here's the three hundred Ludlum took away from you at Purgatory Pass."

Charlie Bonham began to sputter. "What the hell? How the—?"

"Simple enough," Jim cut in. "I ran Ludlum down at a poker game. He had quite a stack in front of him. I suggested that he pay you and Abe Stent back. After thinking the matter over, he decided I was right. So he paid. I already gave Abe Stent his two hundred."

THE TOWN of Gold Run proper was like a drunk sleeping off a bad one, but all along the creek flats the pleasant morning was bright with movement and activity. Jim Rudd, coming up out of the diggings, paused beside the new town corral. A lot of horses were in that corral, most of them sorry, bony nags, a few fair, and a very few really good. Jim was running an expert appraising eye over the lot when a peg-legged man with a leathery face and twinkling eyes came clumping along.

"See any you like, friend?" he asked. "If you do, speak up and I'll tack a price on 'em. Broncs from California, broncs from Oregon, broncs from Idaho, broncs from Utah, and just yesterday a couple came in from Arizona. News of a gold strike sure travels far and fast. Now take that morro gelding yonder. There's a bronc. Sound as a nut, young, full of fire and bottom. A steal at two hundred pesos."

Jim grinned. "Give you six bits for the hide, no more. That wall-eyed brute would bite its own mother."

The peg-legged man sighed, then chuckled. "Okay, pick your own. No chance of getting rid of a four-legged snake to you. I can see that. I sure got stuck on that morro devil. Meaner than sin. Had to fight him off with a pitch fork the other day."

Jim stabbed a pointing forefinger. "That white-stockinged sorrel and that blaze-faced bay. How much?"

The peg-legged man groaned. "You *do* know broncs. Them's the best I've got in the corral. I've *got* to ask two hundred apiece for those two broncs. And that's honest value."

"Sold!" said Jim. "How you fixed for saddles?"

"Can do," said the peg-leg. "Come on over to the shed."

Half an hour later Jim headed up town, possessor of two good horses, a good saddle and a pair of big, stout saddle bags. He turned in at the store and found the proprietor alone behind the counter. There was a rack of rifles against the wall. Jim pointed. "For sale?"

The shopkeeper chuckled. "Brother, anything in this place is for sale. You can have the layout itself, if your poke is deep enough."

"Then I'll take this one," said Jim. "And a scabbard to handle it. Likewise a couple of boxes each of .45s and .30-30s."

The storekeeper laid out the purchases. "Aiming to shoot up something?"

"This camp can use fresh meat," drawled Jim. "And they tell me the breaks off to the southeast are full of deer. Fresh venison ought to be worth a dime or two."

"No fondness for digging for color, then?"

Jim laughed. "Never did have any affection for a pick handle."

As Jim turned to leave, he saw a slim figure farther back in the shadows of the big room. It was Betsy Stent. She was watching him. Jim touched his hat gravely and went out.

AT MIDAFTERNOON, riding one horse and leading another with an ordinary saw buck pack saddle cinched on it, Jim Rudd jogged down across the diggings. Presently he came to Dan Roscoe's claim, and Roscoe hailed him cheerily. "Where away, cowboy?"

"Out into the brakes after a couple of venisons," drawled Jim. "How'd a feed of fresh deer meat strike you?"

"Right where I live," grinned Roscoe. "I'm speaking for a whole quarter right now. Wait, I'll get you a sack to put it in."

Roscoe hurried into his tent and came back with a trick-rolled burlap sack. He handled it lightly, but when Jim took it from him he was amazed at its weight.

"A mite over forty-one pounds, Jim," murmured Roscoe. "Twelve thousand dollars' worth. Carry it across the saddle in front of you until you get outside of sight of camp. Then you can split it up for your saddle bags. All sacked and labeled proper. Good luck, boy!"

Jim headed due southeast into the heart of the brakes and, when sure no eyes could possibly see, unrolled the sack Dan Roscoe had given him and stowed the sacks of gold dust in his saddle bags, dividing the weight equally. These greasy, worn buckskin pokes, with their weighty, precious, solidly packed contents, each with a bit of paper tied in at the neck, giving the owner's name —what they represented in danger, hardship, killing toil! What dreams, what futures they held!

Jim's face was very sober with responsibility as he buckled the flaps of the saddle bags tight and secure.

Well back in the brakes he jumped a bunch of deer, shot two, dressed them out and hung the carcasses well up in a nearby desert sycamore. Then, buckling down to the ride, he headed due east. By dint of traveling a relatively straight line and changing from one horse to the other, he covered in hours what it had taken two full days to travel by the slow plod of a freight wagon. The evening was still not too old when he jogged up to the outskirts of Collinsburg.

Leaving his horses in a pocket of shadow, Jim shouldered his saddle bags and moved around the edges of things. Any other time he would have found pleasure in running into Jessup, the town marshal, and punching his ugly face in. Just now he wanted to meet no one.

In his short and turbulent residence in Collinsburg, Jim had noted a few things. For instance, he remembered the Wells Fargo office, and he remembered that the agent had living quarters out back.

So Jim came up from the back, saw a window aglow and knocked on the door. A cheerful summons answered him and he went in.

John Lyle, the agent, a cherubic little man, was about to turn in, but when Jim explained his errand, Lyle bustled about. "Of course. I'll give you the receipts and we'll put the stuff in the safe right now."

When this was done, Jim stowed the receipts carefully away and Lyle asked, "Come in from Gold Run straight?"

"Yeah. And heading back right away."

"Had anything to eat?"

Jim shook his head, and Lyle said, "I'll shake up a meal. Like a snack myself before turning in."

Jim liked this trustworthy, hospitable little man and talked freely over the food, explaining that he'd probably be in to see him often. Lyle nodded.

"Those miners are smart. There will be all kinds of hell break loose in Gold Run before long. Too much easy gold. The vultures and hyenas will be after it. Incidentally, if a fellow named Ford Ludlum is around, tell the people to keep their eyes on him. He's no good, yet just smart enough to organize a robber band. Plenty of rough mugs at Gold Run, I expect. For that matter, we've got our share right here in Collinsburg."

Jim smiled grimly. "You're telling me! Remember that row a few evenings ago, when Jessup and his crowd beat up a guy, threw him in the jug, and then a a guy named Fleet—who calls himself a judge—fined that guy his horse, his riding rig and his guns and then gave him a floater out of town? Well—"

Lyle leaned forward, peered at Jim's face. "You're that man!" he exploded. "By jing—you are! I can see the marks of their fists still on your face. That was a dirty deal!"

"I'm not forgetting it," said Jim grimly.

"You shouldn't! Brad Hoban—he's one of Jessup's pals—is riding your horse, sitting your saddle, and carrying your guns. I heard him bragging about it in the Sundown today when I dropped in for a beer."

"Good!" said Jim. "I'll keep that jigger in mind."

THAT NIGHT Jim Rudd got a few hours' sleep, far back in the sage brush and junipers, with his saddle for a pillow and a saddle blanket to cover him. He was up and going again in the first grey dawn and, cutting back through the brakes, cut down the deer he had hung the day before, lashed them across his pack saddle and headed on for Gold Run.

His first stop was beside Dan Roscoe's windlass, and when Jim sent a call down the shallow shaft, Roscoe came up the rope, hand over hand. His eyes widened in amazement.

"Back already?" he snorted. "What happened!"

"Nothing," said Jim. "No use lingering there that I could see. The gold is safe with John Lyle, and here are the receipts."

Roscoe wiped his muddy hands on his overalls and ran over the receipts. He nodded soberly. "This one for Tim Murphy—well, Tim won't have no use for it. The boys found Tim in his tent this morning—dead. Somebody had stuck a knife in him and rifled all his gear. Looking for dust, of course. The receipt says twelve hundred dollars. I understand Tim had a sister somewhere back East. We'll see that his dust goes to her. I'll make good to you the sixty dollars which Tim owed you for taking his gold out, Jim."

"Like hell!" growled Jim. "Murphy never owed me a cent! That all goes to his sister."

Dan Roscoe said, "You're one white man, Jim Rudd. Now I'll take that haunch of venison."

AT THE very moment Jim Rudd and Dan Roscoe were talking, Ford Ludlum, in a cabin at the north end of town, was listening to a report by Dice Gault. "I'm telling you, Ford," whined Gault,

"there wasn't a pinch of dust in that tent. Don't ask me what Murphy had done with it. I and Mig Deschutes went over every inch of the place. There wasn't a smell of gold anywhere!"

Ludlum's eyes glittered as he stared fixedly at Gault. "I hope," he purred, "that you and Mig didn't figure to put something over—like, say, splitting Murphy's poke and then cooking up this story."

Gaunt cringed. "We wouldn't do that, Ford—you know we wouldn't. That's straight!"

Ludlum nodded. "I believe you, Dice." It had pleased Ludlum, however, to see the burly ruffian cringe. It satisfied a sadistic streak in him. Then Ludlum went on, almost to himself, "Wonder what the devil Murphy could have done with his poke! He had a good one—at least a thousand-dollar poke, maybe more. I know that. All right, Dice—you can go. I want to do some thinking."

Coming down the street, Dice Gault was in such a state of mind he did not even see Jim Rudd, though he passed within ten feet of Jim as the latter rode slowly along the street, with the hams and backstraps of one deer still on his pack saddle. Jim watched the ruffian hurry into a saloon, shrugged and forgot him, for he saw Abe Stent in the act of hitching a last mule to his wagons, ready to pull out. Betsy Stent was already up on the wagon box.

"Heading back for Collinsburg, Abe?" asked Jim, reining to a stop.

Stent looked up, saw who it was and shook his head. "Not yet, Jim. What with the stuff me and Charley Bonham brought in, Jigger Dangerfield is stocked up to the ceiling. Maybe not for a week will he be ready for some more goods. I'm just pulling the wagons up creek to camp by Bonham. What's the deer meat for?"

"Sale. Got to earn an honest dollar or two somehow. How's to sell you a quarter? A lot of meat for a dollar."

"Sure!" said Abe. "Betsy, you got the poke up there. Toss Jim down a dollar."

Betsy Stent was looking at Jim queerly. Now she flushed, fumbled in the jockey box and spun a coin which Jim caught dexterously. But as Jim handed the meat up to her she spoke, her voice low and somehow intense.

"For a man—a real man—peddling deer meat is a cheap business. Indian business. What's the matter? You afraid of real work?".

Jim started slightly, then grinned right into her accusing eyes. "Me and hard work never did get along, Miss Betsy. What's the matter with peddling deer meat? Folks have to eat, don't they? Somebody has to kill their meat."

Her flush grew deeper. "I still say it is Indian business," she said cuttingly.

Jim only grinned wider. In fact, as he started on up street he began to whistle. And Miss Betsy Stent, watching him with sultry eyes, slammed the haunch of venison down hard enough to startle the mules.

Jim Rudd went on to Charley Bonham's camp with the last of his deer meat.

WITHIN THE next week Jim Rudd made three more trips to Collinsburg, his saddle bags heavy with gold. Each time he arrived at Collinsburg after dark, and left the place during that same night. Each time, on return to Gold Run, he brought in a load of venison. And in the four completed trips, he had safely transported a full forty thousand dollars in dust. With the agreed commission for carrying it, he was making money for himself so fast he felt guilty. When he mentioned this to Dan Roscoe, Dan laughed at him.

"It's worth every cent you're being paid to get that gold safely to the Wells Fargo station in Collinsburg, Jim. You've carried and put my poke in safe keeping, and anything I have paid you for that is cheap at the price. The boys in the diggings are more than satisfied. If they're not kicking, why should you?"

The freight outfits of Charley Bonham and Abe Stent were still in camp on the

shelf above town and Jim Rudd still spent most of his leisure time there, for he liked Charley Bonham and Bill Stallings and Abe Stent.

Betsy Stent was there too, but she managed to avoid him. This day, after turning over the Wells Fargo receipts to Dan Roscoe and on riding up to the freighter camp, Jim thought the camp deserted. The wagons and the lazing mules were there, but he did not see anyone about, not until he was but a few yards from the wagons, the sound of his approach muffled by grass which carpeted the ground. Then he saw Betsy Stent.

She came into view from behind one of the wagons. She was backing up, and following her, an ugly leer on his heavy face, was Dice Gault. Jim heard the girl's voice, low and tense, and shaking with repressed fear and revulsion.

"Get out of here! You can't hang around me! My father will—"

Gault broke in, his voice heavy. "Your father ain't here, pretty one. Nobody is here, just you and me. And—"

"Your mistake, Gault!" Jim Rudd left his saddle as he spoke, and when his heels hit the ground he strode swiftly forward, placing himself between the girl and Gault. And as he passed Betsy Stent he said quietly, "Get out of line, Betsy! Get around the wagon!"

He did not look back to see if she obeyed, for his eyes were fixed on Gault. The big ruffian was startled. Uncertainty, fear, crawled through his eyes. He backed up a stride or two.

"I'm giving you more than you deserve," rasped Jim Rudd harshly. "An even break. Get about it!"

Gault wouldn't do it. With sly intuition he knew that Jim would not draw unless he made the first move, and he took refuge in that fact. But if he thought this was going to save him entirely, he was mistaken. Jim, realizing that Gault had no intention of facing a shoot-out, glided forward. He drew a gun, but did not shoot. Instead, he smashed the ruffian across the face with the weapon.

Gault staggered back, but he was a man of brute strength and he did not go down under that first blow. But with the second he floundered and collapsed. Jim was standing over him, taking his guns, when Abe Stent came hurrying up from the creek flats, his face grim, his eyes squinted with some disturbing thoughts. He stopped now and stared.

"What the devil goes on here?" he growled. "Rudd, are you—?"

BETSY spoke swiftly, going over to her father. Now that her terror was gone, she was near tears. "No, Dad—not Jim. That lout on the ground—he came sneaking around the wagons; must have been spying and saw that I was alone. He came pestering me. He was horrible. And then Jim—Mr. Rudd—rode up—"

Abe Stent was white with rage. "Why didn't you kill him?" he yelled furiously. "Why didn't you blow him apart, Rudd?"

"He wouldn't draw," said Jim grimly, "or I would have. He wouldn't draw, so I gun-whipped him."

Fairly beside himself, Stent snapped, "Give me one of those guns! I'll finish him!"

"No, Abe," said Jim. "I know how you feel, but we can't do that."

Abe Stent got a grip on himself, and nodded. "You're right. I'm sorry, Jim—and damned grateful to you. You've done Betsy and me a lot of favors, and—"

"That's been my pleasure, Abe," Jim cut in. "No thanks needed." He roused Gault with a vigorous toe. The renegade reeled dizzily as he lurched to his feet.

"You're awfully close to the edge, Gault," said Jim, his voice brittle. "You've got until evening to get out of this country. If you haven't gone by then, you'll never go. That's a promise, Gault. Git!"

Gault didn't answer. He staggered off toward town, his hands over his beaten face.

"Things are coming to a head, Jim,"

said Stent, staring after Gault. "There's been another murder and robbery in the diggings. Fellow named Crain. When he didn't show up at his claim today, some of the miners finally got to wondering and took a look around. They just found him. He'd been slugged and thrown into a shaft half filled with sump water. It was known that he had a pretty heavy poke. I saw him when they hauled him out."

AT THE same time this was going on, excitement of another nature was taking place down at the lower end of the diggings. A miner had been caught stealing foodstuffs from a neighbor's tent. The miner, a lank, shifty-eyed individual by the name of Ketch, had been caught red-handed. There was some talk of a lynching, but inasmuch as the loot was but a side of bacon and had already been returned to the rightful owner, Ketch was allowed to save his neck by getting out of town immediately.

He had been manhandled somewhat, and as he went slouching out of town and passed Ford Ludlum's cabin, Ludlum saw him and wondered. And then, struck with a swift idea, Ludlum hurried out to accost the thief. Ketch faced him, surly and suspicious. "I'm leaving," he mumbled. "I'm getting out. You can see that, can't you? Let me alone!"

Ludlum, smiling in that tight way of his, said, "You don't have to get proddy with me, friend. Something has happened, but I have no idea what. Maybe you'd care to tell?"

Sudden, festering fury convulsed Ketch. He shook his fist toward the creek flats where the miners swarmed. "They ran me out, damn 'em! Kicked me off my claim and ran me out. Just like I am. No outfit, no grub—nothing. They ran me out—may they all blister in hell!"

Ludlum dropped a hand on the fellow's arm, jerked his head in a nod. "Come on over to my shanty, friend. I don't like a lot of people in this camp any better than you do. Maybe if we get together, we can raise a few of those blisters you speak of. You don't need to worry. No one will bother you in my cabin."

Ketch hesitated, then followed Ludlum, who, when they entered the cabin, bustled about, heating some water so that Ketch might bathe some of his bruises, stirring up some food and bringing out a bottle of whiskey at which Ketch gulped heavily. And presently Ludlum, who had read his man shrewdly, said—"I can show you a way to get gold a lot easier than digging it. Interested?"

They measured glances for a long moment and then Ketch laughed wolfishly. These two had much the same makeup and understood each other. "You're talking and I'm listening," said Ketch. "I think we can get together."

Ludlum, lighting a cheroot, paced the cabin slowly. "Ketch, gold has been going out of this camp," he said. "Miners are shipping their pokes out somehow. I know the dust ain't going out by the stage, and I'm wondering."

"Hell!" exclaimed Ketch. "That's easy! Some hombre named Rudd is taking it out for them. Taking it to Collinsburg. He's leaving it with the Wells Fargo agent in Collinsburg and bringing back deposit receipts. Those fools are paying him five per cent on all he takes out for them."

Ludlum threw back his head and laughed. "How can a man be such a fool as I've been!" he marveled. "Right under my nose all the time and I didn't guess it! And he's been bringing back venison as a blind. Ludlum, old boy, you're slipping!"

Ludlum kicked a bench up across the table from Ketch, sat down and leaned forward, his eyes gleaming. Ludlum talked steadily while Ketch listened. When Ludlum finished, Ketch nodded.

"I'll go you, Ludlum. I never did like that Jim Rudd. And Dan Roscoe was one of the high and mighty boys who gave me the bum's rush."

"You any idea when Rudd is to make his next trip to Collinsburg?"

"Tomorrow, I think."

"Good. This will work out fine!" Ludlum brought out pencil and paper and wrote rapidly for a time. He folded the paper and gave it to Ketch. "Deliver that to Bull Jessup, the marshal at Collinsburg. He'll probably have more work for you right away. And you get the same cut as the other boys. Now I'll rustle you a bronc. Wait until I get back."

LUDLUM started to leave, but as he reached the door and opened it, he stood staring. Lurching toward him came Dice Gault, staggering and obviously badly battered. Ludlum led Gault inside. "What happened to you?"

"Rudd," mumbled Gault. "He gun-whipped me across the face." And Gault went off into a frenzy of cursing. Ludlum shook him.

"Why? How? Where?" he snapped.

Gault explained. "And he told me to get out of camp or he'd kill me on sight!"

Ludlum went white with anger. "He should have killed you then and there, you thick-skulled fool!" raged Ludlum. "Didn't I tell you to keep away from that Stent girl? Didn't I? You could have upset all my plans! Had you pulled any rough stuff on that girl, this camp would have gone lynch crazy! And they wouldn't have stopped with just you. You big, knot-brained fool, I've a notion to smoke you down myself!"

Dice Gault, battered, bleeding, sick, flared back. "Gone soft-hearted, have you? Or maybe you kind of like the looks of that girl yourself!"

"I don't give a hoot in hell for that girl!" Ludlum snarled. "I'm thinking of what you might have started in this camp. It wouldn't have been only *your* worthless neck, it could have—and probably would have—ruined all the things I and the other boys have been planning and working toward. You're leaving town. You're going to Collinsburg, where Bull Jessup can handle you for a while. Give that ugly mug of yours a little attention and then get ready to ride."

AS JIM RUDD rode out of Gold Run, his saddle bags were the heaviest they had ever been. Dan Roscoe had an exceptionally large number of pokes ready for him. "The boys are really worried, Jim," he explained. "The murder and robbery of Ben Crain up at the head diggings has shown them that no man with a decent-sized poke is safe around here any more. Crain was one of the stubborn ones who wouldn't listen to the idea of having you take care of his dust. Said he could take care of it himself. I hear he got a little too much liquor the other night in town and was flashing his poke carelessly. Well—he'll never flash another, poor devil!"

Jim said, "I don't know how many times the miners will have to be kicked in the teeth before they'll get together and clean things up. A little session with Judge Lynch and you'd be surprised how safe a man's gold would be hereabouts!"

"I know," Roscoe agreed. "It will probably come to that before we're done. But they aren't worked up to it yet. Good luck!"

Jim said grimly, "One of these trips I'm going to need that good luck, Dan. I feel it in my bones. We're not going to keep on fooling everybody forever."

As the afternoon waned and ran out and the low spots began to fill with pools of purple shadows, Jim Rudd rode more warily than ever before. He hadn't seen a thing to induce this wariness, but intuition was at work on him, tingling up and down his spine. His probing, narrowed eyes were constantly at work, searching gulch and ridge and rock outcrop; studying sage-matted slopes, resting long on thickets of juniper. As the sun went down and twilight began to thicken his wariness increased.

Queer how a man's instinct could sense these things. A few times before in his life when hunches had run through him, Jim had found them well founded. Now they were at work again and he was not only watching, he was thinking. And it was well that he was, for he thus instantly read the significance of the move

when his horse swung its head high and to the left, ears pricked, and sent a shrill whistle pealing, evidence beyond argument that other horses were close about.

Reining powerfully to one side, Jim sank home the spurs and his horse lunged into a full run. Down there in the shadows to the left sounded the crash of gunfire and lead whistled all about. Two savage thuds of hurtling lead sounded just behind Jim and he knew what that meant, too. And he flipped the lead rope of his relay bronc from his saddle horn just before that luckless animal crashed down. Jim, leaning low, spurred headlong up a shallow gulch opening to his right and slightly ahead.

Back of him now sounded a volley of shrill yells, and more gunfire. But the pool of shadow welling up in the gulch became a protective curtain for Jim and the shots flew wild. Jim made no effort to return the shots now. Instead, twisted in the saddle, he worked swiftly at the straps holding his saddle bags in place behind the cantle. These freed, he gave a powerful heave and swung the precious load around and across the saddle in front of him.

From the day of his first trip, Jim had realized the possibility of such an attack and had figured out what he would do in that event. One thing was obvious. In case of attack and pursuit, his horse, carrying both him and the sodden, dead weight of thousands of dollars' worth of gold dust, would not be able to outrun pursuit. And so to attempt to hold on to the gold would only result more surely in it being lost. The smart thing to do was to cache it at the first opportunity and come back for it later. And so, as he sped up the twisting, steadily climbing gulch, Jim's eyes were probing the thickening gloom.

The gulch funneled abruptly to the top of a ridge and, limned against the skyline, horse and rider made an open target to the pursuit. It was an opportunity the renegades did not miss. Gun flame lanced the shadows, and the flat thunder of reports rolled and growled.

Something tugged at Jim's right thigh and then it was as if a white-hot flame had touched him in passing. His saddle shook under him as a slug battered itself to powder against the steel heart of his saddle cantle, and at the same time it was as if a sudden gust of wind tugged at the wide brim of his sombrero.

But these were minor things. What sent a dart of desperation through Jim was the manner in which his horse lurched and missed stride. The animal had been hit.

It did not go down immediately, however, and when, in the temporary safety just over the ridge top, Jim reined along the side of the ridge, the horse kept going, though the smooth rhythm of its stride was gone.

JIM knew exactly what he had to do and his face was bleak and drawn as his eyes probed and searched. Now he saw it; a clump of tangled rock, vague in the gloom, with the blackness of thick brush about the base of it. Jim held his faltering horse against the slight slope until even with that rock pile. Then he leaned over, swung the saddle bags clear and dropped them against the base of the rocks, where the blanket of brush would hide everything.

Freed of the weight of the gold, the horse seemed to gather fresh strength; its stride lengthened and steadied. This did not deceive its rider, however. Jim knew the luckless animal was fatally wounded. It was only a matter of time. So he held his course along the side of the ridge until he felt the animal weakening fast. Then he turned to the left and went down the slope of the ridge into the dark flat below.

He reached the flat, started across it. The horse was staggering badly. Jim drew his rifle from the saddle scabbard, kicked his feet free of the stirrups. And when the horse went down, Jim swung clear.

He leaned over, ran a regretful hand along the horse's neck. "You were a good bronc—the best," he muttered. "If

there is a horse heaven, you're headed for it."

Then Jim prowled away across the flat, feeling his way through the brush. Up on the ridge behind him, Jim could hear horses crashing through brush, hear men shouting and calling to one another. They were perilously close to where he had dropped the gold, so Jim swung his rifle up and lashed a couple of quick shots.

They answered with shouts and lead of their own, and there was a roar of hoofs as they came charging down toward the flat. Jim, crouched low, thumbed fresh lead through the loading gate of his rifle and broke away at right angles to where he had been.

A hundred yards along there loomed another outcrop. Jim circled this, then stopped to rest and listen. He heard them quartering the flat below. Then a shrill and exultant yell told of someone finding his horse. And a heavy, harsh voice cut above all the other sounds.

"We've got him afoot now, and he's got the dust with him! Scatter out and keep after him until we jump him!"

JIM stiffened as he heard that voice. He'd heard it before. It belonged to Bull Jessup, Marshal of Collinsburg! Jessup!

A hard, savage grin split Jim Rudd's face. So that was the setup, eh? Well, it wasn't surprising. Jessup, under a mantle of righteousness as Marshal of Collinsburg, had all the instincts of a killer and a thief. Jim had figured the fellow that way from the first. And so the toughs of Collinsburg were tied in with the toughs of Gold Run!

That someone had finally guessed his true business did not surprise Jim any. In fact, he marveled that they had not guessed it before. At best, his pretense of being a meat hunter had been pretty flimsy.

Jim left his place of concealment, headed away from the clamor of the flat. His right leg was beginning to bother him now. Even through the fabric of his jeans, he could tell that the wound was not serious, little more than a surface gash at most. Yet it was bleeding considerably, for his jeans were growing soggy and he could feel the blood running down his leg into his boot. It wasn't going to make things any easier for him. He was a long way from Collinsburg and a long way from Gold Run—too far from either place to try and walk it with a wounded leg. What he had to have was a horse, no matter what desperate lengths he had to go to to get it. And there was only one way to get that horse.

Jim stopped, turned and listened. He could hear the renegades behind him. They had scattered and were beating the brush on all sides. Mounted men came his way, veered off and circled away again. And then a single rider, riding a wider circle, came almost directly at Jim, who crouched low, getting that rider against the sky. Jim could see the upper half of the horse against the darkening sky also and he knew another start of surprise.

To a saddle man, a well known horse has a personality akin to that of a human. Little peculiarities in gait, the manner of carrying its head, many other things besides mere coloring, mark a horse for a saddle man. And instantly Jim knew that here, heading right at him, was a horse he had ridden many a mile on, a horse he had valued highly, one he had known better than any other. It was the horse he had ridden into Collinsburg and which had been taken from him as part of the fine assessed by that weasel of a Judge Fleet.

Jim pursed his lips, gave a quick, warbling whistle. Instantly the advancing horse flung its head high and whickered softly in answer. And now Jim was positive as he slid his rifle to his shoulder.

The rider up on that horse threw a gun, shot toward the sound of the whistle. Shooting at a sound, he shot wide. Jim shot center, for he had his target clear and boldly limned. The rider poured limply out of the leather, and as the

horse reared aside, startled, Jim called, "Skeeter! Skeeter, hoss!"

Jim ran forward, stumbling with that wounded leg, which was growing a trifle numb. The horse snorted, uncertain. So Jim gave that warbling whistle again and the horse stood still, reaching questing nostrils as Jim came up. At the first touch of Jim's hand, the horse knew and it thrust an eager head against Jim's shoulder.

Jim limped over to where the rider had fallen, for he was remembering what John Lyle, the Wells Fargo agent in Collinsburg, had told him about one Brad Hoban, a pal of Bull Jessup's, not only riding the horse, in Jim's saddle, but also carrying Jim's guns. And Jim wanted those guns.

Brad Hoban was dead, and Jim found his guns. One of them was still in the leather, the other in Hoban's dead hand. Jim took them, as well as the belts and holsters strapped about Hoban's waist.

This was savage business and there was no place in it for squeamishness.

As Jim went into the saddle, his own saddle, he could hear the rush of riders pouring that way through the thickening night. Drawn by the shots, they were on his trail again. But Jim laughed grimly. He knew this horse under him.

He cut away directly at right angles, keeping to a walk so there would be a minimum of sound. He could hear Bull Jessup roaring, "Brad! Brad Hoban! Where is he, Brad?"

Jim slid across a ridge top, and then let his Skeeter horse run.

JOHN LYLE, the Wells Fargo agent in Collinsburg, had rather expected Jim to ride in this night, so when the knock sounded on his door and he opened it to show Jim Rudd standing there, Lyle was not surprised—not until he marked the drawn look about Jim's mouth, the fact that he was not carrying a pair of weighty saddle bags over his shoulder and that he limped badly as he came in. Then John Lyle knew that something had gone wrong.

"What happened, Jim?" he asked anxiously.

Jim sank into a chair. "If you've got a shot of whiskey handy it would help, John," he said huskily.

Lyle brought the whiskey, and after a good shot of it Jim pointed at his leg. "They tried a holdup," he said. "And in the ruckus they stuck a slug through me—there. It needs looking after."

John Lyle heated water, locked his door, and curtained his window with a blanket. He helped Jim bare the wound and then got busy at it. Half an hour later, with the wound thoroughly washed and cleansed, smeared with healing balsam oil and firmly bandaged, Jim gulped a steaming cup of coffee and told Lyle the story.

"You're certain Jessup and this Brad Hoban pal of his were in the crowd, Jim?" asked Lyle.

"Positive. I'd recognize that voice of Jessup's any time, anywhere. And I know Hoban was there because I drilled him and took his horse and saddle and guns. Because they were my horse, my saddle and my guns—the ones Judge Fleet relieved me of. I just rode in on that horse. So—there's no mistake, John."

"You can find that gold again?"

Jim nodded. "Sure of it, if one of them don't happen to stumble across it, which I doubt. Oh, the gold is safe enough. I'll go out after it tomorrow, after I've settled up a few chores."

"Such as—?"

"My little argument with Bull Jessup."

Lyle frowned worriedly. "You're in his own back yard here, Jim. The edge will all be his. Maybe we'd better wait until—"

"No more wait for me!" Jim cut in harshly. "Honest men always wait too long. And while they wait, the crooks move in and good men die. They're still waiting over in Gold Run, where two miners have already been murdered for their pokes. They'll keep on waiting until things get so bad they'll be forced to make a move. If they hadn't waited

so long, they wouldn't have to sneak their gold out of camp. Fine state of affairs when five hundred honest men are afraid to move because of a handful of crooks! No, I'm tired of waiting. They threw the chore right in my face tonight. From now on I ride it rough!"

Jim slept the rest of that night in John Lyle's spare bunk. In the morning his leg was stiff and sore and unwieldy, but his strength had largely returned. While Lyle cooked breakfast, Jim went over his recaptured guns, cleaning and oiling them. From time to time Lyle threw sober glances at Jim, and in the lean, harsh set of Jim's face he read a decision beyond changing. Lyle sighed. He had come to think a lot of this quiet cowboy.

The guns to his liking, Jim limped back and forth across the room, working the stiffness out of his wounded leg as much as possible. And such was the expression on John Lyle's face as they ate breakfast that Jim laughed grimly.

"Cheer up, John!" he said. "I'm not going to be any meek lamb in a slaughterhouse. I know my way about. The pressure will be on Jessup and his crowd."

"I surely hope so, Jim," said Lyle. "I'm no fighting man. I don't understand those things. But I'm certainly wishing you well, boy!"

THE ALLEY beside the Wells Fargo office was still in shadow, but the morning sun lay bright and full along the street of Collinsburg when Jim Rudd moved into it. Jim's plan of action was simple enough. Just find Jessup, call him and let the smoke roll.

A survey of the street from the alley mouth showed it drowsing and empty. So Jim slid quietly along to the big freight warehouse, pulled himself up over a sagging tail gate of a freight wagon standing out front and settled himself in this hiding place to wait and watch.

In time a certain amount of activity began along the street. From beyond the freight corrals a stage with a team of six rolled into sight and clattered along the street to the Western House Hotel, there to pick up mail and passengers for Gold Run. Soon it went storming out of town, white dust funnelling out behind. With the departure of the stage things quieted down again. As the sun climbed higher and reached into the freight wagon, Jim soaked it up gratefully, baking the stiffness out of that bad leg.

And then, throwing another glance along the street, he came vigilant and alert. Two men were coming along the street, apparently headed for the High Spot saloon. One was Bull Jessup. The other Dice Gault!

The presence of Dice Gault surprised Jim for a moment. Then he nodded to himself. Here was proof of one thing. Jessup was certainly tied up with the rough crowd in Gold Run, otherwise one of Ford Ludlum's right hand men would not be fraternizing with him in this manner. And no doubt Gault had been in that attempt to get him and the gold the night previous.

This hiked the odds—two to one—but Jim did not care. He slid quietly out of the wagon. It had been in the books from the first that he and Gault would eventually swap smoke.

JIM angled toward the approaching two, cutting across the street. The very openness of his advance was his best disguise. For one thing, neither Jessup nor Gault would be expecting him right here in Collinsburg in broad daylight. The logical surmise on their part would be that, after escaping last night from their attack, he would head back for Gold Run. And if Jessup or Gault glimpsed the tall, limping figure of a cowboy idling across the street, they did not mark it clearly until too late—until Jim had abruptly swung in before them, some twenty yards distant. His voice came at them, cold with finality:

"No chance to brush me here. My turn now. Get about it!"

Jessup and Gault came to a full and startled stop. They swung a wary step

or two apart. Jessup shoved his heavy head and shoulders forward, growling, "I gave you a floater once. You know what to expect by coming back!"

Jim Rudd laughed grimly. "You don't seem to understand, Jessup. You're not telling me—I'm telling *you*. Get about it!"

Gault understood, all right. Across the big ruffian's coarse face, still swollen and marked by the gun-whipping Jim Rudd had dealt him, flashed a look of desperate uncertainty. Gault was thinking that any man who dared boldly to call him and Bull Jessup right there in the street, where it was one to two, must be either a fool or a darn good shot. And Gault was badly worried because he could not figure which was the truth of the thing.

"The odds," he muttered to Jessup, "don't seem to be worrying him any. Which means something. Maybe we better go slow, Bull."

Jim Rudd had come a few steps closer. "Losing your nerve won't help you," he rapped. "I've been waiting all morning for this, and I mean to make an end to it now. For the last time, get to it!"

It was getting hold of Jessup now. The chill in Jim Rudd's eyes flayed him, and such was the icy purpose in them that Jessup knew there was no way out of this thing but the smoke road. And still Jessup hesitated.

Jim's voice lashed at him again. "You could use your fists and boots on me while I was being held helpless, Jessup. In a farce of law and order, you could steal my horse, my saddle, my guns and hand them over to a friend of yours, Brad Hoban. Well, I met Hoban last night, when the gang of you tried to gulch me, and now I've got my own back again. And I'm going to use 'em—*these!*" He tapped the butts of his guns.

It couldn't go on. The tension was too great. And it was Dice Gault who made the break. He gave a strangled gasp of desperation and went for his guns.

Jim Rudd shot him twice, without need of hurry, for Gault was slow and clumsy. And Gault walked a blind, staggering circle, pawing at his chest.

Jessup, crouched low, tried to get there quick by shooting through the open end of his holsters, a method deceptive and lethal when smoking down a man at very close range. But only by chance could a man hit another in that way at this distance. And this wasn't Bull Jessup's day to profit by any stroke of luck.

Jim Rudd's first slug for Jessup took Jessup right at the bridge of the nose and Jessup went down on his face as though hit by a thunderbolt. Gault, still staggering in that blind circle, tripped over him and went down also.

And Jim Rudd, holstering his reeking guns, limped swiftly clear of the street, went down the side of a long, squat building and out into the brush country beyond the edge of town. Here he struck a shallow wash, twisting away deeper into the sage. Behind him he could hear shouts, but they were still in town and not coming his way.

The wash broke into a little flat and here a plaintive whicker greeted him. Skeeter, picketed in the flat, stood with pricked ears, eagerly waiting his approach.

From a clump of stunted cottonwoods Jim dragged his saddle and blanket. Within a minute he had the horse saddled, ready to go. Jim swung up, favoring that bad leg. In the saddle he faced town, listening and watching. There was still some shouting going on back there, faint with distance now. But there were no signs of pursuit. Jim reined away and lifted Skeeter into a jog.

THE men who carried Dan Roscoe from the diggings up to town thought he was dead. He looked like a dead man, he was that limp, his face so sagging and ashen. And when Charley Bonham and Abe Stent and Betsy stepped out of Jigger Dangerfield's store, they came face to face with the group of savage-looking miners.

"Good Lord!" exclaimed Bonham. "It's Dan Roscoe! What happened?"

"Knifed in his sleep last night," growled a miner. "We found him in his tent."

They carried Dan Roscoe into Dangerfield's store, for here they had determined they would hold their meeting, and the body of Dan Roscoe was to be an object lesson to the unthinking and the hesitant. Yet, as they gently laid the limp figure down, a low moan broke from Dan Roscoe's lips and a miner yelled in sudden relief, "Dan's still alive! Thank God he is!"

And then Betsy Stent took charge. The miners, rough and with little knowledge of what to do, gave way willingly to this slim girl who seemed to know exactly what to do. They jumped to obey her orders. A thick pad of blankets was made and Dan Roscoe was carefully lifted upon them. Men raced to the hashhouse and came back with steaming pails of water. One anxious fellow, knowing but one cure-all, stampeded off and came back with three quarts of whiskey. Charley Bonham and Abe Stent knelt beside Betsy and helped her cut the bloodstained shirt away.

Dan Roscoe was known the length and breadth of Gold Run, liked and trusted by all who knew him. To the miners he was a leader, one who thought out their problems. To the others he was a four square man.

Cold fury began to run through the assembled miners. The word lynch began to sound. But here Jigger Dangerfield intervened.

"Go slow, boys," he warned. "You don't know who did this, or why. There are roughs in this camp, plenty of them. But you can't lynch them all, just in the hope of getting the guilty one. What we've got to do is bring Dan Roscoe through. Maybe he'll be able to tell us who used that knife on him."

The men stirred restlessly.

Betsy Stent spoke up. "He has to have a doctor. He may not live until the doctor gets here, but we must try. There's a doctor in Collinsburg—the closest one. Who'll go?"

A couple of young miners stepped forward. "We'll go, miss."

Jigger Dangerfield said, "I've got a buckboard and a fast team down at Peg-leg's corral. Go tell him I said to let you have the outfit, boys. Don't waste any time. Bring that doctor, if you have to hogtie him!"

The two young miners hurried out.

And presently all that could be done had been done. "He must not be moved," said Betsy. "He must be kept warm. And a teaspoon of whiskey now and then won't hurt. Besides that, we can only wait—and hope."

THE day ran on and the word of what had happened spread all up and down the diggings and through the town itself. Curious men tiptoed in and out of the store. In the dives of the town, shifty-eyed individuals grew restless and many of them eyed the open distances beyond town as though already wishing they were on their way. And it was into this scene of growing tension and uncertainty that Jim Rudd came riding.

He looked gaunt and drawn and tired. When he crossed the creek flats and found them deserted, he wondered. And he heard about it from Peg-leg at the corral. The bitter chill deepened in Jim's eyes as he listened. He left his weary bronc at the corral, with orders for its feeding and care, and limped along the street to Jigger Dangerfield's store and warehouse. He pushed through the crowd and into the clear, where Betsy Stent sat cross-legged, watching her patient.

The girl's eyes brightened as she looked at him. "Jim!" she said. "Jim Rudd!"

Jim knelt, looked long at the wounded man's face. "No idea who did it, of course?" he asked bleakly.

Abe Stent answered. "None at all, Jim. We're hoping, if we can bring Dan through, he'll be able to tell us. We've sent to Collinsburg for a doctor. But you—you look like you been through considerable yourself!"

Jim shrugged. "A little trouble. Nothing to worry about."

Betsy dropped a hand on his arm. "You're limping, Jim," she said softly. "You've been hurt."

That drawn weariness about Jim's eyes softened somewhat. "Just a scratch, Betsy. I'm doing all right. Do what you can for Dan."

There were miners in the crowd Jim recognized and from one to another he limped, giving out the Wells Fargo receipts for their gold.

"A little longer on this trip, Jim," said one of the miners. "Something happen?"

Jim explained tersely. "It held me up one day. I had to go back out and locate the gold and then wait for dark again to take it into Collinsburg. I'm not," he ended, with a grim smile, "exactly popular in that town, you know."

"I wonder how they got wise to you being our gold messenger?"

Jim shrugged. "They might just have guessed. Then again—last night I got a glimpse of that thief you boys ran out of Gold Run—hombre that was stealing food. Ketch, I think his name was. Well, I saw him in Collinsburg. I reckon he knew how the gold was going out and he might have spread the news, figuring to get even. Anyway, they knew. But it didn't do 'em any good this trip. Next time is another trip. We'll travel it when we get to it."

Jim went to the hashhouse, ate, then trudged out to the freight camp, where old Bill Stallings was standing guard. Jim handed a pair of six-shooters over and said, "Here are your guns back, Bill. Thanks for the loan. I don't need 'em now. Got my own back. I'm dead for sleep, I'm turning in. Keep your eyes open, and when the doctor from Collinsburg arrives, you wake me up."

THE hills were purple with dusk when Jim awoke with Bill Stallings shaking his shoulder. "The Doc from Collinsburg just pulled in, Jim," said Bill.

Jim arose, shook the sleep from his brain, tried his bad leg and found it better. The rest had helped. As he started for town, Bill Stallings moved with him. The old skinner had his guns buckled on.

"The night promises excitement," said Bill, "and I aim to be in on it."

The doctor was flustered and dusty. "Damndest ride I ever had in my life!" he fumed. "Those two miners were a pair of maniacs. Thought a dozen times they were going to break my neck for me. Now, where's that patient?"

Jigger Dangerfield had his hanging lamps aglow and by their light the doctor made his examination. He shrugged, reaching for his kit. "He's lost a lot of blood, almost too much. And the knife seems to have touched a lung. It will be close. I can't guarantee a thing. The fact that he's lasted this long helps, though."

The doctor injected a heart stimulant and a faint tinge of color showed in Dan Roscoe's grey cheeks. And then Dan's eyelids fluttered and lifted. Jim Rudd was instantly on his knees beside him. "I want him to speak one word, Doc," said Jim. "Can he stand it?"

The doctor hesitated, then nodded. "Try him."

Jim bent very low. "Dan, old boy, this is Jim—Jim Rudd. Who did it, Dan?"

Vague and slow understanding came to Dan Roscoe's eyes. His lips barely moved, but Jim caught the words. "Two of them. One was Deschutes—Ludlum's man. Tired—as hell—"

Dan Roscoe sighed and his eyes closed. Jim stood up. "Thanks, Doc," he said woodenly. "Don't spare anything. Just bring the boy through."

JIM started for the door, someone laid a hand on his arm. It was Betsy. She was not in shirt and overalls, now. She was in gingham, and there was a warm, irresistible charm about her. No man could have been insensible to it. Jim said, "I never realized how pretty you are, Betsy."

She flushed, her eyes sparkling. "Jim," she said, "you must not try and go this

alone. Why should you? This is something for the whole camp to concern itself with."

He knew what she meant and said, "Dan Roscoe is my good friend. And this camp—it is stirred up pretty well, Betsy, but it still isn't ready to act. The miners—most of them—have already drifted back to the diggings. They are thinking about gold again, not Dan Roscoe. The roughs have got me marked now. I didn't get this—" he touched his wounded leg—"from a busy bee. I'm carrying the fight to them before they get another chance."

She studied the grim lines of his face, the set of his jaw and the lurking anger far back in his eyes, and she knew she could not dissuade him. This man was upon a trail of his own decision. He'd ride it out to the end. Her touch on his arm became a soft, steady pressure.

"Be careful, Jim," she said, her breath catching. "Please. There are some of us who are—pretty worried."

Then she watched him go out, limping a little, but with a charging strength and purpose in the swing of his shoulders. She whispered, "Good luck, Jim!"

As Jim left the store, there was old Bill Stallings dropping in beside him. Jim turned on him, growling a little. The old skinner shrugged. "I was handling guns when you were a howling infant, my lad," said Bill. "I feel my youth stirring in me again. Lead on. I'm going along and you'll have to like it. It's barely possible, you know, that I'm interested in the happiness of someone who is more concerned with the safety of your confounded hide than you are yourself."

Jim smiled briefly. "All right," he said. "All right, Bill."

They moved the length of the brawling street. "If," said Bill Stallings plaintively, "I knew who you were looking for I might be able to help."

"The one called Mig Deschutes, mainly," growled Jim. "But in the end it will have to be Ludlum. He's the brain behind these things. I talked to a couple of freighters who had come through Purgatory Pass. Nobody stopped them, nobody bothered them. Picking up a couple of hundred dollars that way and knowing somebody was going to get tired of such robbery and sooner or later shoot their way through, probably struck Ludlum as being not worth the risk. Not when there were thousands of dollars in dust traveling around this camp in fat pokes, or going out to Collinsburg by another route than Purgatory. No, Bill, Ford Ludlum has turned to richer pickings. One of the gang who tried to get me, Bill, was Dice Gault."

"That sure ties Ludlum in tight," nodded Stallings. "Gault was Ludlum's man all the way. Well, it don't look like we're going to flush any coyotes right out here in the street. We might as well hit the saloons and gambling dives. The birds we're looking for go strong for the joints."

So they tried the joints, first on one side of the street, then the other. And they emerged from the last without having sighted any of the men they were after.

"Ludlum has a cabin," ventured Stallings. "I saw him standing in the door one day."

"We'll try it," said Jim grimly. "Let's go!"

THE cabin was dark and, as it stood at the edge of town, all around was darkness also. There was only the earth, smelling of heat and dust, the latent touch of vanished sunshine. And the sky, wide and lonely and touched with the vague star radiance.

They went up cautiously, both wise and wary in this sort of thing. Maybe Ludlum and his wolves were waiting for them, guessing perhaps that they would be coming that way. Maybe there was a trap.

Bill Stallings spoke of this possibility in a hoarse whisper. Jim answered, "Even so, I'm going in. This has to end one way or the other, and tonight is as good a time as any."

"Sure," agreed Bill. "We'll shove it

down their throats and make 'em like it!"

They circled the cabin, vague and shifting shadows in the darkness. And Jim became impatient with the silence, for there had been within him, from the moment he looked down on Dan Roscoe lying wounded and still, a cold and hard fury even worse than that which had carried him past Bull Jessup and Dice Gault back in Collinsburg.

For Dan Roscoe had been one of those rare good men, honest as the sunshine, genial and far-sighted, with real concern for others as well as for himself. And he had been cut down by that most cowardly of all attacks, a knife thrust in the dark.

They had completed the circle of the cabin and now stood but a yard or two from the door. Jim slid a gun free, put an open hand against the door and drove it open. And he slid through into the interior, ready for anything.

But the cabin was empty. He knew that immediately. It was something his searching senses told him with infallible sureness. "An empty buzzard's nest," he growled. "They've slipped us, Bill!"

They went out and back downtown again, prowling the street. "I'm trying to figure where," said Bill. "They may have some hangout back in the hills. Maybe they saw that, for a while, the temper of the camp was sharp, and decided to slide out long enough to let folks forget and cool off."

"Folks forget and cool off too damn easy!" Jim growled.

THEY went clear out to Peg-leg Smythe's corrals, and they stood there for a while, smoking, before turning back. And then they lingered, for drifting in through the night came the tattoo of approaching hoofs. They waited, curious.

The hoofs did not cut in to the corrals as they thought they would. Instead, at the far end of the street they swung away, grew muffled because of intervening buildings.

"Queer!" murmured Bill Stallings. "Why didn't they come on in to the corrals?"

Jim nodded. "Come on."

They circled buildings, listened. Faintly they heard those hoofs, pulled to a walk now. They went that way. The sound of hoofs was gone altogether. The rider had stopped. Jim closed in faster, moving as silently as possible. Out ahead some seventy-five yards, a brief flare of light shone as a cabin door was opened and closed. For a split-second the man entering the cabin was limned against the light and Bill Stallings exclaimed softly.

"That was Ketch, the one the miners ran out of camp!"

"It's working out," murmured Jim. "I think we've found our coyote nest, Bill. Look! You don't have to go any deeper into this, you know."

Old Bill cursed. "I never was one to tackle a trail unthinking, Jim, and I always want to see it through to the finish. Come on."

They closed in on the cabin. A careful circle of it showed that the lone window had been carefully blanketed on the inside. A casual passerby would have thought the place unoccupied. Jim, his ears pressed to the wall, finally heard in the mutter of voices one he wanted to hear, the smooth, clipped accents of Ford Ludlum.

Bill Stallings whispered, "I'll follow where you lead, Jim. But there is no profit in suicide. That crowd in there is jumpy. They got a glimpse of the massed spirit of the miners. They're scared of that sort of thing, for it means lynching. If we play this right, we can make 'em come out to us, instead of us going in after them. It is the only way we can even the odds."

"That's right," agreed Jim. "We'll try it. You over there, Bill, and me over here. Luck!"

Jim slid both guns from the leather and backed away far enough to be able to cover the door. Then he sent a harsh, penetrating call.

"All right, you murdering whelps! We've had enough of you. Come on out, or we burn it down over your heads!"

JIM knew that his words had carried to the interior of the cabin. But there was no response, only a drawn and breathless silence. And then, with deliberate intent, Jim threw two roaring shots at the door.

This brought immediate results, as he had figured it would. For as Bill Stallings had said, these men had glimpsed the first shadow of the lynch rope hovering over the camp. That the vigilante impulse of the miners had not yet quite jelled did not mean it might not do so at any time. And with this challenge coming in so startling out of the night, they had no means of guessing how much was behind it. But their imaginations would supply plenty of detail. If the miners were in force, they could not afford to stay in the cabin and attempt to make a stand. Like startled animals, they suddenly made their break.

The door slammed open, but there was only darkness, for they had extinguished the light. Jim shot at the sound and Bill Stallings followed suit. A man yelled wildly, and a gasping emptiness at the end of the cry told a grim story.

Shots came back at Jim, the measured cadence of a gunman throwing both guns in alternate action. And the shooter was steadily on the move, movement marked by the lancing gun flashes. He was working toward the corner of the cabin, evidently of a mind to break for freedom toward the rear.

Jim measured those flashes and shot for them. Once right at them, once to one side, once to the other. The last shot got results. He heard a guttural curse, explosive, as though driven from the renegade by a heavy blow.

The smooth roll of those two guns broke. A single gun spat back, but the flame of it was low down, close to the ground. And Jim hammered a shot in return and heard that grunt again, fainter this time.

There had been a rush of movement off to Jim's right, passing by Bill Stallings, and Bill had been shooting. Now Bill had stopped and Jim yelled at him anxiously. "Bill!"

"All right," growled Bill. "I got one. The other one headed out, hell bent. Listen!"

The silence, after those rattling explosions of gunfire, seemed to be filled with a vague roaring, soundless, yet real. Jim shook his head, knowing it was the excited pound of blood in his ears. Now he heard, fading into distance, the thud of running boots. And from over toward the center of town shouts of alarm were lifting.

"We'll take a look and then be on our way," said Jim. "Before the crowd gets here."

Jim went over to the cabin corner. He had a feeling about that one somehow. That guttural cursing had told him something. His prodding toe found what he was searching for and, bent low, he let the glow of a match live briefly. He straightened up, lips moving.

"Mig Deschutes. That makes it even, Dan old boy!"

There was that one just outside the door and Jim used another match. This one was Ketch, the renegade miner and thief. Over to the side, Bill Stallings said, "If Ludlum ain't there, then he's the one we heard running. This is the hombre they called Hunch."

"Deschutes and Ketch are here," gritted Jim. "The prize bird got away. And the chore isn't over until we get him, Bill."

"Then let's be out and looking," said Bill.

They were gone into the darkness before the crowd arrived. Stamping and snorting behind them was the horse which Ketch had come in on, riderless and masterless now, and edgy from the startling events of the night.

Jim spoke his relentless thoughts aloud. "He'll know we'll be after him and he'll have to have a horse. He'll be trying to work his way down to Peg-

leg's corrals. Cut for the street, Bill!"

They let other men, wondering and arguing about the gunfire, bunch in the light from window and door, while they kept to the shadows. And the hunch drove stronger and stronger at Jim that Ford Ludlum would make for the corrals. The man would hardly start into the wilderness on foot. His only chance for a real getaway was by saddle. And he wouldn't wait long to make his break.

"The corrals, Bill," murmured Jim. "He's bound to show up there."

So they worked their way along until the splintery fence barred their way, where the smell of horse flesh and cooling dust lay strong. "You watch here, Bill," said Jim. "I'm going around to the far side."

"You would!" grumbled Bill. "You know he won't come down the street. He'll be circling to come up in the dark on the outside. And you're going there to hog all the fun!"

"This is a thing that has been between Ludlum and me from the first," Jim replied simply. "He knew it and I knew it when I borrowed your guns and made him fork back the money he took from Charley Bonham and Abe Stent that first trip through Purgatory. Some things are set and there's no use fighting them. I hope it happens as you say. But you stay here!"

Jim circled. He was suddenly tired. Mortal combat, even though a matter of a few split-seconds, takes a lot out of a man. The tumult had been in Jim, was still there and working. He couldn't relax until this thing was over one way or another. And waiting now was going to be hard. He wanted to finish it, have done, and know that the slate had been wiped clean by a few bold, savage strokes.

THERE was plenty of racket going on now over across town. They had found the battlefield and the mortal wreckage of it. There would be toasts drunk this night, but not to the fallen.

A cold, pushing wind was beginning to pour down out of the wild and lonely hills. Jim braced himself against it, listening to every sound, his eyes searching the mocking blanket of darkness. Behind him, in the corral, a horse sneezed and the sound was like a thunder-clap.

As the minutes ticked away, a thread of uncertainty nagged at Jim Rudd. Maybe he had guessed this wrong! Maybe Ludlum had a bronc hid out somewhere up past his own cabin for just such an emergency as this. Maybe Ludlum had outguessed him completely and was, even at this moment, speeding away into the far night.

Jim swung his shoulders restlessly, then quieted, knowing that if he had guessed wrong, he'd simply have to wait until daylight to pick up the trail. And he made a swift resolve that if such was the case, he'd take that trail and ride it down if it led to the Canadian Border and beyond. No job was done until it was finished. And this one was not finished.

He was hungry for a smoke, but knew it would be a dead give-away. His bad leg ached and he found a sort of savage satisfaction in that fact. It made this all very, very real, instead of something formless and vague.

And then the crouched and prowling figure of a man nearly bumped right into him and recoiled swiftly, with a thin and startled and desperate cursing.

"Ludlum!" challenged Jim.

His answer was a shot, so close that the blare of report and blooming flame bludgeoned his ear drums and seared his eyes. And Jim knew a cold and dazing wonder that he had not been hit. He was moving before Ludlum could shoot again, moving desperately and dragging at his guns as he went.

Before he could get his left-hand gun clear, holster and gun were ripped from his fingers and the shock of pain ran up his arm from a hand lanced with splinters of spattering lead. The shock turned Jim half around, which was well. For Ludlum's third shot shredded the shirt across Jim's chest. Had Jim been face

on instead of sideways, that shot would have found his heart.

Jim felt his right elbow rock back again and again under the recoil of his gun which, after a space of seeming ages, was finally in action.

He shot with instinctive direction, much as a man might throw his fist. And he had the feeling that he was throwing physical blows, with a sharp emphasis behind each one. And not until the hammer clicked upon an empty, dead shell did he stop. And only then he realized how he had stumbled blindly through a pit of hell to safety beyond. For the surprise had been in favor of Ludlum, and Ludlum had had two shots, close up, before Jim had gotten into action. But where Ludlum had crouched there was emptiness now, except for something huddled black and still on the earth. And Jim knew finally that the thing was over. He backed up to the corral fence and leaned there, drained dry of all emotion, sick with the weariness of reaction.

CHARLEY BONHAM and Bill Stallings and Abe Stent were hitching up their mule teams to their wagons. Stocks in Jigger Dangerfield's store were getting low. The freight had to roll again.

It was a bright, crisp morning, and Jim Rudd came up through it, limping slightly.

"What's the Doc's latest report, Jim?" asked Abe Stent.

"Better and better. Dan's over the hump, all right."

Betsy came around from the head of the team, where she had been swinging the leaders into place. She was in shirt and overalls again, and she looked at Jim with wide and unreadable eyes.

This man with the grave, sun-leathered face and the quiet blue eyes had been a stalking terror but a few hours before. The whole town and diggings rang with excited talk about his exploits. But looking at him now, she found it very hard to believe, for he seemed so quiet and grave and gentle.

He met Betsy's glance and smiled, and there was a sudden youth about him. He moved up to her and for a moment had her to himself as Abe Stent ducked across the chain to hook up the traces of the off pointer.

"Is the dust of the freight road too strong in your blood for any hope of a change, Betsy?" he asked.

"I—why, I'm afraid I don't know what you mean, Jim." She knew what he meant, but a sudden shyness was in her, lowering her eyes, staining her face and throat.

"I've made better than five thousand as gold messenger," he said. "I'm out of a job now, though, for the boys know their pokes are safe. And I'm thinking of a place back in the Blue Hills. Water, grass, shelter and half a state to look out across. For five thousand, I can start a fair little herd. The country will do the rest. But it would be a lonely job, alone."

The color deepened in her cheeks. Then suddenly her head was up and her eyes met his. "I'd trade the dust and the long hot miles for the Blue Hills any time, Jim," she said.

He put out his hands and she laid both of hers in them. And there was no further need for words.

Adventure Cove

"GUEST ANNOUNCER"

By Wesley W. Morgan

I WAS working as radio announcer at Station WMAI. It was 12:15 a.m. in February 1941, and I was carrying on with our nightly "Midnight Dancing Party." It was raining like Hades outside, and I had reluctantly settled down for the remaining forty-five minute program of "rug-cutting jive" and the like, before we would go off the air at one and I could go home.

There were only two of us at the station, myself and Jerry, the operator and technician. It was his job to keep static off the program and pitch the right frequency. Right now he was having a pretty easy job, because the popular recordings needed little checking.

About 12:20 the telephone brought a message from the police station. Sergeant David said that a local filling station had been held up and robbed, and that one of the attendants had been shot and killed. He wanted me to broadcast an alarm to the radio listeners to be on the lookout for the killer. The description read that he was about five-feet-ten, weighed about a hundred and sixty pounds, had black hair, and was last seen wearing a black overcoat.

For a routine plug, I told the Sergeant it would be on the air in thirty seconds. Hanging up, I went over to the turn table and cut right in the middle of Bob Crosby's "There'll Be Some Changes Made." Thirty-five seconds

later and I had informed the listeners that a desperate killer was in our town's midst, and that any possible help from them would be appreciated by the police department.

Well, that was that, I thought. Another good turn rendered by old alma mater ether waves. With a grin at Jerry through the transparent sound-proof glass of his control room, I put the needle down on Clyde McCoy's "Bugles In The Sky."

At exactly 12:30 I gave the time, name of station and content of program. I was just getting ready to put the recording on that would start the last half of the program when I looked up and saw a man who so closely fitted the "five-foot-ten, eyes of black and coat of the same," that I was struck dumb. He was standing just outside the studio room when I first noticed him, but by the time I realized just who he actually was, he was inside the room with me. There he stood facing me, with a pistol in his hand.

I dropped the needle on Benny Goodman's "I Want To Be Happy" and drowned out the castanetting of my knees. With a dirty look on his face he came over to where I stood and motioned for me to step back into a corner. Surely he wasn't going to shoot me with 20,000 listeners! Not that, at the time, I felt at all like bragging about the exact number!

Standing me in the corner, he whispered tightly, "All right, you started this —now you are going to get me out of it! Tell your pal over there," indicating Jerry, "to behave himself and neither of you will get hurt."

JERRY had already taken the situation in hand and I don't think he intended giving any opposition. He later said the only reason he didn't interfere was because of my welfare, but —well, maybe so.

Anyway, after our intruder saw he wasn't opposed, he turned to me.

"What do you want?" I whispered weakly.

"You're going to tell the people that I have been captured by the police and have been taken to jail. The police will hear of it then and relax a little, and give me a chance to get away. Meantime, I'll stay here until the excitement dies down. Who'd think of looking for me here?"

I was forced to agree with him. Who *would* think of searching for a hold-up hoodlum at a radio station? And although I could see no apparent danger to myself, I wished I was home in bed.

Naturally, with a gun in my side, I didn't find it difficult to comply with his wish—if my quavering voice wouldn't give me away.

As best as I could get it out, my "notice of capture" went like this:

"Ladies and gentlemen, due to the heroic work of our citizens, the filling station robber has been apprehended and turned over to the police. . . . Now that that's over, we can get along with our dancing party. Requests have been high for 'I'll Never Smile Again,' so here it is—by Tommy Dorsey."

The killer was standing over me with a satisfying grin. Motioning me to go on with the show, he sat down in a nearby chair and watched a very frightened radio announcer go through his act.

Jerry, all this time, had been quiet because, although his room is sound proof, it isn't bullet proof. So he just sat there twisting dials and checking instruments. I did notice that he changed more things around in five minutes than I had ever seen him do in a whole broadcast. Must be having trouble with the rain and lightning, I thought, although had I looked out at the time, I would now have seen a clear sky.

Well, at 12:45 I picked up the mike, and my visitor stood up and menaced me with his gun. With a whispered, "Station break," to him, I again gave the time and nature of program.

Just after I had put Gene Krupa's

"Drummer Boy" on the machine, the telephone rang outside the studio. After debating with himself a moment, the unwanted visitor motioned for me to answer it. Thinking it possible that this was an opportunity for me to do something about getting rid of "my friend," I eagerly stepped out to answer it.

However, this was not his intention. He walked out of the studio with me and stood scant inches away as I picked up the receiver.

THE voice that came over the wire was that of Ted Sumner, who worked out at the transmitting station where the power for the station is handled.

"For Pete's sake, Wes, what is the matter with Jerry? His frequency-pitch sounds like Hitler's throwing a blitzkrieg up there! Tell him he is going to bust a few transformers out here and FCC is going to have his license if—"

"I am sorry, sir," I broke in, "but we don't have 'It's a Sin to Tell a Lie,' but I will play 'You've Got Me Out on a Limb.' Not at all—you're welcome—goodbye."

Without giving Ted a chance to answer, I hung up and walked over to the shelf to get his "request." With a look of "That's good—keep smart, buddy, and you won't get hurt," the murderer returned to his chair and I to my turn table.

About 12:55, I heard several feet trampling in the hall outside. With a jump, the culprit was up, his gun in hand. The best I could do at seeing several uniformed true "blue" friends was to give a deep, soul-satisfying sigh.

Ducking behind the nearest table, I waited for the gunplay I expected would follow. But this time my expectations did not come true. My gunman "pal" had decided that he was outnumbered and gave up without a fight.

Collecting my wits, I would have liked to turn hero, as a detective always does when he catches a criminal, and tell him how he had come to be captured, but he didn't seem to be interested. I could have told him that Jerry had used his head and twisted all those many dials for a purpose, that of attracting Ted's attention at the sub-station, so he, in turn, would contact me. Ted is a great pal of mine and he knows I wouldn't joke where somebody's job is at stake. So he had put two and two together and got the answer that something was suddenly wrong at the studio. Then he had done the thing he thought best—phoned the police.

Yes, there was a little piece in the paper the next morning about how "The alert radio men, on their toes, apprehended one of the city's most desperate criminals."

However, to me, the first recording that I put on the "dancing party" turn table the next night sounded much sweeter. It was the only one, out of the many, that expressed my true feelings. It was "It's All Over Now." It didn't matter whose band played it, as long as I could announce it without interference!

SENOR DON COYOTE

By Joe Brennan

FOR many years I managed to keep body and soul together by trapping in that section of the High Sierras which sprawls down to the edge of Owens Valley. My traps netted me coyotes chiefly, with an occasional red

fox. I really began to believe that I knew all the ways and wiles of *Don Coyote*. Lord knows I certainly shipped enough of their skins to the three big Western fur buyers to indicate that I had a first hand knowledge of the beasties!

I knew them for their sly elusiveness and I knew them for their cunning. On top of that, I always branded them as being jammed from brush to snout with cowardice. Only when they were cornered had I ever seen them show any real fight.

My method of killing them, upon finding them in my traps, was the usual thing of looping a wire noose over their heads and cinching it down to the strangulation point on their necks. When the thrashing ceased, it was always simple to put my knee over the region of the heart and press till all life was gone. In this manner I was assured of having an undamaged pelt for the market.

But I had to go away from my own stomping grounds to learn that there are coyotes *and* coyotes!

They say that most seamen harbor a deep yen to some day own a chicken ranch far inland. Well, by the same token, I guess most trappers secretly dream of going to sea. So, when a well-to-do friend of mine whom I used to take deer hunting asked me to join him on a month's cruise south from San Pedro, I jumped at the chance. I wrote him in hurry-up style that I would be on hand at the Watchorn Basin the following Wednesday.

It was a midsummer morning as we drew away from the San Pedro lighthouse. Our long sleek schooner slipped through the choppy water like a thing alive. Even though strictly a landlubber, I could appreciate the grace of it all.

"We'll be fishing off the Coronados Islands tomorrow," grinned Doc, my friend and owner of the boat. "I'll square up for the good hunting you've shown me."

"As long as we're on the *go* I won't moan," I laughed. "And I'll have skins out of my mind for a change."

The other three members of our crew ribbed me a little about my soon having a bellyful of the ocean. Then they turned to showing me how to handle canvas.

Well, we did fish off the Coronados group that next afternoon. We hooked and landed several big yellowtail, then made our way back some ten miles to San Diego. The following morning, armed with the necessary clearance papers and seamen's certificates, we started our cruise for points along the coast of Baja California. Ensenada, some seventy miles due south, was our next destination.

It was a leisurely and carefree cruise that we made down that coast. The further south we went, the better the fishing became. It encouraged us to push on with our southerly course, so we spent but one day in Ensenada's bay.

We sailed on down the barren, rocky line, tarrying but briefly at points such as the lonely Island of San Martin, Rosario Bay, San Geronimo Island and Canoas Point. Those places were bare and desolate in every respect. At Canoas Point we ceased hugging the shore and cut out for Cedros Island. We had learned from a passing tuna clipper that the fishing would be excellent in that neighborhood.

The advice proved fine as far as the fishing was concerned, but Cedros Island proved to be just one more place where there was no place to land. Frankly, I was developing one terrific mania for the feel of firm ground under my feet again. I was having a grand time, but the call for solid earth was pounding at my legs.

Doc sensed it, I imagine, for he volunteered, "We'll be going ashore when we reach Magdalena Bay."

That was music to my ears until I checked on the map and found the Bay of Magdalena to be approximately four hundred miles farther south. Well, I could wait.

WE ultimately reached the wind-swept place, and as desolate and forsaken as it appeared, it was still *land* to me. The Port Captain studied our papers and gave us the "all clear" signal. I couldn't get ashore fast enough.

A little later, just as we were leaving the customs office with the Port Captain, a group of hurrying natives caught my eye. They were carrying a man in a makeshift stretcher arrangement—a mere blanket held at the ends. Many excited people were rushing up, asking questions, looking at the man, then jabbering in a way that told of their horror.

Doc, the only one in our party who spoke Spanish, turned to the captain and said something like, "What do you make of it?"

The officer cocked an ear, listened intently, then made a lengthy explanation. Doc, in turn, said to me, "He says it's another coyote case. They're bad this year. Starving."

It didn't make sense in my book at all. Speaking to Doc, I said, "Ask the Cap if he doesn't mean *wolves?*"

My wealthy interpreter got nothing but headshakes out of the captain and the insistence of, "*Los coyotes, señor—coyotes!*"

My interest by this time was more than skyrocketing. I drove Doc into getting all the details about these so-called voracious coyotes. It all sounded like a lot of mythology to me, but the obvious sincerity of these people stirred me on to at least investigating.

I learned that all the area between the shore and the Llano de La Magdalena was literally overrun with coyotes. I got Doc to find out where it might be best for me to look into the situation. You should have seen the captain throw up his hands at the very idea of my wanting to check on it.

But he did finally break down to explain that the animals were to be found particularly in the country a few miles north around Los Isloles. He even went so far as to draw a map on the back of an envelope to show the lay of the land.

On our way back to the boat I convinced Doc that I'd like to camp back in that country for a couple of days to investigate all that I heard. For one thing, I had developed an obsession for some immovable ground under my feet; for another, I was wondering if I had found an unlimited supply source of skins.

No sooner said than done. Good old Doc fixed me up with the necessary camping equipment and cruised several miles up the inlet, where he put me ashore. He agreed to pick me up again on the following morning. As bleak and forbidding as that country looked to me, I was elated at once more making my way on solid soil.

AS NEARLY as I could make out, that district bordering the bay consisted of numerous little sandy beaches broken up by thickets of thorny cacti which grew almost to the water's edge. Imagining that the coyotes would be more apt to be found farther inland, toward the desert country, I started to pack in. My mind was made up to check up on Mr. Coyote—his population, his disposition, and his kind of fur. It smacked of some sort of bonanza.

Almost immediately I crossed onto undeniable coyote trails running in every direction. Many of the tracks were new, and many of them were immense. It still didn't make sense, for I had seen no indication of game of any kind which they could subsist on.

Then before I had packed very far, gaunt, starved-looking coyotes began to slink on ahead of me. They would slip along through the tangle and bark sharply at me over their shoulders. All this was new to me, for the beasts of my Sierra country rarely show themselves, let alone yip right out in full view. I was astonished at the number of them, but was disappointed at what I could see of their pelts. They certainly didn't look to be in good condition. Too, they

were small and stringy in comparison with those of the high altitudes at home.

The more I saw of them, the more I scouted the idea of their being apt to attack a man. The only thing that made me wonder was the fact that I was hearing their yipping and yapping on all sides—*surrounded*-like! It was enough to make me glance down reassuringly at the .303 Savage under my arm. Meanwhile, I continued to tramp on in quest of the owners of some of those mammoth tracks I was seeing.

The farther inland I progressed, the less there was in the way of cacti and greasewood. In that the sun was rapidly westering, I made camp at the mouth of a draw, where I could get a good view of any and all animals that might pass. The area looked like something of an old clearing—a thing that pleased me by this time because I figured the coyotes would get even bolder after nightfall.

Frankly, I was a little ashamed over my vague fears that the sorry-looking beasts might work up enough courage to pay me a visit right in camp. Such a thing was unheard of in my own mountain country.

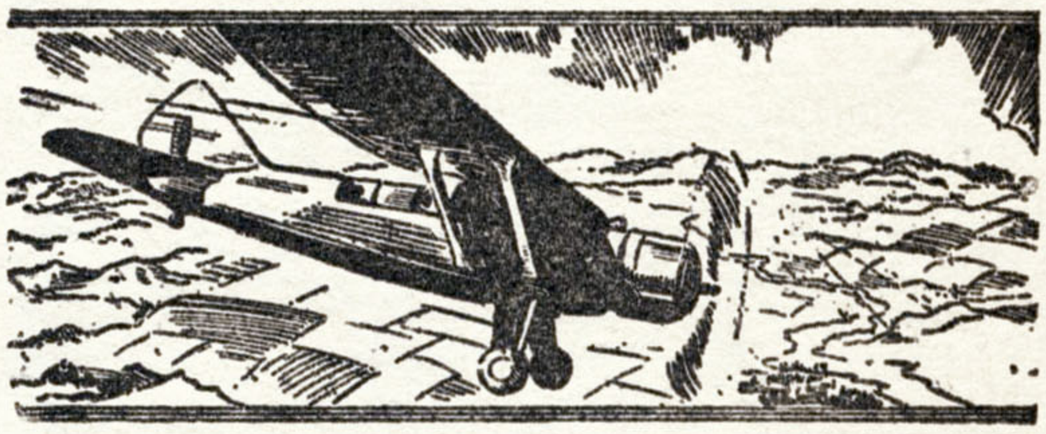
In any event, I fetched myself up on the right side of a steaming plate of canned beans, some healthy slices of bacon and a pot of coffee. And, sure enough, as the shadows lengthened and the aroma of my cooking spread out into the surrounding mesquite, the sporadic barking of the coyotes soon developed into a full-blown chorus from all sides. I even went so far as to take the safety off my rifle and placed it close at my side. They grew bolder and bolder to the point where they stood in plain view, yapped savagely at me, then slunk back into the gloom. By this time I had even rechecked on my .38 Colt Police Positive and held it in readiness. By now, I was wishing for a few hand grenades!

WORKING against time and suspecting that one of the bigger brutes might yet be coaxed out, I placed a chunk of liver in an open spot about twenty yards in front of the tent. Believe me when I tell you that I but turned my back and walked half the distance to camp when a rush from the undergrowth made me whirl around just in time to see two lean beasts snap it up on the run. The wraithlike things gave me the jumps. I knew then that these were truly starving coyotes. I also knew that it would be pointless to put any more food out there. I'd have coyotes whether I wanted them or not.

My tiny waterproof tepee looked like a good precaution against the sudden rain squalls that descend upon that country, but it offered little promise as a haven from beasts that might attack. I had planned to catch about forty winks in order to awaken after midnight to see what I could see by the light of the big moon which the almanac guaranteed. But I hadn't counted on such aggressive coyotes.

I made as big a fire as I dared, then crawled into the tepee hoping some measure of sleep would come to me. But, quite to the contrary, it was my lot to remain owly-eyed for long and long, while my fire died down, and some of my courage with it.

Soon I was lying on my stomach and watching intently through the small door. As my eyes adjusted themselves to the black night, I could faintly make out the occasional form of one or more



of the moving brutes. When they remained stationary I could see nothing. Movement was the only thing that could give me clues to their actual whereabouts. As the fire's illumination waned, the shadowy shapes loomed closer.

(Continued on page 154)

Congo Drums

By Rolland Lynch

LIKE jackals slinking in the night, the infiltration of Africa had begun. With half of Europe bleeding under the hob-nailed heels of dictatorship, these same war lords had turned loose their organizers on the possessions of conquered countries. The Belgian Congo was the rich plum.

Through the mystic jungle and velds, the native drums carried the word. "Men who speak in a guttural tongue come," said the drums. "The Great White King is dying and another is being born. Hail the Old King—long live the new!"

The loyal subjects of the Belgian Congo were aroused to this new danger. Overseer and derelict alike girded for the battle that was to come. The status quo must be preserved at any cost. They must not let the natives be duped by the false and treacherous promises of the dictator's men. But despite all their efforts, uprisings flared. Down with the subjects of the dying king! Up with the new!

And so the unwritten call went out to the loyal subjects to gather at Riba Riba, the jungle outpost at the base of Koakumu Mountain. Come and renew your allegiance to the sovereign crown. Help fight these men who would conquer all Africa and grind it under their ruthless heels, as they had done to half the peoples of Europe.

The small safari made its way along the jungle trail. Massive Black Mike Collins was in the lead. Behind the Irishman came the Cockney, Dibby Cartwright, and the Scot, Kiltie McRae. They, like hundreds of others, were answering the call. Derelicts, traders in ivory, they nevertheless were loyal to the Crown. They were headed for Riba Riba to do their bit.

With the late afternoon heat hanging relentlessly on, the safari dipped down toward the muttering Congo River. The flat report of a rifle shattered the jungle quiet and stopped the men in their tracks. The three derelicts swore and readied their rifles, fever-bright eyes seeking to pierce the tangled undergrowth.

The blacks of the small safari put down their *posho* boxes and crouched behind them, eyes rolling with fright.

The jungle stood still. It was the rule of this ruthless land—when in doubt, don't move! Both human and animal life obeyed that rule.

Slowly life took up again. Buzzing insects returned to their devilments. A monkey chattered and a jinn-bird bawled. The late afternoon heat droned oppressively on.

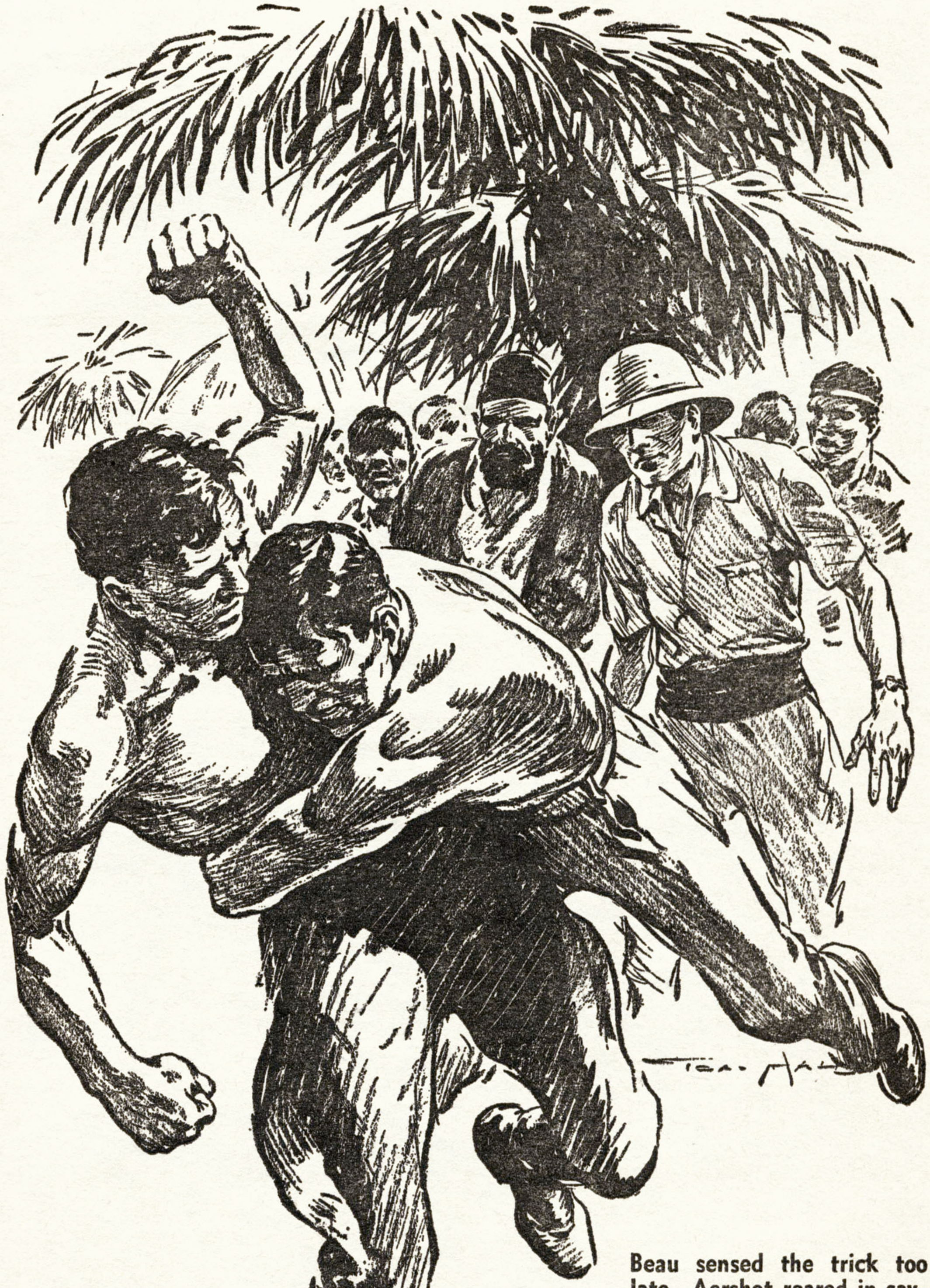
Dibby Cartwright, the little Cockney, muttered, "I guess we ain't the target."

Black Mike Collins nodded his shaggy head. "It came from the river. From the sound, something's gone to join its patron saint."

"Hoot!" agreed Kiltie MacRae, the ruddy Scotchman. "I heard naught but the shot. There is usually a scream to something that's been hit."

With curiosity shining in their watery eyes, the three ivory hunters went forward. They kept bunched together, rifles ready. The blacks shouldered their burdens and crowded up, wanting the protection of the white men's spears which spoke thunder.

Nothing barred their way as they pushed cautiously through the lush growth.



Beau sensed the trick too late. Aershot roared in savage satisfaction, crushing Beau close.

THE Congo River was a low murmur against the jungle's hum. As the elephant trail widened onto the banks of the turbid stream, Black Mike Collins spread his long arms to halt his companions.

A man lay huddled at the water's edge, his immaculate whites splotched with slimy mud. His helmet, lying near his blond head, did not show the sweat stains of long usage. A knife was stuck in the ground near his outstretched hand. Mike rolled the figure over with his foot.

"American," said Dibby Cartwright thinly. "Lookin' like 'e's just stepped out from waitin' on 'is Majesty the King."

"*Baturi*—high class white," conceded Black Mike. "Foine linen he wears, and a Garboon man, from the looks of his knife."

Kiltie MacRae clucked his tongue. "Such extravagance! He would be from the French Congo Slave Coast." He squatted down to peer closely at the knife. "Hoot, an' I've always wanted a Garboon knife. MacRae, 'tis here for the takin'!"

"Tyke your blinkin' 'ands off it!" snapped Dibby. "We'll stew in hell, robbin' the dead like this. Stop, I say!" He spat through his fingers in the superstitious fashion of the natives.

"'E's beyond mindin'," growled the Scot and reached for the knife's shaft.

Then the three of them were reeling back. For the inert man had suddenly come to life. He rolled unsteadily to his feet, an ugly Luger magically appearing from a shoulder holster.

"Stand where you are!" he barked.

Safari blacks dropped their burdens and cowered back. They began to chant weirdly to ward off this ghost. Color drained from the quinine complexions of the derelict ivory hunters.

"Gor blimey!" cursed the little Cockney. "Lively corpse, *I* calls him!"

Black Mike's huge shoulders settled. "And quick with a gun. Too quick for a *guoa rubu*—a newcomer."

"It's rum luck," mourned the Scotchman. "Just as I was to lift a Garbon knife—and for nothin'!"

The American couldn't suppress a grin at that. And here in the gathering darkness it was like a line of quicksilver streaking across the bronze of his handsome face. But his voice remained cold as he asked, "What flag do you follow?"

Black Mike drew himself up proudly. "The Crown and tricolor of Belgium," he said.

"How do I know that?" snapped the American. "You can't trust anybody these days."

Black Mike's eyelids lowered. "We could have shot you easy if we had wanted to kill you."

"That's right, Governor," said Dibby.

Slowly, the American returned his weapon to his hideout and replaced his knife in its belted sheathe. "You're right," he admitted. "I guess I'm too jumpy. I've had to kill one guy since debarking on the Slave Coast. Perhaps I'll have to kill more. Someone is mighty anxious that I don't reach Riba Riba in the Bakumu country."

"Riba Riba?" echoed Black Mike. "We're headin' there, be gorry! Every patriot of the Congo is answering its call. Drums thump of nothing else. They say the Germans are trying to organize the country there as they have Vaal River and Potchefstroom. They've got to be stopped."

"Aye!" nodded Kiltie MacRae. "And I ken they will be." He patted his rifle.

THE young American scrubbed the back of his neck with his hand. "The bullet laid a lump beside my ear," he said ruefully. "I was playing *buto*—dead—for a return shot when you came down the trail. My luck's holding. I was missed once before. If the outposts continue to be such rotten shots, I'll get to Riba Riba!"

"Anxious as a Londonderry maid for a kiss, you are," said Dibby narrowly. "Blimey if I ain't seen you somewheres! The Soudan—Bechuanaland—perhaps

Cape Town?" he said speculatively.

"I'm Beau Cordner," said the American. "Son of John Cordner, overseer of Bakumu, appointed to his post by H. M. Stanley after the forming of the Association of the Belgium Congo Free State by King Leopold in 1900. I've been traveling. The States, England, France—"

"Erin go braugh!" muttered Black Mike. "Me an' John Cordner were thicker than Dublin thieves. A grand man. I remember he had vast holdings in the Bakumu at the Annexation by Leopold. Yank or no, the King appointed him overseer, because he could handle the Bangala savages. He's held up under his commission like a wearer o' the green. So his spalpeen's returnin' to see him on the rush, eh?"

Again that brittle coldness was in Beau Cordner's voice. "I've been called back. Special communique from the Government in Exile making me temporary overseer. What's happened to my father?"

There was no answer. And during the silence night shut down with tropic suddenness. In the darkness, with safari blacks chanting monotonously, the three derelict whites looked at one another and at Beau Cordner. Worry and tension showed in the lines of the American's face.

"'E could be sick," muttered the Cockney. "Wanting you to take over until he gets back on his feet."

Black Mike laid his big-knuckled hand on the American's broad shoulder. "John is all right," he said consolingly. "He's tougher than a County Cork blacksmith. What the spit of a Londoner says is true. He'll be wantin' you until he gets well." Unfortunately, his words lacked conviction.

Beau Cordner shook his head. "There's more to it than that," he said darkly. "The dregs of the jungle are on the way to Riba Riba, joining up with the Germans. The Free State harbors more criminals than the whole of Africa. Law has been neglected here but for the infrequent visits of the Luxemburg Patrol, and even they now are torn between loyalty to their puppet government and the one in exile."

Black Mike nodded sagely. "Right, lad, but don't let the thought of it turn your heart. There are those of us in this country who will fight to see it remain free. No dictator moves in here. They'd bleed the place dry. They want copper, tin and iron for their fighting natives, but they shan't get it. We'll go on to Riba Riba together. Four are better than one. John Cordner was our friend, and a friend of the Bangalas. They will stay loyal to the flag. This is going to be more fun than the time we cheated the stewin' kettle of the Kampbomba in Northern Rhodesia."

"Right as rain, Governor!" said Dibby Cartwright. "Hell! We ain't been in a fight since breakfast!"

"Loafing is too extravagant," said Kiltie MacRae. "Fightin' for a thrifty mon, with a wee bit o' loot when the brawlin's done."

BEAU CORDNER stared at the gloom-shrouded derelicts. The warmth of friendship shot through him. For friendship was at a premium in this dark country and during these dark times. Huge, powerful black Mike Collins—sandy, stocky Kiltie MacRae—short, wiry Dibby Cartwright. Tropical tramps—but men, for all that, in a world aflame with the lust for power.

But Beau couldn't wait to travel their leisurely way to Riba Riba. Their offer to have him accompany them was gratifying and he was grateful to know he would have friends in a town fast filling with the scum of the jungle, the reasonless mob that was being wielded into Prussian might and arrogance. But his orders were to proceed with caution and avoid, if possible, an open outbreak of war. He was to gather information for the prosecution of the fifth columnists in a democratic way. For only in that way could control be maintained over the natives.

Beau thought of Riba Riba as he had

known it. The scatter of brush huts, the warehouses with their corrugated roofs. In the days before he had left for the outside world, the dim trails had known naught but the pad of the Bangalas' bare feet. Regal men with their tattooed cheeks and bone earrings. He remembered their grunting speech. The compounds where black children played. Supple maidens grinding wild grain. Bangala warriors, brilliantly painted, at their tribal dances. The musty smell of oil palm and the rank odor of drying copra. All the charm of his boyhood paraded before him now.

But now there was war. And here was a country rich in oil, minerals and diamonds. A country that could supply the necessities of half the world. A rich prize indeed to men bent on conquering all peoples.

Finally, Beau said, "I'd like to accept your offer, but I've got to hurry. If something's happened to my father, the sooner I take over the better. Belgium may be overrun with the Nazi horde, but the Congo will never submit to that kind of tyranny."

"I know your feelings," said Black Mike. "You're a spalpeen o' John's. He saved my life once—kept my head from whitenin' atop a village *nogo* pole. Black Mike will be around, lad, willing to lend a hand to John Cordner's boy and throw a wrench at dictatorships."

"Thanks," muttered Beau feelingly. "I'm going on, with eyes in the back of my head."

"Watch yer pitfalls," cautioned Dibby. Then, with a withering glance at Kiltie MacRae: "Keep your hand near your bloody knife—lest a bloomin' grave-robber lift it."

"If anything happens to me," said Beau soberly, "I would like MacRae to have my Garboon kife. *Auo juo*—goodbye!"

He picked up his cork helmet and jammed it on his head. Saluting, he turned into the darkness.

He went rapidly, leaving the three staring after him.

AS BEAU CORDNER slogged along the slimy banks of the Congo, the Government-in-Exile's sealed order making him temporary overseer weighed heavily in his pocket. These outposts he had come past were far from a cold sign to him. They were Fifth Columnists. He knew the jungle, where even the preying were preyed upon, and half the world was preying on the other half now. What Black Mike Collins had said—"Don't let the thought of it turn your heart"—was a warning. So long as there were men like Mike Collins, there would always be a Belgium Congo Free State. But ahead in Riba Riba—

There he would find traders in vice, adventurers, derelicts, *hausas*, those conniving merchants of the West African Coast, each looking at his share of the loot that would be promised by the Nazis. All willing to kill for a price—killers willing to listen to killers. If the situation wasn't immediately brought under control, there would be another revolt like that historical uprising of the Batatelas.

Among the gathering would be those fifth columnists who had set these outposts for Beau. And this thought brought back thoughts of his father. How would he find him? Sick? Shorn of his power because of some trumped up malfeasance of office, forcefully ejected and in exile? Dead—? Beau quickly put this last thought from his mind. It choked him up to think of it. John Cordner, friend of the Bangala, kindly, sympathetic, understanding—who would harm him? Yet this imperial document he carried was like a formal announcement of his death.

Weighted down with these thoughts, alert to the darkness that hid sudden death, Beau made his way along the sinuous course of the Congo. He recognized landmarks along the river, places he had explored in his younger days. He loved this land like no other on earth, for the beat of the drums was in his pulse and the witchery of the tropics was ingrained. Here was a strong country, where only the strong survived. It was

his home. Red blood had been shed here to make this country free. More would be shed, if necessary, to keep it so.

With broad shoulders sagging wearily, he took a trail onto higher ground. At the brink of the rise he stopped, his lean brown hands plunged deep in his coat pockets. His tired eyes widened as he surveyed the scene.

Belly-deep papyrus grass stretched across this jungle-locked veld to the dark line that was the Koakumu Mountains. The grass land had a thousand eyes. Yellow eyes that flickered and danced. Candlenut torches. They were everywhere, vying with the low-flung stars and the symbolic Southern Cross. The torches marked the compounds of the natives who had come to fear that the Great King was dead and another had been born.

Wearily, Beau Cordner went on, following a well defined trail. His lips curved bitterly downward. The charm and indolence of Riba Riba was gone, replaced now by widely different political opinions, torn by promises that were lies; torn by the insidious propaganda of a dictator who preached freedom of men so that he himself might enslave them.

As he neared the village, the clamor of the place rushed out at him. It was like a file to his nerves. Beau knew that among the new arrivals were men possessing shrewd instincts; some who would work their way to affluence; some who would seek the shortest route to power by guile and death-dealings. Beau's experience dictated that in such a gathering there must be jackals. And, somehow, these scavengers must be weeded out, just as the jungle weeded out the weak.

DARKNESS was like a velvet cloak hiding the fungus growth of Riba Riba as he strode into the village. There were new grass-sided huts with corrugated roofs. Grog shops! The muted strains of sensuous native strings came from them.

Fists clenched, Beau surged with the motley mob flooding up and down what passed for a street. There were turbaned men from the Sudan, black beards bristling. Traders from the coast in burnouse and flowing white cloaks. Derelicts in tropical shorts and blouses and helmets. French breeds in kepis and wide sashes, after the fashion of their Foreign Legion. It was the flotsam of the jungle.

The street was crowded with ox carts and those drawn by the native red buffalo. They carried lumber and mining machinery, and were driven by a dozen different creeds, men who cursed in a dozen different languages as they wove in and out in the crowd.

Evil stalked the shadows where once squatted warriors at their evening smokes of *haura* weed. Shrill-voiced merchants hawked their wares from the council compound where once beat tribal drums. Beau was conscious of his fine linen being out of place amid the sweat-stained garments of these jungle men. He shouldered away from the touch of a dusky girl clad in sarong and pushed on.

The far end of the village was his goal. There was the shed housing the offices of his father. He dreaded every step now, afraid of what he might find. He recognized no one along the street, but when he came to the Van Crique warehouse, he paused. Van was behind his desk, his iron-grey head bent over some books. On shelves behind him lay the commissary of this village. Van Crique served as storekeeper while running his ivory trade. Beau turned in.

"Hello," he said. "Things are certainly humming around here."

Slowly, the pinched face of the storekeeper lifted. His eyes narrowed and he paled a little beneath the mahogany color of his skin. "Beau Cordner!" he breathed hoarsely.

Listening to the clamor of the village, Beau missed the look of surprise and fear in the eyes of the Belgian.

"Yes," he said. "And I'm not so sure I'm glad to be back, lucky as I am to be here."

The Belgian's face was shrewd.

Van regarded him sharply. "Which way did you come?"

His question brought a frown to Beau's forehead. "Up the Congo. Why?"

The Belgian wiped his thin, sweat-beaded features with a bony hand to hide what expression he might have shown. "Just wondered," he mumbled.

BEAU stiffened. It wasn't like old Van to act this way. The man had changed. His pale eyes had become greedy, hard as diamonds. His long nose seemed more pinched. He was uncomfortable under Beau's eyes.

The young American controlled the flood of questions he would have liked to put and asked instead, "How's my father?"

Van's humped shoulders bent still more as he leaned over his ledger. "I've work to do," he answered sharply. "Shipments, invoices and incoming stores are about to drive me crazy."

Beau's fingers flexed. Van Crique had abruptly dismissed him.

Beau put down the impulse to reach across the desk and throttle the answer from this storekeepr who owed his success to kindly John Cordner. Instead, Beau turned from the warehouse. At the door, he almost bumped into a girl and her escort.

"Sorry," he mumbled, and started to pass on.

But the tall, swart man spun him by the shoulder, snapping, "Watch your step next time!"

A flush dyed Beau's face and he jammed his thumb into his belt near his knife. He said coldly, "You're pretty quick with your temper. Is that all?"

They stood sturdily planted before one another, legs wide-braced. Beau's eyes bored into the beady, opaque pupils of the man in immaculate tropical whites. He was a German, with the dark swarthy strain of Uhlan ancestry giving him a Satanic look. He was handsome, in a suave way. The Heidelberg saber scar on his cheek gave him a romantic look. A trim, waxed mustache was twisted into spikes at either side of his aquiline nose. His lips were thin and cruel. Beau waited for him to take up the challenge.

Now the girl's voice broke in. "Beau! Beau Cordner!" she cried.

When her escort relaxed, Beau looked at her. She was stunning. Romain Crique had grown up! Her imported whipcord riding breeches revealed her supple curves. The mahogany complexion painted by the jungle's brush enhanced the spun gold of her hair. Her blue eyes sparkled. The last time Beau had seen her, she was stringy, freckle-faced, and a little savage.

Beau tipped his helmet. "You've grown up to be as beautiful as *Tanit*, the Moon Goddess," he complimented warmly.

Her throaty laughter eased the tension between the two men. "Such a pretty speech, Beau! How long have you been back?"

"Not long enough to get to the far end of the street," said Beau.

Romain sobered. "It isn't as it used to be," she admitted. "But there are compensations."

"Not for what's come into *this* place," he said darkly.

Romain bit her lip and turned to her escort. "Beau Cordner is the son of the late overseer, John. This is Baron von Marr."

The American did not acknowledge the man's curt nod. His eyes were fixed on Romain's eyes. She had said the *late* John Cordner! His voice sounded unreal as he stammered, "My father—dead?"

Genuine sympathy flooded Romain's face. "I thought you knew," she murmured. "I—I'm sorry. She stopped, eyeing him sympathetically.

Beau got a grip on himself. His knuckles showed white as he wound his fingers around the handle of his knife. He knew now why old Van had avoided his question.

"How did it happen?" he asked.

Baron von Marr took Romain pos-

sessively by the arm, saying, "Go inside, Fräulein."

THE GIRL looked up at the Baron. Through the grief dimming his eyes, Beau saw the admiration akin to love that she held for this suave German. It added to the hot emotions already surging through him. Romain was making a fool of herself! Couldn't she tell this man was the type who fancied one pretty face today, another tomorrow? The Baron's immaculate attire attested to his vanity and smugness. His overbearing attitude suggested a cruel will, befitting a member of the Nazi Gestapo. Beau remembered the impetuous and headstrong Romain. She got what she wanted—especially if it was denied her. This could be only infatuation. She had better wake up before she did anything rash.

Now von Marr was talking, his voice coldly sneering. "Your father was killed by the Bangalas five months ago. Monts Aershot, the new overseer, has tried to find out who did it. He hasn't been very successful."

"The natives never killed my father!" said Beau, so harshly that the German recoiled a step. "That's a damned lie! John Cordner was the *one* friend the Bangalas had!"

The German shrugged, his eyes smoldering. "I'm only telling you what I know," he said stiffly.

"I wonder!" said Beau, staring at the Baron. "This new overseer—Monts Aershot—where will I find him?"

The German jerked a thumb down street. "At the compound. Go slow with him. I appointed him with the idea that somebody might come to Riba Riba with the intention of running things," he said in an insinuating tone.

His direct threat heaped fuel upon the flames within Beau. "*You* appointed him?" he said. "Just where did *you* get the authority, von Marr?"

"You must have been out of touch with world events for some time," answered the man arrogantly. "I advise you to take the first safari out and find out what's going on." He moved on into Crique's warehouse.

BEAU SHOOK with fury, filled with a desire to smash that sneer from the Baron's thin lips. The news of his father's death had set up a tight aching behind his eyes. He turned to go back into the warehouse and have an understanding, but Romain's laughter and gay words were like a dash of cold water in his face.

Trembling with anger, he spun on his heel and strode away. Suddenly, he reached out and grabbed a derelict by the scuff of the shirt. With startling strength, he drew the man to him.

"Who's Baron von Marr?" he demanded harshly.

The massive Belgian blanched at Beau's strength and made no move to disengage himself. He looked from side to side, then said softly: "He's the king of this hole, now that the mother country is gone. He's the brains appointed by the puppet state, with Monts Aershot, Abdul Akam and Don Viso his bloody spearheads. Four of the blackest jackals I ever saw. If you've crossed *their* trail, I suggest you pack your *posho* box and go on a long safari. They ain't cricket, as the English say."

As the man talked, Beau's anger mounted to fury. Riba Riba dominated by Baron von Marr while citizens and natives were under the rule of his cohort, Monts Aershot! This was fifth column work, for the League at Geneva had stated that the Congo Free States should remain free until a European victory had been gained or lost by the nations at war. Beau suddenly remembered his temporary commission naming him overseer. *He* was in authority here, by appointment of the real Belgian government!

"The law changes right now!" he said hotly, and turned up the street.

The brawny derelict stared after him. "Interesting—if true," he muttered, and turned into a grop shop. "But I'll wager my ivory gather against a noggin of rum we'll bury a brash Yankee come morn-

ing. Funerals are downright common in this stinking hole!"

Beau made his way through the motley throng, unmindful of the shrill cries of the merchants, the smiles of lithe girls in the dark doorways of grass huts. His eyes stared ahead, small flames burning in them. Here was evidence of typical fifth column work. They preached a new and wild freedom, while their cunning machinery was set to enslave all mankind. Beau wanted to talk with the Belgian, Monts Aershot.

Just passing Beau was a Bangala warrior. The man's naked, muscular torso glistened with unnatural sweat. His proud, kinky head was lowered on his chest and he staggered. Beau caught the odor of white man's cheap gin. His nails bit into his palms. It was strictly against the law of the tropics, selling or giving white man's liquor to a native. The aborigine could quaff *nagurikui,* the native drink, but the white man's brew was a dangerous and potent mixture for the savage. This, then, was how they won over the natives. He quickened his steps.

As he came upon the Riba Riba headquarters, he stopped, staring. Bangalas lay about the compound, their bodies beaded like diamonds under the candlenut torch light. They snored loudly in their drunken stupor. A shout beat from the grass-sided office at the far end of the yard. Quickly, Beau went to the door. A tattooed warrior was lifting a jug of San-soe, the cheapest and most potent of all equatorial gins. Beau barged into the office and swept the jug from the startled native's hands.

As he set it down on the desk, a burly blond giant behind it raised his broad and florid face. His brutal chin shot out and his piglike eyes narrowed with annoyance. His bushy brows arched quizzically under his tilted helmet.

A paper lay on his desk and a native stood ready to place his mark in pencil.

Beau barked in Bangalaese. *"Duri sigura—don't sign!"*

BEAU made a lunge at the paper, but Monts Aershot snatched it up, surging to his feet. "Who are you?" he grunted savagely.

Beau stood teetering on the balls of his feet, not answering. His eyes bored into the man. Aershot wore a faded and torn coat of the Luxemburg Patrol. Corded muscles strained at the seams of the coat, which ill fitted his tremendously broad shoulders.

The sweating, drunken Bangalas blinked owlishly at Beau, recognition beginning to show in the inflamed eyes of a few.

"Get out!" he snapped in their native tongue.

Grunting gutturally, they reluctantly obeyed.

Aershot's massive shoulders settled and his thick lips curled. "Anyone would think *you* were overseer instead of me!" he said with annoyance. "A stranger might think—"

"*I am* the overseer!" snapped Beau. "I'm John Cordner's son. In my pocket is an imperial order to take charge. Sent by the Belgian Government in Exile; the only true government Belgium has.

"Being overseer in my absence, you should know enough *not* to give white man's liquor to natives. That's like testing dynamite with a hammer. Just so you won't make that mistake again—or forget who I am—I'll impress the situation on you!"

Like a dart driven from a blowgun, Beau leaped at the giant Belgian. Aershot was taken completely by surprise. It had been a long time since any man dared stand against him. His tremendous strength was unprepared for any attack.

All the pent-up grief and anger in Beau exploded through his fists. He reveled in the numbing shocks running the length of his arms. His furious assault drove the Belgian back against the wall. His pumping arms kept him pinned there, helpless. Aershot's bulging arms hung at his sides and his mouth gapèd. His middle quivered like Congo River

mud as the American drove home blow after blow.

The cruel beady eyes of the overseer glazed over and he crumpled to the floor. Beau stood over him like a lion over his kill. Reluctantly, his fists lowered to his sides.

Still gripped by his emotions, he grabbed Aershot by the tunic and trundled him down the steps, across the compound, and threw the man into the street.

The Belgian stumbled forward a few steps and lit sprawlingly.

Beau adjusted his coat and turned back into the office, murmuring, "That should show Baron von Marr where he stands!"

SEATING himself behind the desk, Beau took the Luger from its holster and laid it close to hand. His eyes roamed the room. Every musty niche meant something to him, for there stood his father's trophies. The miniature Bangala river dugout, a gift from the head chief, Zawa. The long-barreled Taureg rifle, presented by Leftenant Hans Goderis to John Cordner, after the Leftenant and his Luxemburg Patrol had surprised the desert scavengers seeking slaves in the Congo Free State. Everyone had been John Cordner's friend. Within him had been the gift to walk the world's surface without enemies. He had been able to do what he had done here by keeping faith and *face* with the natives. Whatever he pledged, he did. He treated them like human beings. He understood their child-like whims, protecting them from the cunning, vicious marauders.

This was why Beau knew the Bangalas had not killed his father. Who had killed him then? These new powers of Riba-Riba. Who else? The Nazi horde took little into consideration in their lust to govern the world. Beau's fingers drummed on the desk top. Until this situation was cleared up, he meant to carry on his father's work here. He could do no less for the memory and honor of so great a man.

At a noise on the porch, he put his hand on his gun. But it came away quickly as he looked at the three Englishmen there in the doorway. The two youngsters on either side of the sawed-off oldster were giants. Twins, alike as two spears. Their whites were grimy and ragged, their helmets black with age, their faces cured by the equatorial sun.

The oldster between them stood like a pint bottle between two jugs. He too was seared by the sun. All three pairs of feet were bare, and leathery as a native's.

"We was wonderin'—" began one of the twins.

"Yes," interrupted the other. "We—"

"Shut up!" growled the runt between them, flinging his arms wide. The backs of his hands caught the cheeks of his sons and stung them to silence.

"Don't mind my boys, Adolph and Alfred," he said heavily. "They're curious as kittens. I'm Momba Whitestall, Mister. You the only one in this office?"

Beau controlled his grin, answering, "Yes."

The oldster chuckled. "What did I tell you?" he asked his boys. "Take a good look at the man who can throw Monts Aershot into the street!"

Beau flushed under their interested stares.

Momba Whitestall's chuckle deepened. "I thought I was the powerhouse of this country, but I ain't. I ain't ever had the nerve to bare my fangs at Monts. My little company, name of Whitestall Copper Mines, Limited, are thankful to you, Mister.

"We no sooner set up our crushers on some of the choicest deposits in the place when Baron von Marr sent Aershot and Abdul Akam to run us off. They did. There ain't meaner monkeys in the orang-utan family than those two. You've certainly started the drums beating, friend. Maybe beating out your funeral march!"

"I'm overseer here," said Beau evenly. "Anyone tampering with my authority will get what Monts Aershot got. Per-

haps more, when I find out certain things."

Momba Whitestall punched his two sons in the ribs with his thumbs. The boys winced.

"What did I tell you?" he chortled. Then to Beau: "You talk a good game of cricket, Governor. I wish you luck. You'll need it against von Marr and his snakes. The town's full of compound robbers. And the country's got a way of growing fungus over ideals. But you look like you know the game. *Auo juo*—goodbye, Yank! Keep your tail tucked close!"

He turned from the doorway, taking his stalwart sons with him. Beau grinned. Adolph and Alfred could use their old man for a toothpick, and yet Momba Whitestall handled them the way a lion handles its cubs, cuffing and growling.

And Beau felt the same emotion as when he had met with Dibby Cartwright, Black Mike Collins and Kiltie MacRae there by the muddy banks of the Congo. Momba Whitestall meant to be a friend, and true to the Crown. For all his runty size, there was a real man wrapped up in those tattered and soiled whites.

BEAU SCANNED the document Monts Aershot had dropped. What he read sent anger through him again. This paper was so drawn as to rob the ignorant Bangala of their villages and lands in exchange for quantities of white man's liquor. The native had only to sign his mark to lose all his belongings!

Beau stared unseeingly at the wall, crumpling the paper in his fist. Here was the plan of dictated slavery and the motivation for his father's death. John Cordner would never have permitted such a foul imposition on native ignorance, puppet government or no. And this knowledge threw a still deeper cloud about his death. Some savage, denied his liquor trade, might have killed John Cordner. But whatever his death, or however it had come about, Baron von Marr and his jackals were responsible. Beau had to get proof of that. Proof to show Hans Goderis of the Luxemburg Patrol. Hans must still be loyal to the Cause. If he wasn't . . . Beau would have to move slow against the heavy odds here.

Beau hung his commission beside his father's, returned his gun to his holster and jammed his helmet onto his head. He crossed the compound and entered the trail leading to the outskirts of the village.

The clamor of Riba Riba was lost to him as he walked. Amid this mob seeking to align themselves with the so-called new King, he felt disturbingly alone as he headed toward the compound there against the foothills of the forbidding Koakumus. It was his home where he and his father had lived. Beau had never known his mother. She had died after his birth.

Amid the fresh smell of mangrove and pungent night blooms, he held communion with himself. He laid his soul bare to the heavy thrust of the grief that was in him. Fervently, he vowed to bring the murderers of his father to justice, and to keep Riba Riba and the Congo from falling into the power of the fifth column. He wished his orders would allow him to stage an all-out campaign against them, but until those orders came through he would have to bide his time.

Suddenly, his revery was snapped by the sharp stir of air at his cheek. The flash of a gun was a livid flame before his eyes. Mechanically, his hand moved. He drew and threw his knife toward that fiery blossom.

The hair at the nape of his neck bristled as no scream filled the air. He thought he had missed. But no! A shadowy form was stumbling from behind the huge mangrove tree there at the corner of the compound. Beau drew his gun and advanced. Feet were padding up behind him as men came from town, morbidly curious.

Beau stood over the man, nonplussed by this happening. Someone grabbed a torch from the hands of a native and bent down. The handle of Beau's Gar-

boon knife gleamed dully, sunk to its hilt in the man's stomach.

"Don Viso!" mumbled the torch bearer. "And he unarmed!"

THE crowd growled and tightened about Beau. By every sign, the taboo of the jungle—wanton killing—had been violated. A cold tide swept Beau's back. This man at his feet had been dead when he threw his knife. Another man had shot at him and purposely missed! But how could he prove these facts to this ominous crowd pressing about him—?

Beau said shakily, "This man was dead before I threw my knife!"

"*Jah?*" sneered a German bluntly. "Even der body's warm and bleeding!"

The crowd pressed closer.

Another said, "Ze Yank iss too fast with his knife."

The man with the torch looked up at Beau. "Where you from, Yank? 'Most everything goes in this hole of a land—everything but killing a man in cold blood!"

Beau's fists clenched and his finger tightened on the trigger of his Luger. They were asking where he was from! There had been a day in Riba Riba when, if you didn't know John Cordner and his son, you didn't know anyone. . . .

"Best you all mind your own business," he said sharply. "Choose your side in the war, but don't try tricks with me!"

"Cut his throat," said an Arab breed. "No American *baturi* is going to tell *me* what to do!"

An ominous mutter followed the speaker's words. Beau could feel the growing brutality in this crowd. Most of them were von Marr's henchmen. Just one tiny spark was needed to shove this mob over into insane violence.

He talked for his life. "I've only been in town a few hours," he said vehemently. "In that time I've found that my father, John Cordner, has been killed. This is the third time my life has been in danger. I've had—"

"He's talking like zee voodoo man!" shouted someone drunkenly. "Eet is wrong to keel in cold blood. Give him the stocks—and *Komomori!*"

Beau paled. There was no controlling their grog-drugged minds. The stocks and *Komomori*—The Hundred Lashes of Death! He licked his dry lips as the sullen men edged in closer. He swung his weapon warningly.

"First man to reach out a hand—"

But there were those behind him with courage gained from a bottle, and with the promise of power instilled in their minds. Like an avalanche, they swarmed over him. He struggled against their brutal pummeling, their liquor-fouled breaths stinging his nostrils.

Battered nearly unconscious, Beau felt himself pushed roughly along the trail toward town. The clamor of the drunken parade rose as it neared the village, and grop shops spewed men who joined the rollicking gathering. Drunken men who added their taunts to the swelling lust. Few in the mob knew why they were taking this stranger to the village stocks. They didn't care. Their liquor-fed tempers found it easy to rise to wanton violence. The saboteurs were doing their work well. . . .

AS THE closely packed huts with their candlenut torch lights slid past, Beau was fully aware of his inescapable fate. His bruised lips twisted with irony. At the time he had been plotting to bring the real criminals to justice, he had fallen into their trap! The cunning men behind John Cordner's death and the usurping of the Congo had contrived this. They had sacrificed one of their followers in order to indict Beau with the riff-raff of the jungle, and be well rid of a foe to their cause. It was a typical Gestapo trick. Baron von Marr and his cohorts should be the ones going to the stocks. Yet, even with imperial authority, he could not have brought that about without positive proof.

Now nothing could be proven. Beau's only consolation was that these devils would be thoroughly crushed on the

fighting fronts of Europe. Then, and only then, would Riba Riba return to itself. Yet it would be hideously scarred by the memory of the red hell bound to break loose within its confines before this war was done.

Numb to all pain, Beau suffered the binding to the stocks. His arms and feet were thrust through small holes and the clamps screwed tight. Thus he hung, ignominously imprisoned. Imprisoned in the instrument originally used solely for unruly blacks who had viciously violated the law.

It seemed for a moment that all his senses were overly keen to his surroundings. He saw again the tribal dances of the Bangala in the council compound. The soft nights, such as this one. He heard again the passionate swell of the drums as they signaled warring parties.

The first lash stung his back. Beau gritted his teeth. The second lash felt like a hot iron searing his skin. Sweat broke out on his forehead and he felt the warm blood trickle down to his trouser's band. He tensed for the next blow.

But it never came. A voice beat over the tumult. The shrill, panic-roughened voice of a woman.

"Stop it! Stop! Baron, do something—!"

Beau's pain-filled eyes got back into focus. Romain Crique stood there, clutching frantically at Baron von Marr's arm. Tears streaked her cheeks. Her eyes were brilliant in the glow of the torches.

The Baron stepped forward, waving off the brawny whipper. He spoke softly to some of the ringleaders of the mob. The crowd could not hear and surged forward in deadly demand. Von Marr planted himself in their path, arms upraised.

"Stop!" he commanded. "This is not justice—to take the law into your own hands! It will only bring martial law. Go back to your grog and forget it. Let the Luxemburg Patrol settle this when they come."

In this moment, Baron von Marr was proving up on his sway over this village. Fear of him came into the drink-glazed eyes of the mob. Like jackals robbed of their carrion, they gradually dispersed.

It was Romain who undid the clamps holding Beau. Her cool fingers moved tenderly over his back. "I'm sorry," she murmured in a choked voice. "Come to the warehouse—I'll take care of it." Her eyes were wet.

But Beau wasn't looking at her. He was holding himself rigid by sheer will power, staring at the Baron.

He said harshly, "It would have been better to let this go on, von Marr. Stopping it is like leaving the poison off the blow-gun dart. I've a hunch I'm set for a dirtier death than this. But some things can happen between now and then. The man who rigged this should be smart enough to know!"

Von Marr's grin vanished. "Ungrateful cur!" he snarled.

Beau said evenly, "I know whereof I speak. There were reasons for my father's death—and plenty for mine. Your mistake, Baron, was in letting a girl prevail on you to stop this."

Romain gasped and her face paled. "Beau!" she reprimanded. "You don't know what you say—!"

BITTERLY, he turned to her. "I'm thankful to you for saving my life and for your offer to salve these welts. But I'm letting them burn awhile, so I'll never forget how I got them—and through whom!"

"Beau!" she choked. "After what the Baron did—"

He read condemnation in her eyes. For von Marr's lone stand against the mob had been magnificent. If one failed to see the subtlety behind it, the Prussian had played an impressive role.

"I should be grateful to him, too," Beau bowed mockingly toward the swart leader of Riba Riba, "for another chance to clean up this place—if the odor of it doesn't choke the life from me first!"

With a low cry, Romain turned away.

The Baron offered her his arm and they turned into town.

Beau stared after them, the arrogant bearing of the German and the burning welts across his back adding to the fuel of his hatred. There went the man responsible for the natives getting white man's liquor, for the death of his father, and no doubt for this try on Beau's life, in which he had cleverly turned this village against the one man willing to stake his life against the fifth column undermining Riba Riba.

The Baron had set Beau a man apart from the rest. One man against a legion of killers—for the French, too, were torn between allegiance to Vichy and De-Gaulle. Beau knew the viciousness of this leader now. He had sacrificed one of his own men to place Beau in this position.

Gingerly Beau drew on his torn shirt. He shouldered through the press of those remaining. They shrank away from him. To them he was a killer in cold blood. In the pale glow of the tawny moon, he saw familiar faces now, but not one sign of friendship or understanding. They had heard. And they believed. Such was the cunning of the Nazi saboteurs. Native aid was lost to him. . . .

AS BEAU turned onto the path toward the Cordner compound, he once again became alert. That he had been saved for a greater disgrace he had no doubt. Humiliation was one of the widely and skilfully used Nazi methods. Behind him, life seemed distant and unreal. The Americas, England, France—all were at war. The immediate problem ahead was the only real and tangible thing. To the swift, the alert, would go the spoils.

He came again to the Cordner abode. The vines marking the compound had long since grown shabby. Fungus had taken over the yard. He went up the weed-filled trail leading to the tightly thatched house.

An ebon silhouette rose before him. Subconsciously, his hand went to his gun. It was gone, lost somewhere during the struggle with the mob. His shoulders bunched against attack.

A grunting voice said, "Many rains have come and gone since you left, *Babua.*"

Babua! Meaning the Strong Son—tribal name bestowed Beau when he was ten. A glad cry escaped his lips. "Tengis!"

Here in the darkness, the two stalwarts gripped each other hard. In the solemn ritual of the Bangala, they touched foreheads. Then Beau held the ebon giant at arm's length.

"You're back from Cape Town and the White King's school," he said.

"Back," answered Tengis, son of Chief Zawa, darkly. "Back to find my father and those who have gone to *Goudu*—heaven—have found a peace I shall never find, even when I follow. Back to find the earth, friend of man, a place of war and hatred, my people suffering, their voodoo weak, the Bangala ready to rise and slay, angered by the lust for power in the new king of whom the drums speak."

Beau said reluctantly, "Who can blame them, Tengis? This new king would promise them freedom only to further enslave them. Many more men would come—grey troops—with thunder-spears. We must have patience and fight to keep them out.

"I return to continue the work of my father, sent by the Imperial White Monarch, who is not dead despite all they say. I will do as my father has done—protect you from the cunning of *wato* whites."

The proud head of Tengis nodded slowly. "Men like you are ever welcome here. The others care for nothing but the riches, the lands. The suffering of my poor people, the suffering these power seekers cause their fellow men, are nothing to them. They are blinded by the cry for a new order of life. The pitiful wailings of the lost are drowned amid the bargaining and the weighing of power."

Admiration flashed in Beau's eyes. He remembered when John Cordner sent Tengis to the English school. The young warrior had been reluctant to go. He would rather have run the trails of his forefathers, keen knife at his belt, blow gun slung over his shoulder. Now he had returned to Riba Riba with a deep well of native philosophy and an understanding deepened by book learning. Tengis was now held as a sage among his people. Respected. Looked up to.

Beau smacked the palm of his hand with his fist. "I'll protect your peoples' rights. There are ways and means, Tengis. And I want you to know I do not believe in their lies—that your people killed my father. It was the work of the warmongers."

"That is true faith," said the savage chieftain simply. "White man's lies are thin. We are a humbled people, but our friendship, once made, is strong. We *cannot* submit to the ravages of the followers of the new king."

Beau nodded, feeling the heat within this proud chieftain. "You shan't," said the American. He paused as a twinge of pain and fever from his back surged the length of him. "I'll see to that." Then he was explaining all that had happened since leaving the steamer on the Slave Coast. When he was done, Tengis was looking at his back.

"I know how you feel, Babua," he said. "The jungle cat and jackal give no warning before they strike. I will not be able to hold my people long. There are many who believes these lies! Wait here!"

Like a wraith, he slipped into the velvety gloom.

BEAU SAT down wearily on the porch steps. His body was one huge ache, from fatigue and the lashes. He buried his head in his hands. He did not know Tengis had returned until he felt the soothing lotion of herbs and mud being applied to his wounds.

He mumbled, "How did my father die, Tengis?"

There was a long, tense pause. Then, Tengis answered, "The Death of a Thousand Hills!"

Beau froze, but made no move. He could not show grief before Tengis. To the native, an outward sign of sorrow meant plunging the dead into the bottomless pits of hell. Beau suffered cruelly, silently.

Butu Tori Bula, Death of a Thousand Hills. The staking of a man upon the mounds of killer ants. Torture beyond belief. Beau's blood ran cold at the thought.

Tengis retold the story he had learned from an elder: "Your father was found by our hunters, who gave him decent burial. In the sand of the hills one keen eye saw the imprint of a shoe. Half the heel was gone from the right one, as if cut to use for a patch for something. I have watched everyone walk since, but I have not seen the half-heeled shoe."

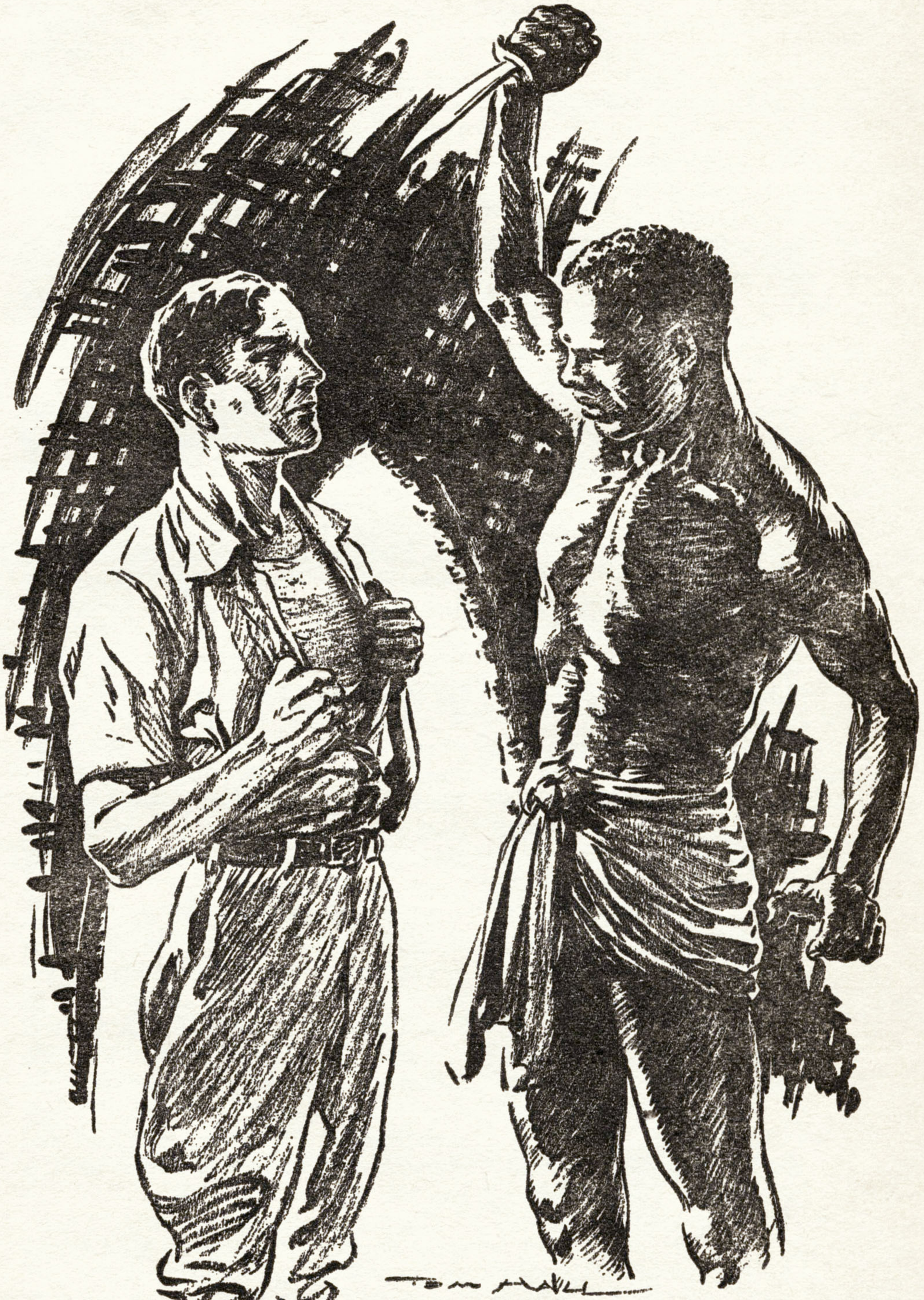
Beau's eyes clouded with fury as he pondered this flimsy clue. He himself had used boot parts for patches. There might be many such. Yet—half a heel—it was a clue, however slight. If only he could prove the killing of his father on the Baron's clique, he could get an impartial order to rid the jungle of them.

He said grimly, "I'll watch the ground. When I see it—"

Silence fell. The soothing lotion Tengis applied, and the bitter burden of grief and fatigue, lulled Beau into merciful sleep.

HE AWOKE to the hubbub of angered voices. He was in his father's bed, placed there by Tengis. Midafternoon heat filled the room and the murmur of insects made a droning background against the talk that had awakened him. He got to his feet and, feeling the strength of deep rest, went into the main room.

Tengis stood in its center, his ebon brow furrowed, his dark eyes smoldering. A group of tribesmen faced him. To Beau's quizzical stare Tengis said harshly, "The first spear has been cast. Benga has signed away his land. Even



Tengis' knife was upraised. Beau tore open his shirt. "I give you my life for what you think I have done," he said.

now Baron von Marr and his men move their crushers and diggers onto the land to begin the smelting of ore."

A guttural growl shook the gathered warriors. It froze Beau's blood. The passions of these headhunters flamed perilously close to the surface. At a nod from Tengis they would start the doom drums.

"Wait!" Beau cried. Action was all these men understood. "I'll have von Marr and his men off the land by nightfall."

He grabbed up his helmet and ran from the house. The natives strung out behind him, Tengis at their head.

In the long, easy lope he had learned when a boy, Beau took the trail away from Riba Riba. At the talus of Mombu Point lay Benga's cluster of compounds. Tengis raced up alongside him.

"*Malo!*" he grunted. "Bad!"

"Keep your men from starting anything," warned Beau. "It would be the worst thing they could do. Von Marr would like nothing better than open warfare before we were prepared."

The chieftain nodded a mute promise to do his best.

The racing men, led by Beau, swept into Benga's village. Already the crushers were set and tracks being laid. Tengis' sullen people were here in force, and their eyes lighted at sight of their chief.

Von Marr's workers quit their tools and formed a tight circle, the Baron at their head. On the right stood Monts Aershot. On his left was Abdul Akam, swart, black-bearded and fez-topped. The desert man's eyes were unblinking and beady, like those of a snake, and held as little compunction.

Now the Baron swaggered forward, chuckling. "So! The Yankee killer! Gone bush?" His eyes swept the natives at Beau's back.

The American ignored the insult and came directly to the point. "Von Marr, you're going against imperial orders, entering onto native property. The penalty is prison. Stay and you'll get it. Get out —and I'll forget it ever happened."

"You don't give orders here!"

"You haven't looked at my commission," Beau retorted. "It hangs on the wall at the office."

The Baron smirked. "Not any more. Leftenant Hans Goderis at Upoto has seen fit to cancel your commission, pending investigation of the murder of Don Viso. He also saw fit to reaffirm my appointment of Monts Aershot. Runners brought word at noon. Monts has given me permission to mine here. Now tell that to your kinky-headed jungle brothers!"

BEAU'S FACE whitened. His muscles became taut. Leftenant Goderis, of the Luxemburg Patrol, held the power to do this. He was standing by the puppet government's order. For even Baron von Marr would not risk the wrath of Goderis until he was better organized. And his arrogant smugness was further proof of his assertions.

Beau, therefore, was shorn of power. He sensed the tightening of the savages. A massacre was but a guttural grunt away. Once it started, heads would dry atop the village *nogo* poles. The whole of Africa would flame into war. All the work done by far-seeing, kindly men like John Cordner would go for naught. The jungle would revert to type.

With fists clenching and unclenching, Beau said evenly, "Von Marr, right now you stand to reopen all the hatred of the black men. You stand to plunge the Congo into the bloodiest hell Africa will ever know, just as your dictator has done in Europe. You can down me, beat the warriors at my back, but you can't break their voodoo. The drums will beat and every hand that can hold a spear or blow gun will take to the bush."

The Baron grinned tolerantly. "I don't scare, Cordner. Take your head-drying brothers of the bush and get out!"

Beau's jaw set. He had promised Tengis he would rid Benga's land of these people. He must do it. There was one way still open. An appeal to the Baron's cruelty.

"Von Marr," he said harshly, "I've

offered my aid to these people. They were friends of my father's and they're friends of mine. They'll back me to the limit—in their own method of fighting. It isn't with guns or knives, for if one shot is fired now, many would die. I'll make an offer."

Interest flamed in the Baron's shrewd eyes and he asked, "What is it?"

"To settle a dispute between factions," Beau went on, "it's customary for each faction to choose the strongest man among them to fight it out. I can get the legal papers of Tengis' people behind me. I'll put them against Benga's paper, which you hold. I'll fight for my side—it will please me if you choose yourself to fight for yours!"

Cunning lights kindled in von Marr's eyes. "Get them to put up the paper," he grinned savagely, "and it's a deal!"

Beau turned to Tengis for confirmation. For a long moment, the black chieftain studied him, weighing him, appraising him.

Satisfied with what he saw, Tengis turned to his people. Swiftly, he told them of the wager. A tattooed warrior accepted. Others followed. Tengis turned back to Beau.

"The fate of the Bangala rests in your fists," he said evenly.

The young American spun on the Baron. "You heard him!" he snapped. "Their words are as good as bonds."

The Baron's grin deepened and he held consultation with his followers. There was dissension, but the love of a fight won them over.

Von Marr turned back. "The deal's on! Monts Aershot will stand for us. He's looking for an even chance at you, Yank!"

SLOWLY, Beau shed his shirt. His rock-ribbed torso was delicately bronzed. He stood waiting, his muscles taut as steel wires.

The savages closed in to form the arena. Wagering began between the warriors and the village scum working for von Marr. Shield against knife, and knife against clothing. A dusky maiden was put up against a bone-handled dagger and an old rifle.

Monts Aershot was bared to the waist now. Great tufts of hair splotched his barrel-like chest. His muscles were firm and well developed.

Beau nodded grimly. His hands came up and he moved forward. Aershot met his challenge, huge arms outstretched, pumping slowly like the pistons of a steam engine taking up a heavy load. Beau shut out all thoughts and set himself for the struggle with the giant before him.

Aershot bellowed and rushed in, for all his tremendous size quick as a cat.

Not prepared for the Belgian's agility, Beau barely escaped that first onslaught. He danced to one side and planted himself solidly. He swung a left into the overseer's stomach as he roared past. With a grunt, Aershot pulled up and turned back.

The savages were chanting now. But Beau didn't hear. He was alone against a powerful antagonist, with the fate of Tengis' village in his balled fists, his honor and promises in the firm balance of his footing.

Aershot came at him like a crazed elephant. Beau met him this time, fists flying like rocks from a catapult. He took terrific punishment. Aershot's blows made lights shoot dizzily before his eyes. Agony rained about his chest and heart and threatened his breathing. Salt sweat ran. Their bodies glistened from the exertion, and Beau felt as if he was punching a bag of wet sand.

It was the lion harrying the lumbering rhinoceros as they churned the ground of the arena. Beau's right eye was closing fast and his knuckles were shredded from pummeling the Belgian's tough hide. He gave ground. Aershot followed, relentless, his lips split, blood trickling from his nose.

Now Beau risked another slugfest with the giant. He swayed and swung from both sides of his body, his blows finding their marks. The force behind those

punches made Aershot give ground. He staggered back, arms raised for protection. Ruthlessly, Beau followed, picking his openings, sending cruel blows home. Breath rasped from his lungs.

Aershot stumbled and threw his weight forward. Before Beau could stop his charge, he was close to the giant. He sensed the trick too late. Those hairy arms reached out, pulling him in. Aershot roared in savage satisfaction, crushing Beau close.

A cry of anguish started deep in Beau's throat, but could not escape. The giant was slowly crushing him to death. Consciousness was slowly slipping from him.

But through all the pain, he could feel the slight slip of Aershot's corded muscles. Gathering his remaining strength, Beau threw his hands above his head and drew his feet up. He was too sweat-slick for the Belgian to hold. He slid down and out of those arms and, gasping for breath, rolled away from the giant's vicious kick.

Then, leaping to his feet, he was backing about the arena, dodging, twisting, evading the sledge-like hammerings. Like a dancer, he never let Aershot get set for a killing blow.

THE BELGIAN cursed, calling upon him to fight. But Beau was not to be baited. That cruel hug had sapped his strength and he needed his second wind.

He got it. New power flooded his body. His brain lost its dullness and breathing was easier. He became aware of the faces banked about the arena, and heard the frenzied chanting of the blacks, the shouts of encouragement to Aershot. Only Tengis was silent, his brawny arms crossed on his chest, his dark eyes showing concern. Beau grinned reassuringly at him.

Then he was meeting Aershot's fresh fury. Beau grunted for power as he punched. And a sudden thrill shot through him, for the sting was leaving the giant's blows, his breath rasped from his lungs, and desperation was in his reddened eyes. Aershot was tiring!

With a shout of assurance to Tengis, Beau threw caution to the winds. He smashed and batted at that shredded countenance before him, taking his pound of flesh and drop of blood, too. For this man was one of those who had killed his father. He was one who was making a hell of this peaceful Congo country. All Beau's pent-up emotions went into the fight as he sensed victory ahead in one swift, battering drive.

But even as he started it, his breath caught. He was going down—tripped! One of the von Marr cohorts had stuck out his foot. Beau flung out his hand to break his fall. During that split-second he was on the ground, he saw something that held him fascinated. The boot that had tripped him *had only half a heel!*

Beau forgot Aershot. He had to see who this man was—this torturer of his father. He turned to look—

A wave of blackness shot across his eyes. Excruciating pain filled his head and robbed him of strength. He sank back—down—into a bottomless pit. Twice, he felt the jar of Aershot's foot before unconsciousness claimed him completely.

WHEN BEAU returned to the realm of reality, his head pained terribly. Each jouncing move brought nausea. With an effort, he opened his eyes. Tengis was carrying him as easily as he would have a babe. The rest of his people stalked disconsolately behind him.

Beau mumbled thickly, "I'm sorry. But that must sound pretty empty."

The chieftain nodded solemnly. "Our voodoo was not strong. Tomorrow—who knows?"

The way he uttered those final words sent a tremor of dread through Beau. For despite Tengis' training in the white man's school, he was still a savage.

Beau said quickly, "It isn't that bad. I was at fault. I can beat Aershot. You see, Tengis, the foot that tripped me had but half a heel!"

Again the warrior nodded solemnly. "That explains it, Babua. You are not to

blame. But my people will not see it. They will shortly leave their village."

"You did not see that foot?" asked Beau anxiously.

"Too many feet," grunted Tengis.

Beau struggled from Tengis' arms, but allowed the chieftain to help him along the trail. He was tasting the dregs of bitterness. He had lost the man he wanted, failed to get the identity of his father's torturer. His power of overseer was gone. He had lost caste among the Bangala. And Baron von Marr held all Riba Riba in his hand!

For several days Beau stayed in Tengis' hut and knew the tender care of Rayu, the chieftain's favorite wife. She administered to his cuts and bruises. Now and then he caught her studying him appraisingly. It was disconcerting. He found the meaning for this the day he prepared to leave.

"I will go with you," she said in Bengala. "To serve and cook and be your slave. A man without a woman is no man at all."

Her words turned Beau cold inside. Here was the simple savage's way of speaking her love. Concealing the alarm and distress this revelation stirred in him, he patted her naked shoulders affectionately. "My wish is that you serve Tengis as you always have," he said. "His heart is with you as no other."

Sadness flooded her eyes at his gentle rebuke. He had hurt her deeply. But it was the only way. She was but captivated by a white man she had taken care of. Soon her feelings would pass and she would be content and happy again as Tengis' favorite.

Tengis himself entered the hut just as the woman turned to bury her face in her hands. His jaws set and the tattoos on his cheeks stood out lividly. He crossed his brawny arms on his chest and said, "You're going?" His voice was more commanding than questioning.

Color surged to Beau's cheeks. He knew it would be useless to explain. "Yes," he answered. "There's work to be done."

The savage said stoically, "It *has* been done! My people and I move to the hills, to less fertile ground, prey to the Ayondos bushmen. As for you—Riba Riba is closed. My runner brings word there is an order out for your arrest. Hans Goderis of the Luxemburg Patrol has come to investigate things. I advise you return to the Slave Coast."

His words were like a death sentence to Beau. Hans Goderis, rapier-like soldier of the Congo! The thought of the leftenant's stern code sent a shiver through him.

But he said strongly, "I'm not running, Tengis. I must avenge my father and regain caste."

"Go while you can," grunted Tengis.

"He will stay!" said Rayu proudly.

The chieftain's eyes silenced her. "Go!" he commanded Beau.

The American spread his arms deprecatingly and turned from the hut. His mind was on fire and he was not conscious of the sullen stares of the Bangala. Behind him his truest friend was inflamed with jealousy. Ahead was Hans Goderis, no longer friendly. Not a Congo trail was safe for him. From now on, he must live like a bushman, by night, with the tawny moon his sun, the low-flung stars his candles.

The fifth column had spread their poison well. . . .

AS HE walked, Beau's thoughts drifted savagely to Romain Crique. Bitter were his memories of the days he had walked the trails with her by his side. He had smiled then, without worries or vengeance squeezing his heart. Now nothing was left of those youthful days. She was infatuated with suave Baron von Marr, the dealer in dictatorships and death.

Now he straightened, listening. The pad of feet came to him. Hans Goderis? Tengis? He was about to slip into the tangled undergrowth when three men rounded the bend in the trail. Beau cried, "Momba Whitestall!"

The runt and his two burly sons

fanned about him. "Jam my head on a *nogo* pole!" swore Momba luridly. "We've been looking all over for you. Shy off, Adolph and Alfred! Give Cordner room to talk and spit!" His two sons backed off obediently.

Quickly, Beau explained what had happened. Momba knew the details.

"Riba Riba ain't healthy for you nor none of us," said the runty Englishman, "and the boys are out here in the jungle with Dibby Cartwright, Black Mike Collins and River Joe. Come join up!"

"We're fixin' to make war," grinned Adolph.

"On the whole damn country!" added Alfred.

"Shut up!" growled Momba. "Leave talkin' to grown men!"

Beau suppressed a grin. "River Joe?" he asked.

"A he-heller friend of mine that works along the river," answered Momba. "Funny cuss, River Joe. Only thing he likes better than a fight is a war."

"And Kiltie MacRae?"

Momba chuckled. "A dark gal got him. Caught him drunk in Riba Riba. Seen it myself. There was half a dozen kids hollering 'hoot mon!' around 'im and showing 'im the Abyssinian pennies he had given them when he left a year ago. His kids, by jing!"

He broke into a fit of laughing and Beau joined in. It wasn't odd to learn the Scotchman had taken a native wife. Many men found mates among the natives in this woman-hungry land.

"She sure had her hooks in him the last I saw!" cackled Momba. "Well, c'mon!"

He turned up the trail with his sons.

Momba led the way to a little grass hut concealed by the mysterious jungle. Dibby Cartwright and Black Mike Collins whistled with surprise at sight of Beau. River Joe, Momba Whitestall's friend, merely eyed the American. He made Beau uncomfortable. The riverman had a knack of looking right through a man. He was slender and wiry, like a steel blade. Despite his soiled whites, he had a precise look.

Dibby said, "Blimey if you ain't still got your 'ead!"

"It's the luck of 'im," said Black Mike. "A grand lad."

Beau shook hands and sat down by the doorway of the hut. To their queries, he unfolded what had happened. When he was done, Black Mike said, "I mind once when a sheik's wife was after leavin' her harem for me. I looked to me heart, I'll tell you!"

"This ain't the time for Irish lies!" said Momba dourly.

"Let 'im tell it, Pop," said Adolph eagerly.

"Shut up!" snapped his father. "Children should be seen and not heard. I'll tan your silly hides if you open your mouth again!"

The gathering grinned as Momba's hardy sons fell silent, abashed.

SILENCE claimed them all, as night came swiftly about them. "By Christopher!" he swore. "There ain't a man among us who hasn't something against von Marr and his band of jackals, besides being at war with his country. And there's only one way of stamping 'em out. Make 'em carrion—just like the stuff they gather around. I'm for beating the war drums!"

"No," said Beau. "I haven't told you my troubles just to get you into a fighting mood. It's my battle. I'm under orders to keep war from breaking out here."

"You're too personal and private for this fighting son of Erin," said Black Mike. "If there's a fight I'm in it, one side or the other."

"Kiss the Crown if I ain't too!" said Dibby.

"And us!" yelled Adolph and Alfred.

Momba kicked at his boys, saying, "Leave fightin' to men!"

River Joe made no sound. He rose and stretched and nodded. Then he was striding off into the darkness.

Beau looked quizzically at Momba. The runty Englishman tapped his head with his finger. "Joe's been in this coun-

try a long time," he answered sadly.

Beau looked around at his friends. "I can't give the order to fight unless I get it. And I'm not overseer any more. I'm a wanted man."

"Hear the Yank!" chuckled Dibby. "Wanted! And indeed 'e is. And me? There's more than a tu'pence on my blinkin' 'ead. The French would make you the bloody king of Morocco for just a little hint of my whereabouts. Wanted by the Luxemburg Patrol? Indeed!"

"And me," bragged Black Mike. "From Cairo to Cape Town, from Suez to the Slave Coast, *I'm* wanted. Once—"

"Hell! Once Lawrence of Arabia escorted me and my boys personally to the Suez Canal," interrupted Momba Smith, "and made us swim to Egypt. The Dragoons drove us out onto the Sahara and left us to die. But we made it here. I—"

Beau stood up, his grin a white flash across the darkness of his face. This loyalty warmed him. He said, "You make it convincing, but I can't accept—"

He stopped, startled. The muted thump of drums pulsed on the night air. At first softly ominous, rising then to passionate heights, then lowering again. There was no mistaking the message. Rise! Revolt! Gather the hated *baturi* heads!

Congo drums boomed war against the fifth column and all whites. . . .

NO ONE spoke. The drums rose and fell, the pulse of them like the hammering of doom. Before each man there was a clear picture of what went on up in the bush on the slopes of the Koakumus. Warriors were whipping themselves into a frenzy, goaded on by tribal voodoo men. Hideous color would be smeared upon their sweat-glistening bodies, and they'd be boasting of their powers as they danced. Women would be sharpening knives and *nogo* poles to take the heads of all *baturi.*

A cold trickle of fear ran down Beau's spine. His fists clenched. "War against all whites! We've got to stop Baron von Marr from moving onto Tengis' land tonight. If we don't, the Congo River will run red."

Quickly the men got to their feet and looked to their pistols. Beau gathered up candlenut torches. Then he was leading his friends onto the trail. They made a grim safari. The drums boomed monotonously on.

Running swiftly, they quit the jungle and raced across the small veld. Beau cried out a warning. They skidded to a stop. They were face to face with von Marr's first safari of implements to take to the Bangala land.

Safari blacks squealed their alarm at sight of the apparitions before them and cowered back. At their head, Abdul Akam rallied them. Safari guards fitted assegais—arrows—to their bows and drew taut the strings. Momba Whitestall opened fire with his Luger. The heavy rifles of Dibby and Black Mike Collins sounded loud over the spat of the revolver.

Arrows sang past. Adolph and Alfred were shooting now, forming a front for Beau.

The American, crouched among them, risking the speeding arrows, lit a torch. Then, lighting one from the other, he flung them amid the papyrus grass.

Like tinder, it took hold of the flames and with a roaring *whoosh,* it spread. Crying out in terror, the blacks scattered. Black smoke billowed up to obscure the sky.

Coughing, arms flung across their faces, the jungle outcasts returned to the safety of the undergrowth. Momba Whitestall swore hotly.

"Missed that mongoose son of a desert Touareg, Abdul Akam. But this fire'll take the fight out of the Bangala for a while. That'll give us time to organize."

The six swung along the trail back to the hut. Exhausted, Beau and his cohorts threw themselves upon palm leaf mats. Momba detailed his sons as guards.

With dawn steaming the dank jungle, Beau rose and left the hut. The rest still

slept. He wanted to be alone to think out what he must do. There was satisfaction in knowing the drums had stopped during the night. But unfortunately they had taken up their doom-filled beat again.

Nevertheless, the world seemed lighter to Beau Cordner. He had loyal friends, friends ready to fight at his side. He could take them to war with him and they would go willingly. But how many of them would he be sending to their deaths? That thought stopped him cold.

As he walked aimlessly, he remembered when he and Romain Crique had explored the fringes of the Koakumus. How they had run for their lives from an Ayondos savage.

And suddenly it came to him how far he had come since then. His days in the States, England, France seemed lost in the swirl of action-filled events. No longer was he free. No man was free, save only to give his life to his country and his principles. His brain and brawn were given over to a set purpose now. He could not be careless, for every moment bore the grim impact of danger. He must act fast. The Bangala were already concentrating!

He stopped, in deep meditation, but was abruptly jarred from it. His blood froze. From directly ahead had come the cry of a woman; a sound of agony and fear.

Drawing his gun, he crashed through the undergrowth and onto a trail. Nonplussed, he stopped, staring.

RAYU, favorite wife of Tengis, leaned against the gnarled roots of a mangrove tree. Her bare shoulders were scratched deep enough to let the blood run. Her hair, usually piled high atop her head, was down, cascading about her shoulders.

Gently, Beau touched her, saying, "What troubles Tengis' favorite one?"

She cringed from him, her eyes wild. But when she at last knew him, she allowed him to lead her around the tree and seat her on a fallen limb.

"I thought it was *him* returning," she said in her native tongue. Her lips trembled.

"Who?"

"Baron von Marr!" She buried her face in her hands.

Beau shook with rage. He looked about the jungle. His thrashing had warned the renegade off, but he had arrived just in time.

"Be strong," he said quietly.

Rayu chanted bitterly, "I have been touched by a *wato* white. I will be driven into the country of the Ayondos by my husband!"

"No," said Beau softly. "Tengis will understand. You have not been harmed. You will tell him. When his vengeance is sated, you will again become his favorite. Tengis is chief among your people, and has a white man's learning. He will understand."

For a long moment Rayu looked at Beau. She nodded and began putting her hair back up with nervous fingers. "I know now why I wanted to serve you, Babua," she said softly. "All our people would serve you. But now they hate you because you lost the big fight when you could have won it. My bondage to you isn't what I thought. It was the slavery one race gives another when there is understanding. You do understand us, Babua. I will again become the favorite of Tengis!"

She said it simply, like a child speaking in faith. Beau felt humble in her presence when she was done. Impulsively, he bent forward and touched her forehead with his own.

Violently, she tore away and ran down the trail. Beau stared unseeingly into space for a moment. There was little wonder the gentle Rayu was Tengis' favorite. His reverie was broken by a sudden movement on the trail. He turned, and the color drained from his face. There in the trail stood Tengis and Romain Crique.

Beau tried to grin and greet them, but their dark looks silenced him.

Romain said hotly, "You! You and

Tengis' favorite! I said once you had changed. You have! From bad to worse!"

Beau's fists clenched, her accusation was so stinging. Words came to deny it, but they choked in his throat as he saw the scorn and hatred in Tengis' dark eyes. Talk would only make things worse. Whatever he might say would sound like an excuse. Better to endure their contemptuous stares than to crawl.

Without a word, he turned his back and strode off. Tengis and the girl followed, and Beau's back crawled. But he knew Tengis would face him when the showdown came. He returned to Momba Whitestall's hut.

The jungle outcasts rose respectfully at sight of Romain, but their eyes went bleak at what they saw in Tengis. They edged away from the door. Beau stopped. The savage chieftain went inside. Beau followed.

HERE in the center of the room they faced each other. Drawing himself to his full height, Tengis intoned: "You were once my friend. I took you into my hut and nursed you. For that you drive a spear into my heart. I pulled its barb out and thought the hurt would pass. In the hills, my people beat the drums of war, but my schooling and high regard for you would not let me agree with them. I told them if they made this fight the Bangala would be no more. They renounced me as their chief. I left them to find—what? To find the only friend I thought I had taking advantage of me because I am but a native. So be it! I will return to my people, fight with them until I die—after I have killed you!"

Beau's fists clenched. "Your heart has been poisoned by your eyes," he said evenly.

"The heart might lie—but the eyes never!" said Tengis sternly. "I saw you touch foreheads."

"That is what you saw," countered Beau. "I was but carried away with happiness at the time. She was re-vowing her great affection for you. Only a moment before, I had saved her from Baron von Marr. That is what you didn't see."

"Lies!" said Tengis, and drew his knife.

Beau felt the lash of defeat. Adjudged a murderer in Riba Riba, ousted as overseer by the lies of the fifth column—now Tengis was charging him with indecency. All this brought a sudden weariness. The task ahead seemed too great a hurdle. In this tension-filled moment he didn't care what happened. Tengis' knife was upraised. The whole Congo was against him.

He tore open his shirt. "I give you my life for what you think I have done to you," he said wearily.

Like an ebon carving, Tengis poised his blade. His sinewy arm was corded and his neck muscles quivered for the strike. Beau did not flinch. The knife slid slowly from Tengis' hand.

True to his heritage of concealing emotion, Tengis said stoically, "I am a fool! I believe you. The truth is in your eyes!"

A surge of joy flooded Beau. "Forget it," he said. "There's plenty to be done."

SIDE by side, they quit the hut. Their appearance broke the tension among the men outside and grins came to their set lips. Several men wiped cold sweat from their brows.

Tengis spoke. "The White Princess came to me looking for you. She has important news."

Beau looked at her. Now he saw the worry and fear deep in her eyes. "What is it?" he asked crisply.

Romain's shoulders drooped humbly. Tears sprang into her eyes. "I've judged you wrong, just as Tengis did," she murmured. "I've discovered what a beast Baron von Marr really is. It was all a mistake. I wouldn't take your warning. Now Father—"

"What?" Beau's prompting cracked like a pistol shot.

"The Baron has Dad. He'll kill him! Your firing the veld burned all their equipment. They want Father to pad

the commissary notes and give them money to buy more. He has refused. They'll torture him just as they did your father. They have him now, trying to force him to their will. Von Marr and Aershot and Abdul, and a newcomer named River Joe!"

Beau whirled on Momba Whitestall. "There's your wacky friend for you! He's found better pay with the Baron!"

The mighty midget shrugged. "I told you he was tetched."

Boiling rage consumed Beau. He said bleakly, "There's but one thing to do! Carry the fight to Riba Riba. I can't ask you to follow me—nor can I stop you if you do." He turned, running.

With a roar, the jungle outcasts fell in behind him. The loyal subjects had arisen. Tengis pulled up to his side, loping easily, his knife drawn. Black Mike Collins and Dibby Cartwright lumbered behind them. Then came Momba and his stalwart sons. Silently, and with the supple grace of a lioness, Romain Crique brought up the rear. She didn't mind being forgotten in this stirring moment. Her eyes were wet with tears of gratitude toward these men who rallied so quickly to Beau Cordner's side. Adding to the bleakness of the runners, the drums swelled and died and swelled again. The Bangala, too, were reaching the breaking point.

Beau flung up his hand and his cohorts skidded to a stop. From the side trail came the shrill trumpet of an elephant. The rolling beast came into view. Atop *tembo* sat Kiltie MacRae and his family. They were resplendent in whites and calicos. Kiltie shouted a greeting and slid to the ground over the brute's head and trunk.

"Now how can ye be exertin' yourselves this hot day?" he asked.

"We're goin' to take the lid off Riba Riba," answered Black Mike. "From who did you steal the finery?"

The Scotchman drew himself to full height. "My one wee extravagance, it is. My woman's hearth is studded with diamonds. Millions! I'm rich. Rich enough to have haggis the rest of my life. Loot, you think? I'll have your black Irish heart!" He stepped threateningly forward.

Choking on his laughter, Beau thrust himself between the belligerents. "No time for private wars!" he cracked out. "The Allies are joining together." Quickly he gave the details to MacRae.

The Scot turned to his woman. "Hoot!" he exclaimed. "Get down an' take the kids home. I'm going to fight!"

Adamantly, the native woman refused. "Last time you did that," she said in Bangala, "you were gone two years."

"Just a wee time, woman," he said. "You think I would run from all your money? I'll be back before you can say Ladies from Hell!"

He was convincing. The woman slid from the brute's back, followed by her children. Their fists were still tightly closed about Abyssinian pennies.

Beau turned to Romain. "Go with MacRae's woman," he said.

She shook her head. "I'm staying!"

There was no time to argue. Admiration flashed in Beau's eyes. "Get up beside Kiltie," he commanded and handed her up to the back of *tembo*. His hand clung to hers for a moment. The warmth of it thrilled him. And what he saw in her eyes sent a reckless hope surging through his body. Reluctantly, he turned from her.

With a wave of his hand, he led on down the trail. Kiltie's elephant brought up the rear.

AS THEY debouched onto the veld and Riba Riba came in sight, a group of citizens met them. Beau stopped his men, asking, "What's the matter?"

The man pointed at the town with trembling finger. "Baron von Marr's men are sacking the place," he growled. "Looting everything in sight! Must be fifty of 'em. They're gettin' out before the Bangala revolt."

Beau and his warriors presented a

stirring sight. It rallied the citizens. One of them asked, "You makin' a fight of it?"

Beau nodded. "We've got to stop them before the Bangalas run wild."

"I'm with you!" cried the man. Others joined in. Soon they were twenty strong. There were terrific odds to face, but no one counted odds now. There was the principle of the thing.

Palming his weapon, Beau gave the signal to advance. With a roar, they went along the trail, Romain remaining behind with Kiltie's beast.

A shout beat from town. The jackals scurrying about the street drew their guns and fired into the sky. Baron von Marr could be seen before the Bambo Bar. Then men were running to him, going inside the grog shop, hurling taunts and curses at the advancing townspeople.

As Beau came to the edge of the village, a salvo of shots ripped from the windows and doors of the Bambo Bar. Von Marr had chosen his fort well. It was the only completely corrugated building in the village.

Beau's small army scattered and began firing sporadically.

In the protection of a copra shed, Beau turned to Tengis and Momba Whitestall. "We'll never get them out," he said bitterly.

The men nodded grim agreement. Then Tengis was pointing. "Look!" he shouted.

Beau stiffened, a cry welling from his throat.

Romain Crique was walking up the street, turning into the Bambo Bar. The doors opened to admit her.

Momba swore, "Gone to be with her dad!"

Impulsively, Beau started into the open. Tengis and Momba held him back.

"Not a chance!" growled Momba.

Beau throttled that first wave of anger and fear. His brain became cool and calculating. Before either of the two men could stop him, he leaped away and raced about the circle of men until he found Kiltie MacRae.

"Your elephant!" he gasped. "I could ride it to the door of the bar and push in the wall!"

Kiltie debated it for a moment. "Glencolin could push the whole building down," he admitted. "I'll do it!"

"No you won't!" snapped Beau, and picked up the guide stick beside MacRae. "This is my job!" He ran to the swaying brute.

USING the animal's trunk, he gained the brute's back. Then he was prodding the trumpeting *tembo* into action. Rollingly, the beast went forward. Beau lay along his back, protecting himself the best he could from the singing lead. The elephant shed the revolver fire as a duck sheds water.

When he was opposite the Bambo Bar door, Beau turned the half-crazed brute. He got to his feet on that swaying back and balanced. A wild cry beat within the bar. And behind Beau welled a great clamor as citizens fell in behind the maddened elephant.

Like a bull in a china shop, the brute crashed against the corrugation. The front collapsed like a house built of cards. Beau leaped over the head of the beast and lit sprawlingly in the barroom.

Flames crackled to the side of him. The falling wall had knocked over a torch. The oil from the candlenut bowl splattered over the bar and burned.

A shout welled from von Marr's men and they stampeded for the rear. A broadside from the citizens cut them down.

Beau's Luger spoke its spiteful message and men fell, collapsing into grotesque huddles.

In a bound, Beau began his search of the cribs along the side and back walls. Unmindful of the smoke filling the room, he searched from door to door, his hatred and his desire to face the Baron growing at every step. Outside the fight went on.

A sound made him whirl. The door of a crib opened and Abdul Akam pushed Van Crique into the barroom. Van fell headlong. Cursing, Beau triggered. The Arab crumpled atop the Englishman.

Beau shouted at Crique, "Don't get up! Stay where you are!" Van obeyed, covering his face with his hands against the gathering heat of the flames.

Now Beau pushed open a door and color drained from his face. The Baron stood by the window, Romain Crique held before him as a shield!

"Blood brother of the Bangala!" swore the suave Nazi. "I'm going to let it out of you!"

"Get from behind the girl!" commanded Beau, and stepped threateningly forward.

Von Marr edged closer to the open window. Beau stopped. Further action would only endanger Romain. His jaws set and his teeth ground with helplessness.

"You've wrecked my plans," taunted the Baron, "but you can't stop me now. Heil, Hitler! . . . Those who want my head will let me go when they see I have the girl. And I'm taking the name of Cordner out of the Congo country. Your father had me whipped once for giving the natives white man's liquor. I paid him back for taking caste from me. I regret I haven't time to do the same to you. But when my people bring the new order into this country—" He kicked a chair out of his way to speed his exit.

In that moment, Beau saw the bottom of the Baron's shoe. Half the heel was gone! It was as damning as the confession he had just uttered.

"You haven't a chance," Beau gritted. "They'll cut you down, girl or no."

"No they won't. Women come too high in this country. Smoke's getting in my eyes. . . . But even if I miss, there are two standing behind you that won't! Monts Aerschot and Wacky River Joe. Monts has a score to settle with you. Your father whipped him, too, for killing a Bangala. We figured you dead by the river or we'd have waited and made it so. Ready, Monts? Heil, Hitler!"

Beau's eyes strayed to the giant in the doorway. Blood streamed from a gash in the Belgian's head. The rapier-like man beside him was smudged with powdersmoke. Both held guns trained on his middle.

In the tension-filled second, Beau saw the whole story. These two men, vengeance bent because of what his father had done to them, asked for duty here in Riba Riba at the first sign of war. They had turned their diabolical plans into new channels and made murder pay. There was no escaping them now—and in turn *they* would not escape. His only regret was that he wouldn't be in on the capture of them or the downfall of their ruthless government.

"Ready!" shouted Monts Aerschot. "Heil, Hitler!"

BEAU looked at Romain. Her face was twitching with the inner pain she suffered. Then he tensed, for a black, brawny arm was sliding into the room through the window. Like the tentacle of an octopus, it went around the Baron's neck and jerked violently. The renegade was whipped from the room, torn from his hold on the girl. Tengis was sating his vengeance. A terrible scream cut the air and died abruptly.

Aerschot cursed. Beau spun to meet the challenge of the two at his back. Nonplussed, he let his finger relax on his trigger. Aershot was going down, folding like a sack suddenly emptied. River Joe was grinning at Beau, holstering the gun he had cracked over Aershot's head.

He said crisply, "I need this man for military trial and confession. He will be deal with in the usual fashion of the Luxemburg Patrol."

"Hans Goderis!" Beau gasped.

"But few knew me in these soiled whites," Goderis smiled. "You were only eight years old when I saw you last. But I could not believe a son of John Cordner could be as bad as they painted you.

I had to find out from both sides. And I had to find out how far the fifth column here had gone."

"Then you don't want me for the murder of Don Viso?" asked Beau. Romain was at his side now and he took her hand.

"Don Viso was dead hours before you threw your knife," said the Congo lawman. "Aershot was the one who purposely missed you. It was planned to disgrace you and get you to leave the country. It's a typical Gestapo trick. You crossed them up by not scaring. I'm done here in Riba Riba. All but to change your temporary commission to a permanent one in the name of the Government in Exile. I've got to get back up country. There's plenty happening there. The fifth column's worse than locusts."

A shout overrode Beau's happiness. Holding tightly to Romain, he led the way from the Bambo Bar. People were pointing across the veld. On its rim was a jagged line of ebon. The Bangala! A black avalanche descending upon Riba Riba. . . .

AS THE townspeople rallied against the revolt, Beau's cry held them. He pointed out the stalwart figure running through the ankle-deep grass. An ebon body with right arm held aloft. In that hand dangled the head of Baron von Marr.

The dark tide stopped at the lone figure's command. And after a moment, the Bangala were gone as mysteriously as they had come.

Beau looked down at Romain. "The Bangala go back to their village. Faith and caste have been upheld—and so have promises. The Congo is still loyal to the sovereign crown, and remains free."

Beau's arms went about her. Their kiss was an unspoken pledge to the future.

"Blimey if 'e ain't forgotten us!" said Dibby Cartwright.

""'Tis well," said Black Mike Collins. "I mind once—"

"Once when Sarah ran off with a travelin' man," interrupted Momba Whitestall. "I brought my two boys to Africa. No women for *them*, says I!"

"Being the prospective father-in-law," said Van Crique, "I'll set up the drinks. Come down to the commissary."

"Hoot!" accepted Kiltie MacRae. "A wee drap is tempting to the best of men!" He hitched at his trouser's band where dully gleamed the handle of a Garboon knife.

Hans Goderis smiled and they all moved off, leaving Beau and Romain alone. The two were lost in a world of their own. In a world where Congo drums boomed softly, telling the world, "The old King is not dead. Long live the Old! Down with the new!"

They're the Tops

Philip Ketchum	Frank Carl Young
John Colohan	Ed Earl Repp
Wes Fargo	C. William Harrison

In the June Issue of

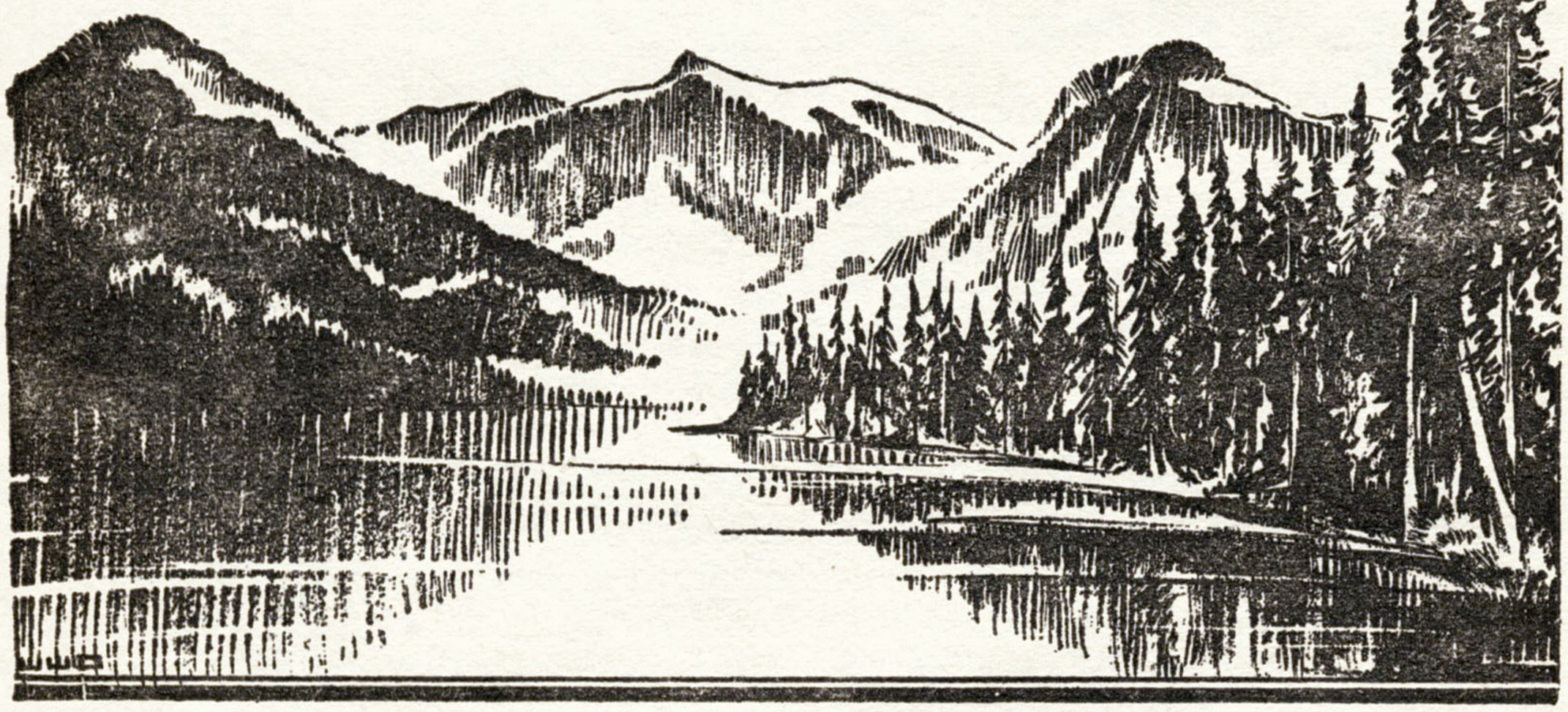
ALL WESTERN

ON SALE NOW!

(Continued from page 125)

Shortly their staccato yipping and wailing screams became a din that was eerie and unnerving. The pandemonium must have attracted all the others for miles around. I had never heard such a clatter and racket. Their ear-splitting clamor made me think hard on the awful tales the Port Captain had related.

Again and again when I made the slightest move I could hear padded feet whisk through the sand near me. It prompted me to raise up and look out through the upper window flap at the rear of the tent. Holy Moses! More furry wraiths fled from that point as I peered out. I was really suffering with the



shakes. I felt hemmed in. However, I still believed that an explosion from my gun would make them scamper.

I didn't have to wait long to give this theory the acid test. My shoulder was bulging against the side of the tepee when a snarl and a stinging slash through the canvas told me that I had been bitten without even exposing my body! Instinctively I fired point-blank into the tear. The din didn't lessen a bit. The searing pain in my shoulder felt like a red hot branding iron.

The first thing that flashed into my mind was "Rabies!" Surely only a mad coyote would attack like that! Dread hydrophobia was a sinister thought. Quickly I sat in the middle of the tent to avoid making another bulge anywhere on the canvas. I got out my permanganate of potash crystals and hurriedly applied it. Then, to take even more precaution, I painted the whole lacerated area with iodine.

I KNEW that I had best get some real medical aid as quickly as possible, but I knew, too, that the beasts were now more daring than they had been. I was reluctant to step out of that tent. Where could I go, anyway? Doc wouldn't be back with the boat until the following morning. Crazily, the thought kept running through my mind that these brutes were paying me back for the hundreds of hides I had taken from their northern relatives. I wondered if my number was up.

The blood running down my arm gave me some assurance that at least some of the poison would go out with the tide. I was glad that it was bleeding freely.

It was apparent that I was in for a night of harried vigil. I knelt at the front opening again and glued my eyes on what little I could make out there. My blood went cold as I found myself staring directly into two fanged faces. Instinctively I blasted twice with my revolver. Both coyotes fell.

In a split instant the rest of the pack, seeing the plight of the ones I had shot, crowded in and sank their teeth into the twisting, turning bodies. Quicker than I can tell it, the dying ones were being torn to shreds. In that this at least diverted the pack's attention from me, I was reluctant to shoot again. I hoped that the two carcasses would satiate them until I had some dawn in which to beat a retreat.

The rolling, tumbling coyotes were soon too far into the darkness for me to see the hideous cannibalistic work. But it's certain that the pack devoured both wounded animals in jig time. The tempo of the snarling and yipping slowed down measurably for a while and I began to think that I would be left alone.

But the balance of the night groped by in a haggard way. Making it a point to keep my body from bulging the small tent in any place, I did sentinel duty at the tiny door. Each time a fuzzy specter stalked up to it, I let him have it with the rifle, then relaxed a little as other furred phantoms rushed in to devour their own kind.

WHEN the moon finally came up, my work was easier, and I didn't have to wait until the coyotes were almost up to my gun barrel before I fired. In fact, as it got lighter they were less and less inclined to come out into the open. It gave me an opportunity to tend to my lacerated shoulder again.

Then the blessed dawn began to knife up through the east—and that was a godsend! I had seen all the coyotes I wanted to see for a long time. Not until then did I attempt to step from the tent and break camp.

As the dawn flooded everything, I started my hasty but watchful retreat to the inlet. At the edge of the encroaching thickets I saw the remains of several carcasses. One look told me that the animals were too poor and mangy for my kind of market. I noticed, too, that the only thing *big* about them was to be found in their pads. The tracks those

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wide pads left were astonishingly deceptive. That breed of coyote, no doubt, developed them as the result of generations of running in sand.

Doc's ship was a welcome sight to my tired eyes. When I climbed aboard, I well knew that I was going to have one helluva time trying to make my story stick with the fellows. I was almost glad I had some wounds of war to prove my words. And as I related the night's experience I kept reminding myself that it was strictly okay with me if they scoffed at it all. After all, it was beginning to sound like just so much ackamarackus to my own ears by that time. One thing, however, was certain—the lift and fall of the ship's deck was now really a *pleasure!*

JOB IN SHANGHAI

By Orlando Blackburn

"YOU'LL HAVE trouble getting a job in Shanghai," my friend, Ed Lord Mack, warned as our boat steamed up the Whang Poo river. "Since this war started, they tell me business is at a stand still."

Had I known how true my friend's warning was, and the difficulties I was to encounter during the next few weeks, I believe I would have visited the purser and spent my last few dollars for passage on to Hong Kong or Manila.

But that was back in 1932, when I was just out of school. Richard Haliburton's book, "The Royal Road To Romance," had been my inspriation to see the world on a shoe string.

My experience as a reporter had helped get me by in a few places. With the Sino-Japanese war just starting, there should be a demand for reporters in Shanghai.

But I was wrong. During the first few days in Shanghai I called on every newspaper and press association in the city.

No luck. They either didn't need men, or I couldn't speak Chinese.

Well, I'd show 'em. I'd go out and find the biggest story of the war. I'd *make* myself a job.

The International Settlement and French Concession were bristling with military activity. The Japanese flagship was anchored at the NYK wharf on the Bund and military supplies were constantly on the move.

Actual fighting was in Chapei, a Chinese populated part of Shanghai. It was possible for reporters to see actual combat with little or no risk. But all the stories I found were either already covered or of little importance.

My funds were exhausted that first month. But in Shanghai they have an unusual credit system. A stranger can charge almost any place for a month. All he has to do is sign "chits." At the first of the month these are all brought to him and if he does not pay promptly, he is put on a black list.

How those Chinese merchants, all over the city, knew the good and bad credit all of the time has always remained a mystery to me.

I was getting desperate. My month of signing chits was nearing the end. I had hoped to land a job before the first and have money to meet my obligations.

"I've got a job for you," Bob Linke, correspondent for a New York newspaper, shouted as he broke into my room one evening. "The Golden Horn is sailing at midnight for 'Frisco and they need another man."

What a temptation! To get out of this mess—go home! To slip my feet under mother's table again. Oh, boy!

But my heart sank still deeper.

"No," I answered, "I couldn't do that. First, because I couldn't run out on these bills, and then I want to make it on around the other way."

WE WENT down to the lobby and the desk phone rang. The clerk was absent and I answered.

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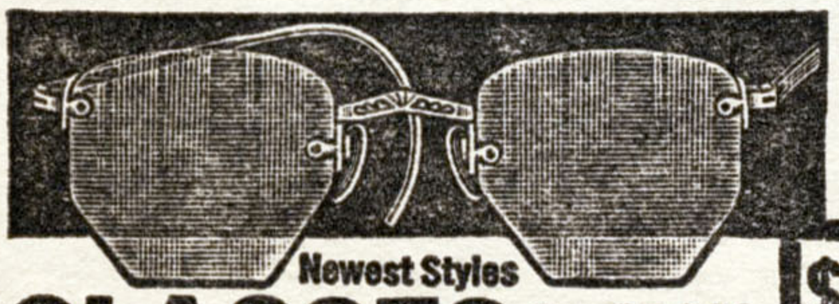

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"Is there anyone there who knows Bob Short?" the voice inquired.

"Yes," I answered, "I do."

He was the pilot from Tacoma and stayed at our hotel.

"Is he there now?"

"He isn't here," I answered. "Hasn't been for about four days."

"Then that clinches it," the voice said. "This is the police, and we have established the fact Short was shot down by the Japs yesterday, while he was flying a Chinese plane."

"What are the details?" I gasped.

"Haven't got everything yet," he answered, "but it seems Short was hired by a Shanghai firm to deliver a fighting ship to the Chinese army at Nanking.

"When Short got there he talked the Chinese into letting him take up the plane and test it out. They did and he attacked three Japs. They got him."

Soon, I thought as I hung up the receiver, everyone would know about this. But right now was my big chance to sell my services to a press association.

I rushed out of the front door and didn't wait for a ricksha. I could have phoned in my story, but I wanted to make a bargain.

Here was the biggest story of the war so far, from the American human interest angle.

I could see the headlines now—"U.S. Pilot Gives Life For China."

Suddenly it occurred to me, as I raced down the street, that I didn't have a curfew pass. It was then past 10 o'clock. Well, I had to take the chance.

I hadn't gone another block when a cop stepped out of a shadow.

"Now where do you think you are going?" he demanded as he waved me to a stop.

"I can explain, Officer."

"Yeah? Let's see your curfew pass," he growled.

"Oh, yes," and I began fumbling in my pockets to stall for time.

"No pass, eh?" he grunted. "I guess you and me had best go to the station

house and have a word with the sergeant."

I KNEW how long those interviews were. I had to act quickly or my hopes of landing a job would go glimmering.

The officer had the misfortune to be standing in front of a box. A quick shove sent him sprawling out in the street and I was dashing away. I heard him yell and shoot a couple of times into the air.

Almost instantly the usually quiet Bubbling Well Road became infested with police and officers and men of the Shanghai Volunteer corps. Immediately they were in pursuit.

"Here he comes!" shouted an S. V. C. directly in front of me.

I wheeled into an alley.

In a cubby-hole were a few sleeping Chinese refugees. Quickly I was one of them, snuggled down, and apparently sleeping as soundly as you please when the cops and Volunteers passed my way.

"Thanks, buddy," I said as I got up and tapped my coolie neighbor's shoulder. Then, for the first time, I saw that he was dead.

As I shuddered, another idea struck me. My dead friend didn't need his coat and pants, but I did. It was rather cool to make the change, but in a moment I had on his coat, pants and round straw hat.

So far, so good—but coolies didn't go walking down the street at this time of night!

A passing ricksha runner solved my problem. The runner didn't know why an American was dressed as a Chinaman, or why I wanted his ricksha, but he did know it wasn't worth more than the five dollars in gold I was offering him.

Under this disguise, I again started for the press office. Cops and S. V. C.s were still all about looking for me.

All went well until, about a block from the office, an officer hailed me. I couldn't

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refuse to let him ride, because that would arouse suspicion.

I pulled to the curb and he got in.

Rickshaws are guided by the occupant kicking the right or left shaft, depending on which way he wants to go.

Half a block from the office my fare kicked the right shaft, and when I didn't stop, he renewed his efforts.

"Hey, you dumb coolie!" he shouted.

Then I resigned my position. With a mighty heave, the two-wheeled cart went over backward and left my passenger scrambling on the ground behind it.

Before he could regain his feet, I was into the building and in the press association office.

ALTHOUGH somewhat surprised at my garb, the manager believed my story, and after making a few checks by telephone, cabled the story to the United States.

"Oh, yes," I said after he had filed the cable. "How about a job?"

"Do you personally guarantee to bring in a yarn like this every day?" he grinned.

"Well—I'll try," I replied. "And could you fix me up with a curfew pass, and, say, a month's salary in advance?"

That was a nice thing about the Orient—you could draw in advance on your salary. I'd have something for those fellows who would call to collect on the chits in the morning. . . .

DEEP SEA TERROR

By Donald Lee

THE OUTRIGGER canoe was rising and falling idly on the swells over the coral reef outside Tahiti when I noticed the long shadow of what I thought was a giant sea-eel disappearing in the darkness of a cave in the reef.

I adjusted my goggles and gripped my short spear tightly. "Hold it!" I yelled to Hali, my native helper, who was

paddling slowly in the stern of the canoe. "I think we've got something at last."

Hali grunted. "No good," he said. "We go on."

"There's an eel down there," I said, peering down into the depths. "And I mean to have him. Back up a bit, will you?"

There was another grunt from Hali as he backed water with his paddle. "Not safe," he said again. "Stay out of water."

"Bosh!" I growled, a little irritated at the native's squeamishness. Nothing had ever happened to me before in my trips below the surface, and now that I had a chance to do some spear fishing in Tahitian waters, I wasn't going to be talked out of a good bag by a native's superstition.

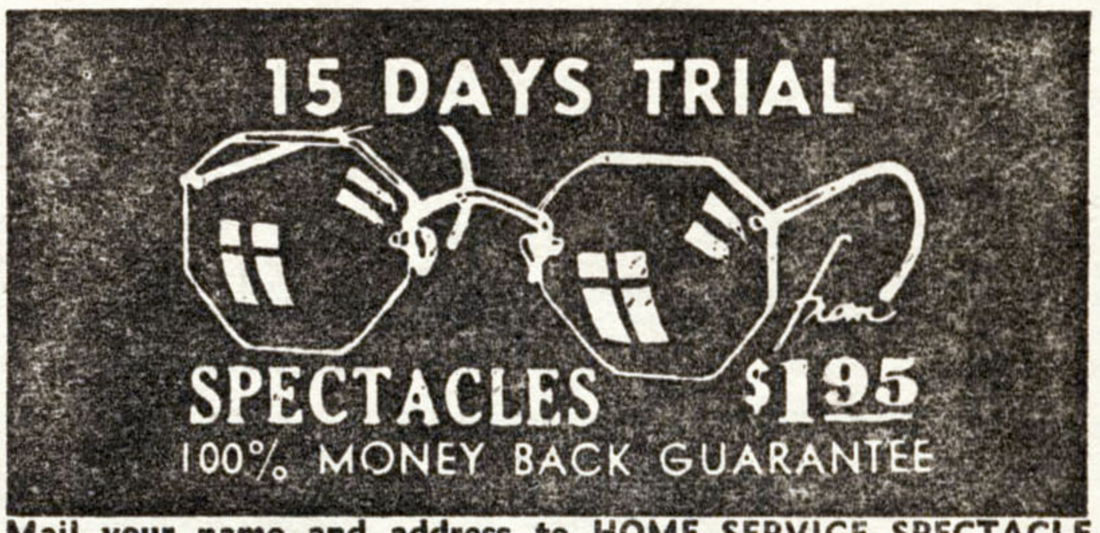
"I'll go down and have a look, anyway," I said. "If there's an eel down there, I want him."

"Wait!" Hali called, but it was too late. His word struck my ears as the water closed over them. I had no fear, since the spear in my hand was protection enough, and the goggles over my eyes enabled me to see through the water well enough to spy any danger in time.

As I pulled myself down easily, I could see the coral looming up sharp and clear, and there, farther down than appeared from the surface, was the dark blotch which I thought was the mouth of a cave.

But even as I maneuvered around, at about eight feet, I saw the dark blotch break away from the coral and fall toward me, streamers gliding in the water. Then the streamers began to writhe horribly, and my blood ran cold as I realized that a huge octopus was coming for me.

I WAS not expecting anything of this nature, and the sight of the horrible creature stunned me so, that I did the one thing I shouldn't have. I thrashed the water with my arms and kicked



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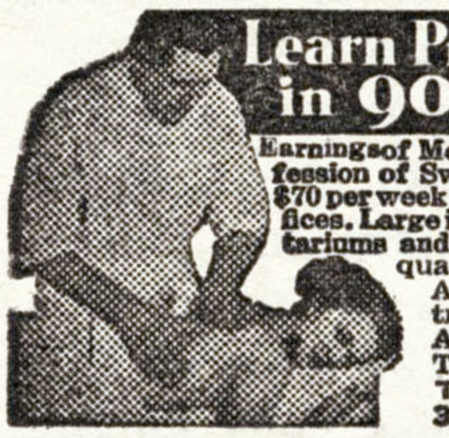

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wildly with my legs in a frantic effort to get to the surface. If I had remained still, or even just floated up without any fuss, the octopus would no doubt have investigated and gone off about his business. But the sudden movement excited the fearsome creature, and he was after me in a flash.

My head popped out of the water, and I had just gotten my lungs full of fresh air, when I felt the grisly tentacles close around my legs, slither up them and around my waist.

The octopus's weight was so great that he pulled me under, and I knew he would get anchored on the coral immediately, and I would never get him loose before I drowned.

I jabbed the spear at the globular body, but a tentacle was wrapped around my arm, and I couldn't get enough play. I switched the spear to the other hand, and like a diabolical fiend, the noisome creature sent another row of suckers entwining around my left arm. I was powerless! I felt myself being drawn into that awful maw that looked like a nightmare version of a parrot's beak set beneath two of the most vicious and horrible eyes I have ever looked into. They seemed to devour me merely by staring.

There was a dizzy, whirling blackness around my eyes as I felt the insistent urging of the tentacles as they forced me toward that ugly beak which opened and closed in sharp, quick movements of anticipation.

I tried to struggle, but my arms were locked tightly. My legs were in a vice. I was helpless, and I couldn't last much longer. My lungs felt like swelling balloons about to burst through my chest.

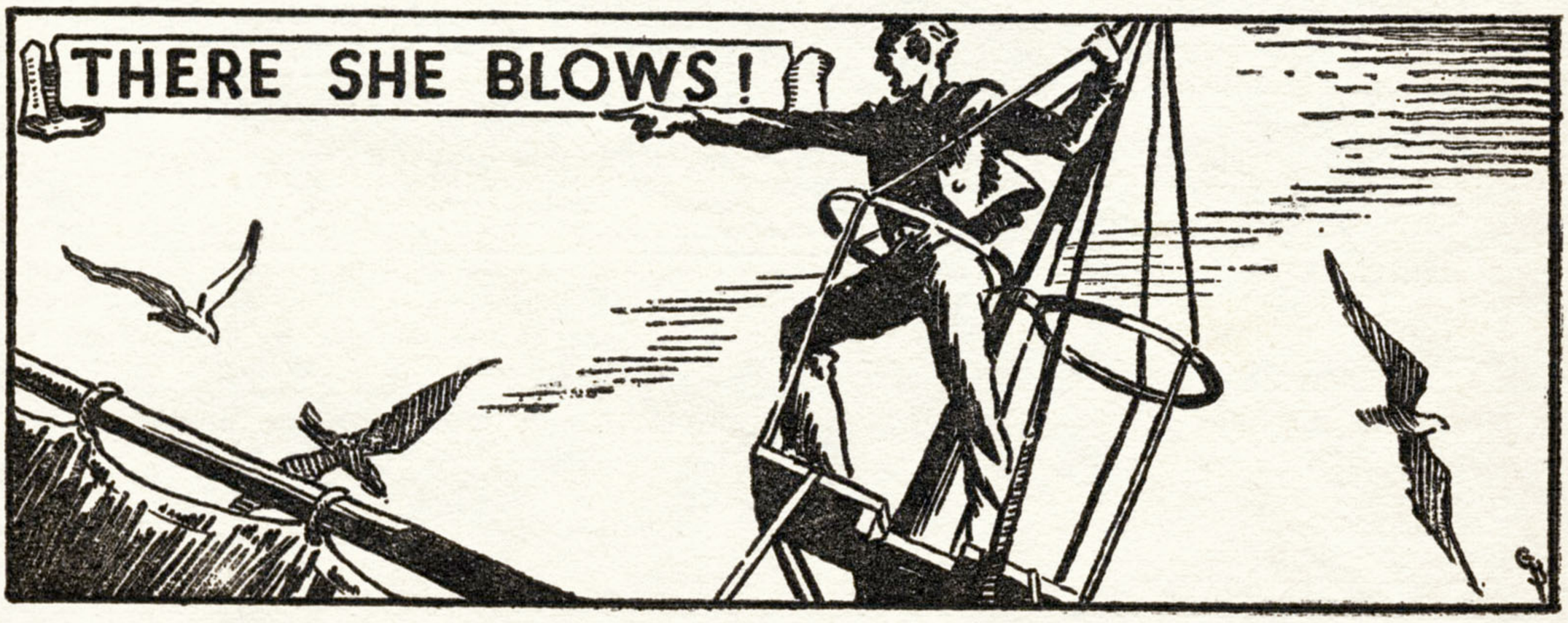
I opened my mouth then. I couldn't help it. Large bubbles floated up past my agonized eyes. Sea water rushed into my mouth. I swallowed, choked, and tried to reach my throat, but those gripping suckers held my arms fast.

I caught sight of those horrible eyes again, and knew the slashing beak was yawning, ready to rip the flesh from my bones. Death was approaching swiftly from two directions when I felt the urging tentacles relax a bit. One slimy arm left my body and reached out for something else—Hali!

THERE HE was, slashing at the snake-like tentacle with a knife in one hand, and tearing at the ones around my body with the other. I could feel, rather than see the churning of the water as the octopus lashed out. Then I felt the spear jerk from my hand, just as the octopus squirted his jet-black ink.

But immediately afterward the clutching tentacles drifted away, and I felt Hali's strong arm encircle me and pull me toward the surface. The spear had found it's mark.

I was horribly sick, and vomited sea water all the way to shore. Now, whenever I want to go over the side for fish, I listen to Hali, or anybody else who knows what he's talking about.



Prayer
For God's Guidance And Help

Dear Heavenly Father, Ruler of the World and the Universe to the farthest star, in Whose Hands rest the lives of the greatest and the humblest, come into my heart and mind, I pray Thee, and fill me with Thine infinite Wisdom, Love and Power!

For as Thou knowest, I have great need of Thee, O Lord; and my strength is in the promise of Him Who spoke, "Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world." And therefore I pray: walk by my side, O Lord, from the moment I rise in the morning, until I sleep again at night. Guide me and help me always. Help me to help others and to live righteously.

Let me know Thou art always near, Dear Father, so that I may cast out fear in both mind and body and live as Thou hast planned I should live — fearlessly and happily! Speak to me now, Father, I pray Thee, in the silence and sweet peace that has come to my soul from Thee, for I listen humbly. In Jesus' Name I ask it. — **Amen.**

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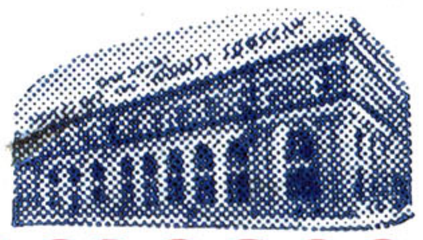

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